



***NATIONAL
RAILWAY***

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FEATURES:

THE VIRGINIA CENTRAL RAILWAY
Ames W. Williams 4

BATTLING THE GREAT DEPRESSION
Ronald DeGraw 16

ELDERLY ALCO AND BUDD POWER IN QUEBEC
Malcolm L. Bruno 24

THE CHAIRMAN'S PAGE 33

THE LION AND THE DRAGON
John H. White, Jr. 34

GLIMPSES OF THE ELECTRIC LINES
Clyde Parent 42

MAINLINES 44

THE EDITOR COMMENTS 46

COVER PHOTO: On February 24, 1970, NRHS Bulletin Staff Photographer Ara Mesrobian caught British Columbia Hydro & Power Authority No. 961 switching freight in Vancouver, B.C. BChP is the successor to British Columbia Electric Railway that operated classic heavyweight interurbans into the jet age. Steeple cab 961 is a refugee from the Oregon Electric Railway and was No. 21 before coming to BChP in 1946.

REAR COVER: On May 8, 1937, Santa Fe's brand new flagship *Super Chief* was taken out to a spot near Lemont, Ill. 26 miles west of Chicago for publicity photographs. This view, from the Santa Fe, is probably not one of those used at that time since it does not have the "extra" clouds that were apparent in 1937 copies. Photo is believed to have been taken by Inland Picture Service.

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THE VIRGINIA CENTRAL RAILWAY

BY AMES W. WILLIAMS

The railroad that ran between Orange and Fredericksburg, Va., which older residents of the area still refer to as the "narrow gauge," ceased operations on January 1, 1938, except for a one-mile segment between Fredericksburg and West Fredericksburg. The last train over the entire line, Brill motor railcar M100, left Orange at 2:15 in the afternoon for Fredericksburg and arrived at its final destination about two hours later, traveling at speeds between ten and 20 miles an hour, handicapped by the constantly deferred maintenance of the right-of-way over the years. The railroad, projected as a five-foot broad-gauge line, was built in part as standard-gauge and completed as a three-foot narrow-gauge in 1877. It was subsequently enlarged in 1926 to the standard gauge of four feet, eight and one-half inches between the rails.

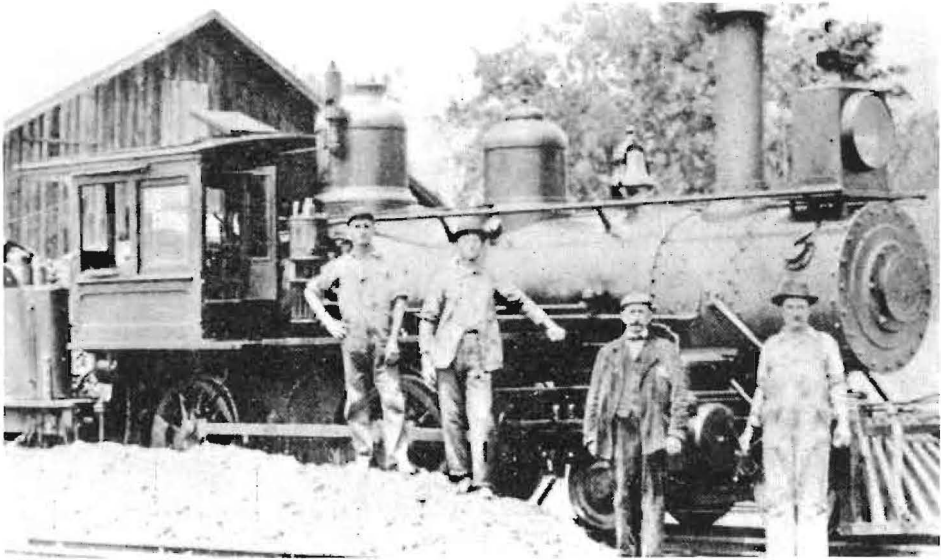
The corporate life of the railroad commenced on March 1, 1853, when the Virginia General

Assembly granted a franchise to the Fredericksburg & Gordonsville Railroad Company for the purpose of building a railroad between Fredericksburg and Gordonsville or Orange Court House in order to connect with the rail lines already running to Gordonsville, Charlottesville, and Lynchburg. The legislature authorized capital stock in the amount of \$460,000, of which the Commonwealth subscribed and paid for 1,380 shares at a par value of \$100 a share. The City of Fredericksburg and a few venturesome individuals purchased 967 shares. The first president of the railroad was voted a munificent annual salary of \$2,000, but upon sober reflection the thrifty stockholders reduced this to \$1,000, denoting a conservative trend that was to dominate the road's future. The route to be followed was also set at this meeting of the stockholders, who voted 419 to 14 to go due west to Orange Court House rather than southwest to Gordonsville.

H. W. Rouse, Jr.

Potomac, Fredericksburg & Piedmont 4-4-0 No. 1 is at Orange, Va. in 1917. The dual gauge track in the foreground allows interchange with the Southern and Chesapeake & Ohio Railways. The consist in the background is most likely PF&P's train No. 2 for Fredericksburg.





A.W. Williams Collection

Potomac, Fredericksburg & Piedmont narrow-gauge No. 2 at Fredericksburg, Va. in 1910. Second from left is A.E. Martin, who eventually became superintendent of the Virginia Central Railway.

By the time the last report of the company was filed in November 1857, the amount of money paid in by stock subscribers was \$219,665, and the amount expended was \$219,647.81, leaving a tidy balance in the corporate coffers of \$17.19. The principal expenditure of \$154,426.86 was to contractors for grading the prospective right-of-way; the balance went for land purchase, masonry, bridges and trestle work. Actually, only 18 miles beyond Fredericksburg were graded when, because of the lack of money and community interest, the company failed. Seemingly the good burghers of Fredericksburg and Orange and the yeomanry in between couldn't be persuaded to risk their capital in the venture.

The four-year War between the States intervened before interest in the railroad reawakened. The completed embankments and cuts, however, upon or in which no rails had been laid, did provide a measure of dubious security to the opposing sides, as the land fought over changed hands during the course of the war.

(Editor's Note: The uncompleted railroad, which later used the "Battlefield Route" as its slogan, played a significant role in the campaigns around Fredericksburg. On December 13, 1862, the graded line along Hazel Run crossed the left center of General Robert E. Lee's army during the Union assaults on the heights west of Fredericksburg. General T.J. "Stonewall" Jackson crossed and recrossed the right-of-way on his flank movement at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863. A year later, the roadbed and a cut served as a hidden approach when the Con-

federates' James Longstreet attacked the Federal flank during the Battle of the Wilderness.)

The property of the railroad lay dormant until December 1871 when restive creditors forced a foreclosure. A new corporation called the Fredericksburg, Orange & Charlottesville Railroad Company bought the relics of its predecessor for \$10,000. The backers of the new venture appear to have been New Yorkers headed by one Thomas George Walker. A bond issue of \$700,000 was authorized along with the issuance of 4,000 shares of stock with a par value of \$100 a share.

The *Alexandria Gazette* of January 4, 1873, copying the *Fredericksburg Star*, noted that contractors Davenport and Finch were vigorously pushing forward the work on the line from Fredericksburg to Orange Court House and predicted that, once the holidays were over, construction would be resumed on some of the sections with an increased labor force. Half of the grading on the unfinished portion of the line had been completed and 600 tons of iron rail had been ordered. The depot and workshop at Fredericksburg would be finished in about ten days and the large enginehouse would be removed from its present site to the railroad track and the locomotive **Old Dominion**, bright as a new pin, would have shelter when not employed on the line. If the hard weather and the epizootic would hold off, the iron horse would no doubt by the first of May salute the citizens of Orange Court House with its whistle. Apparently both evils were encountered because on January 31 it was reported



H.W. Broadbelt Collection

PF&P No. 1 poses for its builder's photo about 1880 at the Baldwin (Burnham, Parry & Williams) plant in Philadelphia. The trim, narrow-gauge 4-4-0 carried builder's No. 10071.

that serious delays had intervened but that the contractors hoped to resume work as soon as possible.

The delays must have continued. In July the Fredericksburg City Council agreed not to enforce a forfeiture of the railroad's franchise because it failed to complete construction to Verdiersville by the first of the month; the deadline was again extended, to September 15. Completion to Orange Court House was set for December 1.

The schedules were not met: On December 5, 1873, the State Board of Public Works, as principal creditor, took possession of the road upon which 18 miles of track had been spiked into place. Subsequently the property was restored to its original owner, the Fredericksburg & Gordonsville Railroad Company.

On March 27, 1876, the railroad was again reorganized and its name changed to the Potomac, Fredericksburg & Piedmont Railroad Company, colloquially known as "Poor Folk & Preachers." The road was finished as a narrow-gauge line and its first train arrived in Orange on February 26, 1877.

In the interval between December 1873 and March 1876, some use had been made of the track that had been laid between Fredericksburg and Parker's Store (now Parkers) by a bull-drawn handcar and a flat car that had been ingeniously converted into a locomotive by William S. Snediker, who mounted a stationary steam engine upon it as the power source.

In September 1876, the PF&P was acquired by

the Royal Land Company, a Virginia enterprise run by a number of promoters from Pittsburgh, Pa. It adopted a grand scheme for land and mineral development in both Virginia and West Virginia, the railroad being the centerpiece; and it was to be extended eastward to the Potomac River near the Northern Neck and westward to the Ohio valley. As has been the case with many similar get-rich-quick fantasies, the Royal Land Company founded in a sea of red ink, and late in 1878 the ownership of PF&P passed to the Richards family of Philadelphia. The narrow gauge, fortunately completed to Orange Court House before the demise of the Royal Land Company, ran smoothly and at a small profit for a number of years, even at times managing to pay modest amounts upon its indebtedness. Three handsome Baldwin locomotives — two 4-4-0's purchased new, a 2-6-0 bought from the Georgia Railroad, and a Vulcan 2-8-0 — made up the carrier's roster. The road also owned several combination passenger and baggage cars and about 75 freight cars, mostly flats for carrying lumber, cordwood, masonry materials and bagged fertilizer.

The 1888 report for the PF&P, the earliest surviving account (previous records were supposedly destroyed in a fire) shows gross operating revenues of \$19,000 and operating expenses of \$16,000. The major portion of these revenues were derived from freight with about \$4,000 from mail and passenger accounts. The officers were paid \$4,400, one clerk \$500 and the other 34 employees such as station agents, trainmen and



A.W. Williams

The Virginia Central Station at Orange, Va. was built in 1926. Seen here at a much later date the structure is doing duty as a Smith-Douglas fertilizer outlet.

trackmen were paid a total of \$5,733. Some 3,777 passengers were carried; the freight hauled consisted of the products previously mentioned, along with hay, grain, tobacco, fresh produce, livestock, coal, cement, tanbark and sumac. Locomotive coal cost \$4 a ton, and it took three pounds of coal to operate an engine for one mile.

In the following years the ratios of expense to income remained constant and about even. The year 1910 showed a considerable increase with some 18,000 passengers' fares and \$56,000 in freight revenue placed in the till. By 1920 the road's employees had swelled to an all-time high of 63 but revenues were beginning to fall. The principal reason, obviously, was the proliferation of the family automobile and the farm truck, both of which offered portal-to-portal service and substantial reductions in labor cost. The state improved the roads and Henry Ford brought a gas buggy within the reach of most. The combination was difficult to beat and the economic justification for the shortline railroad all but disappeared.

Because it was unable to interchange freight with mainline connections at Fredericksburg and Orange, the PF&P could not serve as a bridge carrier, and because of the expense of labor to transload its freight at the two terminals, the road was at a further disadvantage. The Richards estate decided to sell the line, which Gordon W. Richards had purchased, for its estimated scrap value of \$70,000. News of the railroad's imminent demise disturbed the area's business community, and on June 11, 1925 P.H. Faulconer of

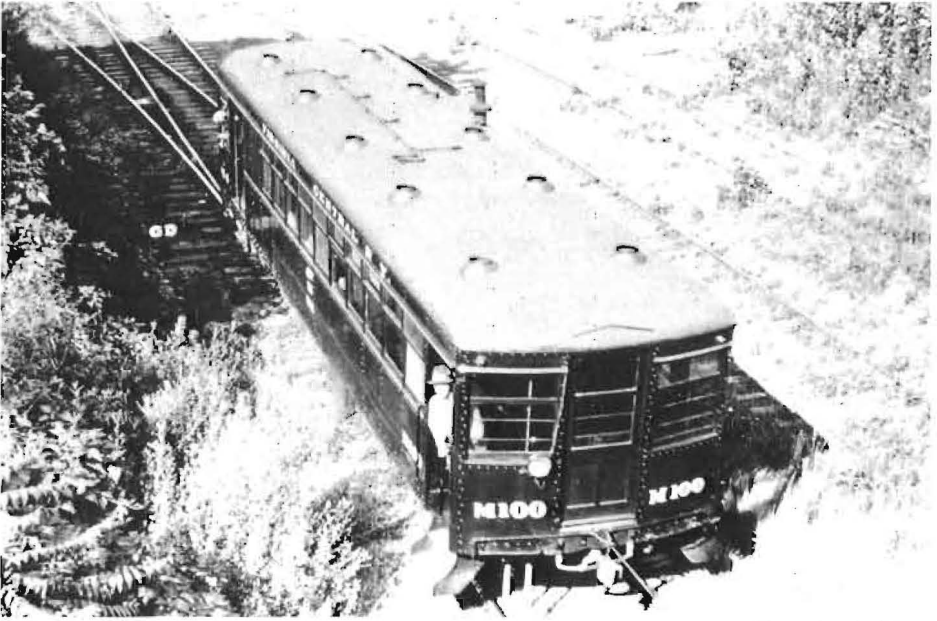
A.W. Williams Collection

The "Battlefield Route" timetable for October 15, 1933 shows daily except Sunday motor car service over the entire 38-mile route.

Virginia Central Railway
"BATTLEFIELD ROUTE"
TIME TABLE No. 1
IN EFFECT AT 12:01 A. M. OCTOBER 15, 1933
Superseding Time Table No. 1 In Effect October 14, 1933

WEST BOUND		EAST BOUND	
1st Class	EASTERN STANDARD TIME	1st Class	Daily Except Sunday
Daily Except Sunday		Daily Except Sunday	
No. 1 (Motor)		No. 2 (Motor)	
8:00 A. M.	0 Lv. Fredericksburg	Ar. 58	4:20 P. M.
8:11	1 West Fredericksburg	37	3:57
8:17	6 Mellon	32	3:42
8:20	9 Chancellors	D 29	3:34
8:30	10 Albion	28	3:20
8:40	13 Brock Road	S 25	3:10
8:44	18 Parker	D 20	3:06
9:02	20 Gold Dale	D 18	2:55
9:09	22 Mine Run	V S 16	2:52
9:15	24 St. Just	S 14	2:45
9:21	26 Nolting	12	2:39
9:25	28 Rhoadesville	S 10	2:35
9:33	30 Unionville	S 8	2:27
9:36	31 Grassland	7	2:24
9:44	33 Nason	S 5	2:16
9:57	37 East Orange	D 1	2:03
10:00	38 Ar. ORANGE	Lv. 0	2:00

C. J. FIELD Vice-President L. M. WILLIAMS, Jr. President



Above, Virginia Central M-100 was originally built for the Clinton & Oklahoma Western. Brill outshopped the 43-foot 43-seat car in 1924 (order S21994) and it came to the VC via the Santa Fe in 1927. Below left, VC M-100 at Orange, Va. in 1932. Below right, VC's home-built trailer for M-100 was carried on the books as T3. Bottom right, M-100 and trailer T3 in the cluttered railyard at Fredericksburg.

H.W. Rouse, Jr.

Bruce D. Fales



A.W. Williams Collection





Rice Collection

Virginia Central 1022 with freight leaving Fredericksburg for Orange, Va. about 1935. The high engine digits reflects its former owner's (Chesapeake & Ohio) numbering system.

Charlottesville and a few of his associates bought the property from Richards for \$72,000.

Again the company was reorganized as the Orange & Fredericksburg Railroad but the Faulconer group could not raise sufficient funds to operate it successfully. Once again it went on the auction block; this time it was sold to Langbourne Williams, a Richmond banker who had once been president of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

New securities replaced the old. The carrier's total indebtedness was again ratcheted upward in the perennial expectation that business would improve and its obligations diminish. The railroad now assumed the name Virginia Central, which in the past had been the name of a component line of the Chesapeake & Ohio, now Chessie System.

The first improvement made by the Williams administration was to standardize the track gauge at four feet, eight and one-half inches and to build connections with the RF&P at Fredericksburg and with the C&O and Southern at Orange. The work was completed by September 10, 1926 but the first train to travel the full length of the road did not run until November 1 of that year. The narrow-gauge station on Byrd Street in Orange was abandoned and a new one erected on Church Street, now the site of a fertilizer company.

Standard-gauge locomotives and rolling stock were purchased from the C&O: three locomotives, 15 boxcars, 51 flat cars and two combination passenger and baggage cars. From time to time the equipment roster was augmented by further purchases from the C&O and N&W. In May 1927 a Brill gasoline railcar, the M100, was obtained from the Santa Fe to be used in VC's passenger and mail service. This car had been built in 1924 as No. 100 of the Clinton & Oklahoma Western Railway. It was acquired by the Santa Fe in 1926 when it took over the C&OW.

A small trailer was also built in the railroad's Fredericksburg shop to be hauled by the M100 whenever sufficient demand was anticipated. In the first year about 4,000 passengers rode the line.

An interesting note for local historians was a petition filed by the railroad in September 1926 with the State Corporation Commission to abandon non-agency stations known as Whites, Robey, Furnace, Stephens, and Taylor, and to change the names of Screamersville to Chancellor, New Hope to Gold Dale, Tinder to Mine Run, Reynolds to St. Just, Lafayette to Rhodesville, Mine Road to Mellon, and Verdierville to Nolting.

In spite of an increase in freight revenue, reaching a high of \$75,000 in 1933, operating expenses in 1931 began to overtake income with lit-

tle or nothing left to reduce the funded debt.

Because the Virginia Central's principal freight revenues were derived from switching cars over a one-mile segment in Fredericksburg between the RF&P interchange and West Fredericksburg, where about 15 industrial customers were located, it was decided to abandon the 37 miles of railroad between West Fredericksburg and Orange. The Interstate Commerce Commission, concluding that the entire line could not be operated at a profit, approved the petition for abandonment on December 3, 1937. At the ICC hearing, an official of the C&O testified that his company would not take the railroad as a gift, not only because its prospects of earning a profit were negligible but also because of the \$600,000 indebtedness and a right-of-way requiring expensive rehabilitation. It was pointed out that no interest had been paid on the debt since 1931.

Consequently the 37 miles of track between West Fredericksburg and Orange were quickly scrapped. The last movement over the road was the gas-car trip from Orange to Fredericksburg on January 1, 1938, described at the beginning of this article. The steam locomotives and all rolling stock were disposed of either by sale to other roads or to scrap dealers. The home-built passenger trailer somehow wound up on the banks of Hazel Run where it finally rusted away. A Davenport Besler gas engine was purchased for the remaining shorthaul and switching movements. A 20-ton Whitcomb was acquired later as back-up locomotive. By practicing strict economy, the foreshortened railroad was able to show a modest margin of operating revenue.

Management continued in the Williams family with E.O.N. Williams in charge. In 1941, he was succeeded by George D. Williams.

A disastrous fire in early July 1949 destroyed the VC's shop and enginehouse along with the two locomotives. They were replaced by two ex-Army Plymouth engines, 30-ton gas-electric No. 500 and 30-ton gas-mechanical No. 200.

For the next 19 years, the carrier operated with George D. Williams as the manager and four employees who doubled as operating and maintenance men. Income and expenses broke about even but contributed nothing to reducing the company's indebtedness. With little or no prospect of improvement in sight, Williams offered the railroad to the City of Fredericksburg as a gift. He believed, and the city officials likewise, that municipal ownership and management could, with greater resources to draw upon, run the road at a profit and attract more industrial customers to the area.

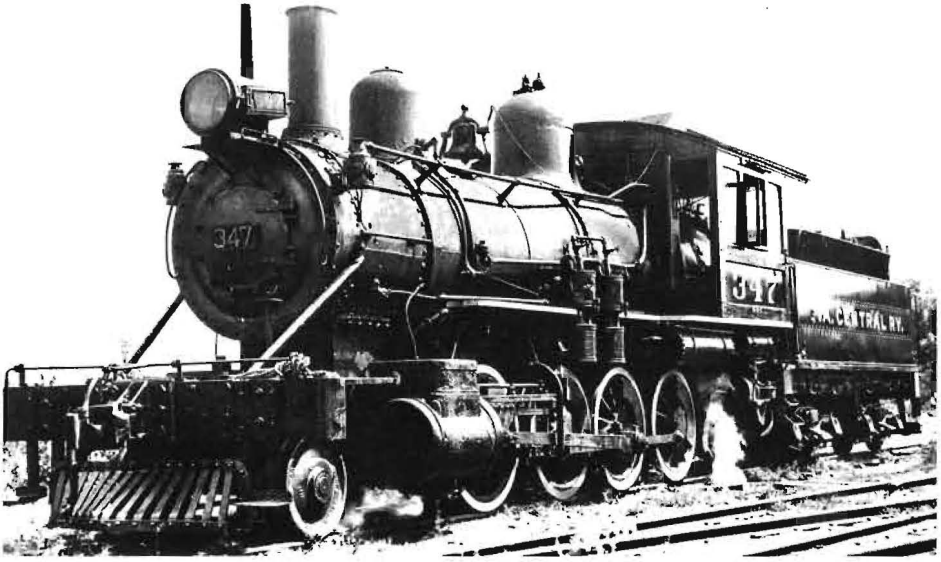
On June 23, 1967, Williams transferred the railroad and the 3,000 shares of its capital stock to the city in return for a cash payment of \$51,000 and a promissory note of \$122,900 for the railroad's Lafayette Boulevard real estate.

Municipal ownership did not produce the anticipated benefits. After eight years of subsidies, broken-down and worn-out equipment, deteriorating roadbed and bureaucratic headaches, a seemingly *deus ex machina* alighted in the person of Railvest Company of Washington, D.C. Railvest was the corporate alter ego of Joseph Keating, a Georgetown promoter of various enterprises including an investment scheme for the

Bruce D. Fales

Virginia Central No. 945 (ex-Chesapeake & Ohio) is seen at Fredericksburg.





H.K. Vollrath Collection

VC 347 was formerly Western Maryland 347, built by Baldwin in 1892. The low-drivered 2-8-0 is at Fredericksburg in April 1938.

purchase and rehabilitation of boxcars taken out of service by Class I railroads. Keating's plan (certainly not new or without merit) involved the sale of the restored cars to individual investors, and through his management service the leasing of such cars to various railroads for mileage and per diem fees. Needless to say, income tax breaks figured in the picture in addition to the prospective per diem income. If the lessor of the cars happened to be a bona fide operating railroad, a substantially higher fee could be charged. The Virginia Central appeared to offer Keating the opportunity for this bonus. In the spring of 1975, the City of Fredericksburg, anxious to rid itself of the railroad without injury to the businesses located on the right-of-way, sold the railroad but not the land to Keating for \$10 and his promise to keep the railroad running.

A 44-ton ex-U.S. Navy Porter diesel locomotive was obtained to replace the worn-out Plymouths, along with a 44-ton General Electric unit. Over the next 18 months, 243 renovated boxcars took to the rails in maroon livery and a colorful VC herald. The locomotives had been painted bright yellow. The right-of-way was cleaned up, and a number of badly vandalized passenger cars and cabooses that had been given to the VC by the RF&P for hauling school children on excursions were scrapped and hauled away. A new office was rented from the RF&P and a manager from Washington took over the business.

In theory, the mileage and per diem fees collected by Railvest through the medium of the VC would in time pay off the principal and interest due on the money borrowed by the individual purchasers of the boxcars who numbered in their midst many Washington professional people.

Unfortunately for these investors, the City of Fredericksburg and the RF&P, Railvest collapsed in February 1978 more than \$500,000 in debt. Subsequent litigation failed to disclose any assets or where the corporate funds had gone. Among the prime creditors was the RF&P, since Railvest collected some \$88,000 in freight charges and failed to remit them to the carrier.

The three operating employees of the VC had remained unpaid for many weeks. No freight cars were moved in or out of their respective sidings; many more accumulated on the interchange track. RF&P refused to do any interim switching because its engines were too heavy for the 75-pound VC rails. But after the lapse of several weeks the RF&P finally consented to move the logjam of cars using the VC's lone remaining engine, No. 101; the VC employees refused to do any further work until they were paid.

An internal squabble ensued between Railvest's 40-odd investors and the banks that had loaned them the money for purchase and rehabilitation of the cars, upon which there were outstanding mortgages. It seems that what records Railvest had kept did not disclose the



H.K. Vollrath Collection

VC 1022 was built by Richmond Locomotive Works in 1909. The former C&O engine was photographed in Fredericksburg in September 1935.

earnings of the individual cars, so the investors were forced to base their respective claims upon a general average of all the cars leased by Railvest. The process was in effect academic because RF&P's suit disclosed that Railvest was entirely without funds or assets of any kind and the individual investors were left to their own devices to recoup their losses. Presumably, those who were able paid their mortgage debts and found another car-leasing service to handle their property.

The VC, its industrial customers and the City of Fredericksburg were concerned over the problems facing them, although RF&P continued the necessary interim switching service. The city had spent over \$30,000 on the railroad in subsidies and was very anxious to unload what it considered to be a white elephant.

The uncertainty was compounded by the Virginia Highway Department's plan to relocate Route 3 to the new East-West connector road, which when completed will isolate the VC from its present enginehouse and interchange with the RF&P. It is estimated that the relocation of VC will cost the state approximately one million dollars. Present economic conditions in Virginia and the shortage of funds in the highway budget have put the relocation of Route 3 in abeyance, and it is likely that the project will not become a reality until the mid-1990's.*

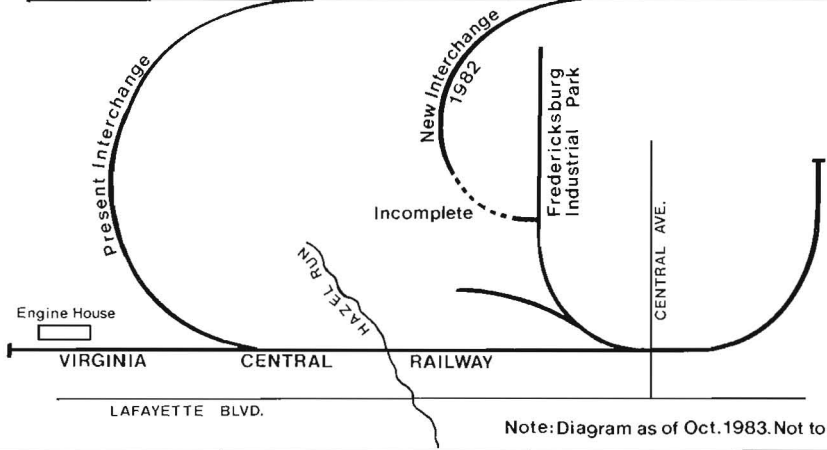
Much to the relief of the City of Fredericksburg, an opportunity to resolve its immediate quandary came upon the scene in the spring of 1979. A Philadelphia lawyer, David E. Wasserstrom, who operates a car-leasing management service known as Centrail Management, signed a 20-year lease on July 1, 1979, under which the city will receive \$150 a month for use of the railroad. The employees, who were left payless by Railvest, were rehired and the carrier resumed business. The VC, in addition to its switching commitments, became the home railroad for about 400 of Wasserstrom's boxcars which carry a lime green livery and a white VC logo.

Only a brief respite from trouble prevailed. In spite of new ownership and optimistic predictions, Wasserstrom says that the VC has failed to produce a profit. In April 1983 he was informed by the RF&P that VC's old wooden trestle over Hazel Run, a small stream which on rare occasions can flood, was "probably unsafe." This news was conveyed to Wasserstrom in a letter from RF&P's president although a spokesman for the railroad later denied that it had inspected the trestle or was involved in the matter.

*A 1,000-foot portion of the new RF&P interchange that will link it with the Fredericksburg Industrial Park was built by the Highway Department at the city's request in 1982. VC, however, has the exclusive right to serve the present ten customers located in the complex.

Virginia Central Railway

← Fredericksburg — R F & P R R — Richmond →

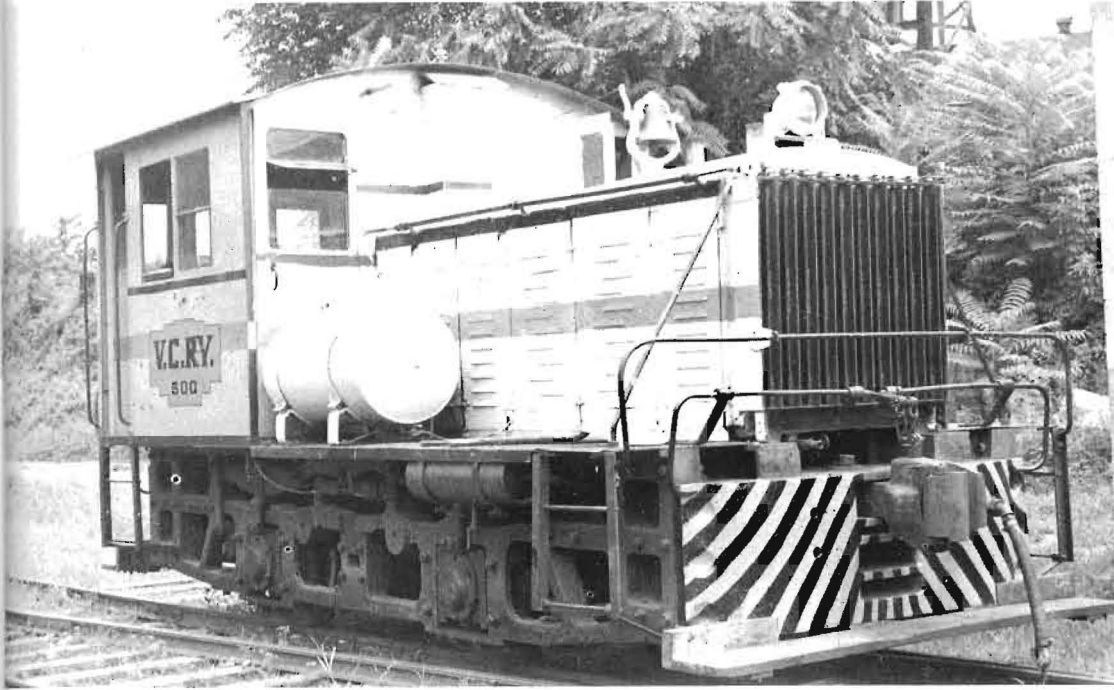


Note: Diagram as of Oct. 1983. Not to scale.

James E. Kranefeld

VC 500 was snapped in Fredericksburg in August 1952. The chunky little Plymouth was built in 1937.

H.K. Vollrath Collection





A.W. Williams
Above, VC No. 3 is in the green livery of Centrail as it crosses the trestle over Hazel Run in Fredericksburg, Va. in March 1983. Below, the former Virginia Central Station in Fredericksburg now owned by Bottled Gas Corporation of Virginia.



The letter from the RF&P, however, prompted Wasserstrom to notify the Fredericksburg City Council that he might default on his lease if the trestle repairs prove to be too expensive. The Council reluctantly approved the expenditure of \$7,500 for a structural safety study of the trestle by the engineering firm of Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas. The latter's report revealed rotting timbers, missing bolts, vertical members out of plumb and inadequate tie spacing. It was estimated that repairs could cost from ten to 50 thousand dollars which Wasserstrom refuses to pay. Since the City Council would not agree to pick up the tab, Wasserstrom embargoed all movements over the trestle as of 11:59 PM on September 23, 1983. On October 14, 1983, the VC suspended all operations.

The present stalemate, unfortunately, leaves the VC's customers without rail service and the City Council impaled upon the horns of a dilemma. In order to preserve service for industrial customers the city cannot afford to lose, it must decide whether to spend a large sum for repair of a trestle that will be razed sometime in the next

decade when the railroad is relocated, or abandon service and risk the loss of some substantial taxpayers.

In sum, abandonment of the VC by Wasserstrom and the City of Fredericksburg would remove a constantly recurring financial burden for the latter, allow RF&P to provide cheaper and improved rail service for the Fredericksburg Industrial Park through elimination of the present VC switching charges and, last but not least, the million dollar relocation expense to the Commonwealth could be saved.

Circumstances will undoubtedly force a resolution of the VC's problem before this article appears in print. The railway, however, has managed to survive a host of desperate situations in its 130 years of existence and if its good fortune persists it may continue to run for many years to come.

In January, 1984, by FD-30372, the Interstate Commerce Commission exempted the abandonment from the requirements of prior ICC approval. On March 1, 1984 the ICC approved final abandonment.