

# Chapter 1

## Railroading Washington

Like most people in post-Civil War Washington, Francis Lutz wanted the Pennsylvania Railroad to come to town. Now head of the business his father had started in Georgetown thirty years earlier—“Manufacturers and dealers in Harness, Trunks, Saddlery &c.,” as their ad in the city directory put it—and newly married, Lutz recognized the benefits the Pennsylvania might bring. No longer would travelers and shippers have to depend on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, which for thirty years had used its monopoly over the city to charge high passenger fares and freight rates. Competition would produce cheaper, more frequent service, which would accelerate the growth of the capital and its businesses. So in 1871, the 26-year-old District native added his name to one of the petitions encouraging Congress to let the Pennsylvania establish itself in Washington.

Like many of those who supported a second railroad, however, Lutz came to question the company's plan. Local officials had originally decided that the Pennsy, as its friends called it, should build its depot at the intersection of Maryland and Virginia Avenues in the city's Southwest quadrant, but neighborhood protests and railroad lobbying soon moved the proposed site half a mile north, to Sixth and B Streets, N.W. A station here, its advocates claimed, would be farther from homes and churches and schools and closer to the center of population and commerce. Among those likely to benefit was F.A. Lutz & Bro., whose current shop at 497 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W., (jointly managed by younger brother John) stood barely a block from the new location.

In early 1872, however, Lutz joined the growing group fighting the new site. While still favoring the company's arrival and an "accessible and convenient" terminal, these critics said the costs of Sixth and B were simply too great. For anyone nearby, they predicted, "the noise and confusion, the annoyance and nuisance will be insufferable to the last degree." Lutz understood that point well—his family's brick rowhouse at 4<sup>th</sup> and C Streets NW was just three blocks from the Baltimore & Ohio's depot—and he knew the company's choice had a second, even larger drawback. The fourteen acres the Pennsylvania wanted were part of the National Mall, and to opponents it was obvious that "such location will interfere with, injure, and forever mar the beauty of the proposed Park." So Lutz signed a second petition that admitted his earlier mistake, that demanded the Pennsy be kept off the Mall, and that called for a union depot to house all the city's railroads.

His switch became part of the continuing battle over the proper place for railroads in Washington. Residents, government officials, and businessmen had long realized how important good train service was

to the city's success, but they regularly disagreed over how to balance demands from companies like the Pennsylvania with those from other segments of the community. These disputes became fiercer and more frequent after the Civil War, largely for three reasons. First, the capital's growth meant more trains and more people crowded into the same space, increasing the number of conflicts. Second, arguments about the place of railroads almost invariably connected to a broader question: what sort of city should Washington aim to be? Finally, attempts to turn ideas into policy increasingly reminded residents of one of their biggest complaints, the District's remarkably undemocratic system of government. As a result, the history of railroads in late 19th century Washington illustrated more than developments in transportation: it also highlighted planning and politics in the nation's capital.

## I

Washingtonians questioned the benefits of the railroads years before the first train arrived. Their doubts initially appeared during the 1820s, when local leaders faced the same decision as their counterparts in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. All these cities hoped to dominate trade with the Ohio Valley, an area booming as settlers plowed their efforts into its rich farmland. Each city recognized that capturing this business, and the money and jobs that would accompany it, required an inexpensive connection across the Appalachian Mountains. The lack of navigable rivers precluded that method of transportation, and wagon travel was so difficult that the cost of sending one ton of grain thirty miles by land was the same as shipping it 3,000 miles across the ocean. Ambitious communities would have to invest in a route over the mountains, and America's chronic shortage of capital forced them to choose between the two available methods—canals or railroads.

Already behind its competitors in size and wealth, Washington put its money in canals. It seemed a sensible choice given the city's and the country's history. In the 1780s, George Washington had surveyed, invested in, and promoted a canal around the falls that blocked the Potomac River six miles above the city soon named in his honor. A separate canal already flowed through the center of the capital; it left the Potomac below Georgetown, ran along the north side of the Mall, turned south just before Capitol Hill, and emptied into the Anacostia River. One of the defining events of 1820s America was the opening of the Erie Canal, which quickly became so busy that tolls paid off its \$8 million construction cost in less than a decade.

The capital formally announced its choice on July 4, 1828, when President John Quincy Adams turned the first shovel of dirt for the Chesapeake and Ohio (C&O) Canal. Though it too would parallel the Potomac, which was too rocky at many points for shipping, the C&O differed from the earlier canal in a number of ways. It would run along on the Maryland, rather than the Virginia, side of the river, accommodate larger boats, and extend much farther west. Its investors, who included local businessmen and the governments of Maryland, the District, and the U.S., believed it would help realize President Washington's prediction that the capital would become "the emporium of the United States." The city seemed an ideal location for a commercial center, as it had natural harbors in Georgetown and Alexandria to handle ocean shipping, stood at the border of North and South, and offered, via the Potomac Valley, a relatively direct route across the Appalachians.

The local economy needed this kind of push. At this time the District of Columbia consisted of five jurisdictions—Washington city, Georgetown, Washington county, Alexandria county (today's Arlington

County), and Alexandria city—and covered one hundred square miles of forested hills and cleared farmlands. (Though its reputation would later suggest otherwise, the area was not much swampier than other Eastern cities.) It had been thirty years since Congress and the President had decided to locate their new country's capital at the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers, and twenty since the federal government had moved there. Despite its boosters' ambitions, however, the District lagged its rivals. Its population in 1820 was just 33,000, about one-quarter of New York's and one-half of Baltimore's. When Pierre L'Enfant was planning Washington at the turn of the century, he wanted the capital to convey "an idea of the greatness of the empire as well as to engrave in every mind that sense of respect that is due...the seat of supreme sovereignty," but it was presently, as one observer noted, less a city than "a long straggling village."

The C&O was originally to reach all the way to Pittsburgh, where it would connect with the busy Ohio River. These plans quickly foundered, however, on terrain so difficult that estimated costs rose to \$22 million, far too much for investors in Washington. They settled on a shorter canal that would run 185 miles up to Cumberland, Maryland, saving \$14 million but stopping on the wrong side of the Appalachians. Even that distance still took much longer to build than expected, with work slowed by labor troubles, funding problems, damaging floods, and legal battles with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad over stretches of the Potomac Valley.

The Chesapeake & Ohio Canal was in some ways a success. Completed in 1850, it required remarkable engineering: seventy-four locks, eleven aqueducts, seven dams, and one 3,000-foot tunnel carried boats through an elevation change of over six hundred feet. The opening of its first segment, twenty-two miles from Georgetown

to Seneca in 1831, reduced the cost of shipping a barrel of flour from \$1.00 to 7¢. Traffic surged every time a new section opened, and during its first five full years, tonnage of cargoes such as flour, grain, whiskey, and coal nearly tripled.

The canal proved to be the wrong bet, however. Long before the C&O was finished, both it and Washington were clearly losing out to the route not taken. On the same day that President Adams inaugurated work on the canal, Charles Carroll, the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, broke ground in Baltimore for what would become America's first operating railroad. The Baltimore & Ohio also encountered constant problems as it took an unproven technology across mountainous wilderness, but it still proceeded more quickly than the C&O. Its "main stem," which traveled across the middle of Maryland before jumping the Potomac at Harpers Ferry, arrived in Cumberland eight years before the canal, and the B&O justified its name in 1852 when it reached the Ohio River at Wheeling, then still part of Virginia.

Faster construction was just one of the railroad's advantages. Canal traffic had to stop when winter temperatures turned its water to ice, but the B&O demonstrated that trains could operate in all but the worst storms. They also moved traffic more quickly: by 1850, its freight service might average ten miles per hour, two-and-half times the speed of a canal boat. Railroads were also far more flexible, since they could, within reason, go wherever their owners wanted, whereas a canal had to remain near a supply of water.

Washington's boosters soon had first-hand knowledge of these features. In March 1833, the Maryland legislature awarded the B&O a charter to run between Baltimore and Washington; the state also invested \$500,000 in the project in return for 20% of all passenger

revenues. Six months later the railroad began building its thirty-two mile "Washington Branch," which followed the main stem for eight miles before splitting off at a small town known as Relay.

Service to the District of Columbia officially started on August 25, 1835, when four wood-fired locomotives steamed in from the northeast. The silver and black engines arriving on the north side of Capitol Hill that afternoon were the B&O's newest and were named, appropriately enough considering the route they covered, after the most recent presidents—Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and John Quincy Adams. Stepping off the trains were nearly one thousand people, including company officials, politicians from Maryland and the District, and two Marine bands; greeting them were thousands of District residents, their attendance an indication of the importance the city attached to the railroad.

Methods for celebrating what a local newspaper called this "great day" varied across the community. Good spirits flowed freely and often literally throughout the afternoon, with locals joining visitors "in taking refreshments liberally provided by the Railroad Company." Leading members of the party visited the White House to receive congratulations from Andrew Jackson, who earlier had climbed a nearby hill to watch the trains enter town. The mayor of Washington offered a brief speech in which he predicted both practical and political gains: not only would the railroad "promote the convenience of the public," but the improved communications it fostered might help "heal the jealousies and misapprehensions" developing between North and South.

These benefits did not eliminate the reservations residents had about railroads. The possibility of a boiler explosion so worried Washingtonians that they convinced Congress to prohibit the use of

steam engines in developed sections of town. As a result, horses had to pull trains over the three blocks leading to the city's first depot, a former tailor's shop at the northwest corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Second Street, N.W.

Even after the railroad's arrival, however, Washington's development remained spotty. A drawing of the area just north of the Capitol from the late 1830s showed two terrified cows running away from a B&O passenger train as it crossed an open field. Over the next decade, the value of downtown lots nearly doubled, and one frequent visitor praised on the "city-like aspect" now developing. The population rose 50% during the 1850s, and at the end of the decade a magazine based in the great metropolis of New York admired the capital's "amazing strides towards permanent grandeur." Yet its economy, though better, was still limited: the orientation of the Washington branch meant that the new line did little to spur western trade, and in 1852 the C&O carried only one-third as much freight as the B&O's main stem. The city's major industry made only limited contributions to economic growth, as increasing sectional tensions made an already tight-fisted Congress even more reluctant to spend more on the federal government. Prospects seemed so limited that Arlington and Alexandria chose to rejoin Virginia in the hope the state would provide better conditions for growth.

As a result, by the start of the Civil War Washington had fallen even farther behind the places it saw as its competitors. America's fifth largest city in 1820, it had now fallen to eleventh. Its population of 75,000 seemed tiny compared to New York, where Manhattan and Brooklyn together had more than one million people, and third-ranked Baltimore was home to 210,000. Georgetown offered an indication of the city's struggles: what might have been a booming port had almost

the same number of people as thirty years earlier.

Perhaps most disappointing for locals was how far their hometown remained from the ambition L'Enfant's had laid out. Even those Americans who credited its progress complained about rough streets and haphazard building patterns. Mid-century visitors from across the Atlantic typically dismissed the city and, by implication, the country it represented. Having seen lots of open space but few impressive buildings, a Spanish Ambassador mocked the capital as "a city of magnificent distances." British commentators, Charles Dickens among them, concluded London had little to fear from New York, let alone Washington. A Scottish writer summed up the European view just before Lincoln's election: "Washington so violates one's preconceived notions of a capital, and is, in its general features, so much at variance with the estimate which one forms of the metropolitan proprieties, that it is difficult, in dealing with it as a capital, to avoid caricaturing a respectable country town."

## II

The Civil War produced unprecedented destruction in the United States, but it simultaneously helped build Washington. The city was, to be sure, a mess by the time Lee surrendered at Appomattox: train tracks cut across the Mall, hurriedly erected forts spread over high ground, and the waterfront featured new docks whose only recommendation was their quick construction. But as would be the case twice more during the next one hundred years, war would be good for growth.

The most obvious effects appeared between 1861 and 1865. The District's population doubled to 160,000 as soldiers arrived to protect the nation's capital, civilians came to manage men and money for the Union Army, and private citizens appeared to sell most anything to

anyone willing to pay. The city became an important distribution point, especially after military engineers connected the B&O to a Virginia railroad by adding tracks along the Mall near the base of Capitol Hill, through South Washington, and over the “Long Bridge” that crossed the Potomac. The federal government spent furiously on men and material, money that fueled the capital’s economy through direct purchases and through the wages of those who handled it.

The war helped Washington even after most soldiers had returned home. The federal government had assumed much greater powers during the four years of fighting, and its increased responsibilities continued after 1865. Between 1860 and 1870 federal non-military employment doubled, and over the next 100 years that figure would rise about 40% per decade. Not only were there many more federal workers, but a greater proportion of them lived in Washington. Historian Alan Lessoff has calculated that by 1870 the capital was home to 12% of all civilian federal employees, twice the figure before Fort Sumter. Washington’s share would remain stable into the 1980s, providing a base on which to build a better city.

Visible improvements occurred only gradually, however. At the end of 1860s, the District offered few paved roads, no major department stores, farm animals wandering free, and a substantial slum only blocks from the White House. Conditions were bad enough that *The Nation*, in a particularly nasty jab considering recent history, described 1871 Washington as “a struggling, shabby, dirty little third-rate southern town.” The Washington Canal, intended to be the main method of moving goods, illustrated these shortcomings in a particularly unpleasant way. Erratic sewers and the Potomac’s inability to flush water through the length of canal left what one contemporary described as a “fetid bayou” in the middle of the capital, one featuring “dead cats

and all kinds of putridity and reeking with pestilent odors.”

This atmosphere did not prevent civic leaders from imagining a beautiful future. They knew they would have to fight off attempts to relocate the capital to a more central spot—St. Louis had now replaced Cincinnati as the alternative mentioned most often—but this danger shrunk each time the federal government invested in structures like the new dome on the U.S. Capitol or the 1882 Pension Building. They continued to think that Washington could become as important economically as it was politically, especially once the “New South” expanded trade with the North. They saw no reason the capital could not ride the wave of industrial growth surging across the country, and they tried to channel this process into the capital by staging fairs and other promotional activities.

Better transportation was again a key method, and people in Washington again hesitated to rely too heavily on the Baltimore & Ohio. They had learned since 1835 that the railroad arranged service to benefit itself, not travelers or shippers. Though the requirement that the B&O pay the state 20% of passenger revenues provided Maryland more than \$300,000 a year, it led to unusually high fares that riders, lacking a comparable alternative, resentfully paid. The B&O protected its position by minimizing competition. It used its influence in the state legislature to delay the attempts of the rival Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) to obtain a charter to operate in Maryland; the Pennsy made it to Baltimore in 1861 only by purchasing the Northern Central Railway, which ran down from south-central Pennsylvania. The B&O responded by abandoning two standard railroad practices: its office in the capital refused to sell tickets to areas served by the PRR, and it would not allow shippers who started their freight on the Pennsylvania system “through car” service, forcing them to bear the extra cost of



The B&O station from the southwest, just before its 1908 demolition. The U.S. Capitol is up the hill to the right. (*Library of Congress*)

reloading their goods in Baltimore. In addition, when the Northern Central changed its timetable to make passenger and light freight transfers to Washington easier, the B&O rescheduled its trains back into inconvenience.

People in Washington did not have to use the Baltimore & Ohio to be offended by it. In 1851, in return for moving off “America’s Main Street,” Pennsylvania Avenue, to the corner of New Jersey Avenue and C Street, N.W., the company gained the right to use its locomotives, now coal-fired, all the way to its station. Neighbors immediately complained about the pollution and noise, which for many more than offset the advantages of the spacious new brick, stucco, and brownstone depot. The company also had the habit of leaving empty cars on sidings rather than returning them to the yards, a practice that blocked the view of anyone trying to cross the tracks, and it frequently extended its tracks

onto private or government property without permission.

The B&O hurt the city in yet another way. During the Civil War there were proposals to have the government build a new line from New York to Washington, but John Garrett, just beginning a quarter-century as company president, blocked this potential competition through argument, compromise, and connections. He said that such a route was a waste of resources, since it could not be finished before fighting ended, but agreed to expand the Washington Branch from single- to double-track. Garrett also used the company’s influence with the Republicans who dominated Maryland politics, reminding them that a newly chartered railroad would not pay the state 20% of its passenger revenue nor contribute as generously to their campaigns.

Garrett’s attempt to maintain his monopoly continued after 1865. The Baltimore & Ohio had long refused to spend millions to create a line northwest from the capital, believing such a route would simply shift business it already controlled. But company executives now feared that if they did not act, another line would. The B&O therefore bought the charter of the Metropolitan Railroad, planned but barely started in the 1850s by businessmen in Georgetown and Montgomery County, Maryland who wanted a direct route towards the Ohio Valley. The B&O did some construction in 1866, planning to swing the southern end of what it called the Metropolitan Branch over to its New Jersey Avenue station. However, the company soon decided to focus on building spurs off the main stem, in particular to Pittsburgh, whose rapidly growing industries had to rely on the Pennsy.

But just as the chairman of a citizens’ committee was concluding, “the town is cornered,” competition came to the District. Over the previous twenty years, the Pennsylvania Railroad had in many ways

paralleled the Baltimore & Ohio. It too had reached west from an Atlantic port, in its case Philadelphia, crossed the Ohio River, and continued towards major Midwestern cities. It too dominated its state government, with a joke claiming that the legislature in Harrisburg adjourned with the phrase “if the Pennsylvania Railroad has no more business for this body to transact.” It too had powerful Congressional allies and, in Tom Scott and Edgar Thomson, executives who personified the company.

The Pennsylvania also wanted to expand into a rival’s territory. In the early 1860s, its lawyers learned that a group of tobacco farmers already held a charter to build a railroad from Baltimore to Charles County, which lay southeast of Washington. Though the Baltimore & Potomac never laid any track, it was valuable because it had the right to build twenty-mile spurs from its main right-of-way—a distance that encompassed the District. As quietly as it could, the Pennsylvania helped some “independent” investors buy the B&P, then convinced Congress to allow the new line into Washington. These businessmen, who included future governor Owen Bowie, sold their interest to the Pennsylvania in 1868, an act that confirmed growing suspicions about who was really driving the acquisition.

The Baltimore & Ohio tried to derail the Pennsy’s trip to the capital. It first circulated an unsigned pamphlet in the Maryland legislature that recommended lawmakers limit the B&P to branch lines that ended within their state of origin. The *National Intelligencer*, one of Washington’s many newspapers, pointed out the hypocrisy behind this “scurrilous and libelous” flyer: “this is precisely the same game” that the B&O had raged against when Pennsylvania had used it to try to keep its monopoly over Pittsburgh. The Baltimore & Ohio also restarted construction on the Metropolitan Branch (it would open in

the summer of 1873), hoping a direct route to the northwest would show that the capital did not need other carriers. It encouraged property owners along the spur to sue, and it told its lobbyists and allies on Capitol Hill to make Congress reject any bill that granted the PRR land for a terminal in or a right-of-way through Washington.

These tactics only slowed the new route, and by 1870, the Baltimore & Potomac had reached the District line. The path it wanted to take in the District began about half-way between the city’s northern and eastern corners, crossed the Anacostia near the eastern end of Pennsylvania Avenue, and ran south along the western bank of the river. It turned west to follow Virginia Avenue, entering a five-block tunnel at Twelfth Street, SE in order to leave open the entrance to the Washington Navy Yard. It veered west onto K Street and rejoined Virginia Avenue after negotiating a sharp turn to the northwest soon known as “Dead Man’s Curve.” A block south of the Mall, at Eighth and Virginia, SW, the tracks swung onto Maryland Avenue and headed southwest to the Potomac, where they crossed the river on the Long Bridge. This rickety wooden span, the only one for railroads within fifty miles, provided another illustration of the Pennsylvania’s influence: though the B&O had controlled it immediately after the Civil War, in 1870 Congress transferred exclusive rights to the bridge to the B&P.

What remained unsettled was where the trains would stop. Since 1850, most of the capital’s growth had taken place in its northwest quadrant, especially above Pennsylvania Avenue. The PRR knew there was little chance it would be allowed to cross “the Avenue,” which was the city’s busiest street and provided the connection between the Capitol and the White House, but it still wanted to be close to downtown. It was therefore unpleasantly surprised in early 1871 when Congress proposed placing the station south of the Mall on a triangle



MAP OF WASHINGTON, D. C., SHOWING LOCATION OF PROPOSED NEW UNION STATION.

The Pennsylvania's station, just east of the words "The Mall," is labeled "B&P Depot."

of public property along Virginia Avenue between Four-and-a-half and Seventh Streets, SW.

Others joined the railroad in trying to get the depot out of South Washington, which was so far the center of activity that locals referred to it as the "Island." Business leaders preferred a depot closer to the commercial district, especially since a new Central Market was now

under construction at Pennsylvania Avenue and Seventh Street, NW. Neighbors of the proposed site worried about what would happen to their churches—there were seven within two blocks—and to a new 1200-student school at Sixth and Virginia.

The result of these complaints appeared during the March 19, 1871 meeting of the city council. At the very end of its session, the lower chamber relocated the terminal to the southwest corner of Sixth and B Streets, NW, with the trains reaching the station on a spur running north along Sixth. The Council then sped the bill over to the upper house, which made ratifying the move its last piece of business for the night.

This surprise shift, consideration of which had somehow been omitted from the evening's agendas, provoked disgust. The *Daily Morning Chronicle* suggested, "the haste with which this scheme was rushed through the Councils raised the worst suggestions or reflections as to the means which must have been resorted to for compassing so gross an object." Less oblique critics accused the Pennsylvania of promising legislators \$11,000, bribes the same sources later claimed the railroad never actually paid.

Since it was unclear whether the city could assign sections of the Mall unilaterally, the bill required that "the consent of Congress be first obtained." Legislators on Capitol Hill waited nearly a year before taking up the issue, mainly because the slow pace of construction meant that the PRR would not need a terminal until summer of 1872. Their deliberations opened with a moment of great theater: starting in the first day of hearings before House Committee on the District of Columbia were John Garrett and Tom Scott. It was a rare face-off between two of the America's most famous businessmen, but the hearing provided more comedy than drama. Garrett argued that

his opposition to the Pennsylvania was based only on his desire “to subserve the interests of the people of the District,” a selflessness the community had never witnessed; Scott claimed his company was so concerned about local welfare that it would be happy to run its trains under the Mall, an impossibility given that the necessary grades would be six times steeper than the railroad tolerated elsewhere.

This farcical testimony kicked off what was a generally serious debate over the depot and, more generally, the future of Washington. Participants actually agreed on a number of general goals. They wanted the city to grow; they wanted nice neighborhoods; they wanted to make good use of the Mall. All of these features were important to creating a capital “worthy of the nation,” a phrase *Harper’s Magazine* had used just before the Civil War and was now frequently repeated.

But conflicts appeared as soon as fulfilling one objective meant downplaying another. Favoring a Sixth Street depot were those who placed priority on economic development, a group that included much of the business community and those federal and local officials who believed the capital should sacrifice a great deal for the benefits that would come with better transportation. They agreed with the chairman of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, who argued, “If you want to make Washington a pleasant place make it a useful place, where people can come and go with all the facilities which the traveling public ought to have. Let it be as Philadelphia or Chicago.” Sixth Street would also benefit trade, since rough roads and horse-drawn wagons meant rail was by far the cheapest and fastest way to move goods locally.

Their opponents thought the costs of a Mall station were simply too high. On this side were some businessmen, most of the city’s newspapers, and residents from various sections, all of whom saw the

B&O’s clutter, pollution, and noise as reason that the District should refuse to stick another depot into its heart. The *Evening Star*, already calling itself the Washington’s leading paper, summarized this view when it wrote, “We are heartily in favor in granting every possible facility to new railroads to this city, but...to permit the Baltimore and Potomac road to penetrate to...the very business center of the city, would be an intensification of all the evils that have been experienced from railroads on and across our streets.”

At the middle of the fight was the Mall, which L’Enfant had envisioned a 400-foot wide promenade running from the Capitol to the Potomac. The area was now twice that wide, stretching between B Street north (now Constitution Avenue) and B Street south (now Independence Avenue), but it was far less appealing. The fragrant Washington Canal formed much of its northern boundary, and only because city workers had recently torn up the B&O’s tracks at the base of the Capitol had locomotives stopped clouding its eastern edge. The only impressive element along the southern border was the Smithsonian Castle, while the defining feature of the western end was the unfinished Washington Monument, currently abandoned barely one-third of the way to its planned height of 555 feet.

The Mall’s interior was only slightly better. The area north of the Castle had been carefully landscaped in the Romantic style, with paths winding through densely planted trees. Not far away, though, were “unsightly shacks, crazy sheds, and miscellaneous debris, which had accumulated through many years of neglect.” Congressional committees and federal bureaus had carved out little sections for their own uses, as had criminals and squatters. Surveying this scene, landscape architect Frederic Law Olmsted, the designer of the Capitol grounds and New York’s Central Park, disgustedly labeled it as “a standing reproach

against the system of government.”

Those favoring the Sixth Street station saw these conditions as an argument in their favor. The Mall’s emptiness was an advantage, since only here could trains be close to the city center without disrupting neighborhoods. The District’s non-voting but elected House delegate chided anyone who might “regard the prospective park...of more importance than the commercial interests of this city and of this District.” Besides, he added, Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park proved that recreation areas and railroads could co-exist happily. His view was not simply a rationalization: as historian John Kasson has pointed out, many 19th-century Americans felt that nature and technology could complement, rather than compete with, one another.

Opponents of the PRR’s plan argued it would undermine the



Looking east on the Mall from the top of the Smithsonian Castle. The Capitol is visible on the horizon. Running across the middle of the picture, just past the break in the trees, is Sixth Street; on the left, or north, side is the PRR depot’s train shed. (*Library of Congress*)

city’s future. Washington would never engender the sort of respect L’Enfant had aimed for, they said, if each day dozens of locomotives smoked and rattled their way across its center. Even locals who knew little about L’Enfant wanted to keep the railroad out and give the future a chance to make the Mall an oasis:

We who have lived many years in this city have looked forward with great pleasure to the time when all our Public Grounds would be thrown into one large and beautiful Park extending from the Capitol to the Presidents House, when landscape gardening with its green lawns and roadways and shady walks should make it the resort of all classes of our people—a sense of beauty and a source of health in the very heart of our town.

Allowing trains there, said one the petitions circulating the community, would “destroy the plan of the city...and the plan of a grand central park.”

Those fighting the Pennsylvania had trouble keeping their troops together. Finding a better location was a major problem, since any alternative inevitably created opposition from whoever lived near the new site. Many of those with reservations about the Mall depot preferred still building something now rather than continued dependence on the B&O. After all, they pointed out, the PRR bill gave Congress the right to modify the act, and so the city could demand its park back whenever it chose.

The strongest support for the new location, not surprisingly, came from the PRR. Though not as powerful in the capital as in its home state, the railroad’s takeover of the Long Bridge had shown it could also persuade Congress. Its influence began with the Pennsylvania delegation, which devoted itself to the company’s needs: Simon

Cameron, a substantial stockholder and a leader of the Republican-controlled Senate, at times referred to the railroad as “us.” The company gave members of Congress free passes, contributed money to campaigns, and sponsored newspapers that promoted its interests and sympathetic candidates. Often those methods simply reinforced existing support for the Pennsylvania, which was so important to the economy—it carried 10% of the nation’s freight—that few wanted to displease it.

The bill’s trip through Congress illustrated why it was during this period that “railroad” became a verb. The PRR quickly received confirmation from both houses of its right to use the land at Sixth Street, and its supporters easily defeated amendments that would have forced the company to pay rent to a city desperately short of revenue for public services, required it to depress part of its route below street level, and forbidden use of its property as a stockyard. After the Senate sent the bill to President U.S. Grant, Vermont’s Justin Morrill sardonically suggested that “the chair appoint a committee of two to wait on the vice president of the Pennsylvania railroad [Tom Scott] and ask him if he has any further communication to make.”

On July 2, 1872, the inaugural train puffed away from the temporary station the Pennsylvania had cobbled together at Sixth and B. Little fanfare attended this 5 AM trip; those looking for festivities had to wait until later that morning, when the new Central Market, located one block to the west, celebrated its opening with refreshments, speeches and bands. Choosing such a low-key beginning must have seemed increasingly wise as the day wore on. The city had regraded Sixth Street just before tracks occupied its west side, but thirty-ton locomotives compacted the new dirt unevenly. The rails soon spread apart, and at one point that afternoon three separate trains lay derailed.

This failure no doubt pleased the Baltimore & Ohio, which sneered at the Pennsylvania’s right-of-way, part of which ran along the recently-filled canal, as “the Sewer Route.” Yet whatever comfort the B&O gained from that insult hardly compensated for the end of its thirty-seven-year monopoly.

### III

The Pennsy quickly set about establishing itself in the capital. Just before Christmas, 1873, it opened a permanent terminal, a three-story, Victorian Gothic building designed by Wilson Bros. & Co., who created a number of stations for the company. Primarily red brick with black mortar, the depot also included horizontal bands of granite and sandstone and a roof covered in red, green, and blue slate. Its main entrance faced B Street and fed passengers into the ground floor waiting room where, eight years later, President James Garfield would be assassinated; the second and third stories housed railroad offices. Its most prominent feature was a square tower at the corner of Sixth and B, and the metal train shed ran south parallel to Sixth Street, its peaked roof extending nearly halfway across the Mall.

Over the next two decades the station became the center of railroading in Washington. Within ten years the PRR and the B&O each had about 40% of the city’s passenger traffic, but the Sixth Street depot was busier because all carriers serving the South also arrived there. In 1872 the PRR extended its line from Alexandria down to Quantico in order to connect with the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad. By the turn of the 20th century, the RF&P was also bringing to Washington cars from the Atlantic Coast Line (ACL) and the Seaboard Air Line (SAL), both which ran to Florida. Two other carriers entered Alexandria from the West. From Louisville, St. Louis,

and Chicago came the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad (C&O), which also had main line service to Richmond and Newport News. Up from Atlanta came the Southern Railway, which J.P. Morgan formed in the 1890s from a series of smaller roads on either side of the Appalachian Mountains. Through “trackage rights,” agreements that allowed a “foreign” railroad to use another company’s right-of-way, they crossed the Potomac on the Pennsy’s route and rolled up to Sixth Street.

It was more than volume that made the Pennsy a central part of capital life. Within fifteen years, the company had replaced the Baltimore & Ohio as Washington’s most despised corporate citizen. Part of this hostility was almost unavoidable. The B&O’s right-of-way had preceded homes into most of the neighborhoods that now surrounded its facilities, a sequence that created at least a limited tolerance for its smoke and clatter; the Pennsylvania, on the other



The B&P Depot in the late 19th century. Extending down the left side of the photograph is Sixth Street and the train shed. (*Library of Congress*)

hand, was a disruptive newcomer in already settled areas.

Yet the main reason the community came to hate the Pennsy was its methods, not its timing. The company displayed a lack of concern for residential life and established law that was striking even by the “public be damned” standards of late 19th century corporations. Within a generation, even the *Evening Star*, which for years thanked the PRR for ending the B&O’s monopoly, was admitting, “the reigning corporate monarch is certainly a more aggressive despot than his predecessor.”

The Pennsylvania began to offend the capital even before its first train swayed across the Mall. To make it easier for carriages to cross its route, the company’s charter required that the tops of its Sixth Street tracks lie flush with the road and that the area between its rails be paved. But the railroad refused to take either step, and a local court supported its claim that these provisions were too “burdensome.” The Pennsylvania soon squirmed out of another restriction, one that limited it to two tracks on city streets. Because this rule limited business, the company began laying additional rails on Virginia and Maryland Avenues. Residents sued, citing the charter and the fact that the new tracks made the two streets almost unusable for other types of traffic. But the judge who heard the case rejected their claim, ruling that the charter allowed construction of whatever the railroad believed “necessary and expedient.”

Over time, much of the city encountered the arrogance of a company that would later describe itself as “The Standard Railway of the World.” In Southeast, its attitude appeared clearly in the late 1880s, when the federal government prepared to extend Pennsylvania Avenue over the Anacostia. The proposed bridge crossed not just the river but also the PRR’s tracks as they ran along the western shore.

Government contractors dug their first test pit in November

1887—and Pennsylvania employees immediately filled it in. It claimed the excavation and the rest of the proposed bridge abutment lay within its right-of-way, but several months of disputes showed the company was wrong: its charter had given the railroad a choice between two routes into the city, neither of which its tracks followed. Rather than admitting its mistake and asking Congress to legalize the existing situation, however, the company sued the government to demand redesigned foundations that would not take up land it might want in the future for additional, equally illegal, tracks. This approach paid off in the middle of 1888, when Congress appropriated funds for a redesign that moved the abutments. It would be another two years before the PRR finally agreed to pay for those alterations, a delay that lasted until Congress had changed the railroad's charter to ratify its existing right-of-way.

Southwest Washington had its own examples of how the Pennsylvania did business. The company decided in the early 1880s that it needed more room to handle freight, and so it bought an entire block, referred to locally as a “square,” just north of the Long Bridge. It then filed an application with the District government to build a new siding that would reach its new yard in Square 233 by running through Square 267, which lay immediately to the east, before continuing across 14<sup>th</sup> Street. City officials refused to permit the railroad to cross a public street and revealed their view of its trustworthiness by stationing police officers at 14th and Maryland to watch for any sign of construction.

The company sued the District, claiming the “necessary and expedient” clause permitted it to build on or across any street along to its route. This time, however, the U.S. Supreme Court stopped the railroad, ruling it could leave its right-of-way only where the charter specifically allowed, and it condemned the attitudes underlying the

suit:

It would be a strange grant of power which, authorizing a railroad company to enter or even pass through a city, should leave to the company the selection, not only of its route into or through the city, but even the streets and highway over which its tracks should be laid, subject only to its sense of its own convenience....The assertion of the existence of such a right is, to say the least, somewhat novel.

The consequences of leaving decisions up to the Pennsylvania would become clear at the Long Bridge. The capital's most important crossing, it carried trains, pedestrians, carriages, wagons, horse-drawn buses, and, after 1889, electric trolleys. Thanks to Congress's action



The Long Bridge, from its eastern end. The train tracks are on the far, or downstream, side of the bridge. (*Library of Congress*)

in 1870, the railroad controlled of the bridge “in perpetuity, free of cost,” as long it kept the entire structure in “good condition.” The company had no trouble using its authority to charge other travelers, but most observers believed it failed to live up to the other end of the agreement. Rather than repoint the mortar in the bridge’s masonry piers as the river scoured it away, for example, its maintenance men simply deflected the current by dropping large pieces of rock at the base of each support.

The problem this technique appeared in 1889. The same storm that caused the Johnstown flood also poured over Washington, and it soon became clear why critics subsequently jeered at the “Long Dam.” The additional rock restricted how much water could flow between the piers, and the Potomac soon ran into—not under—the bridge. Crashing into its superstructure was everything the deluge had knocked loose upstream, including a boat house, barges, canal boats escaping the C&O, mud-scows, a schooner, and another six-foot bridge. The dam helped direct more of the already overflowing river into the city, and water ultimately reached almost as far north as the White House and as far east as Capitol Hill. Within the flood zone was the PRR depot, where the chief matron supervised the waiting room from a boat. As the capital dried out, residents scorned railroad claims that the Long Bridge had not exacerbated the flooding.

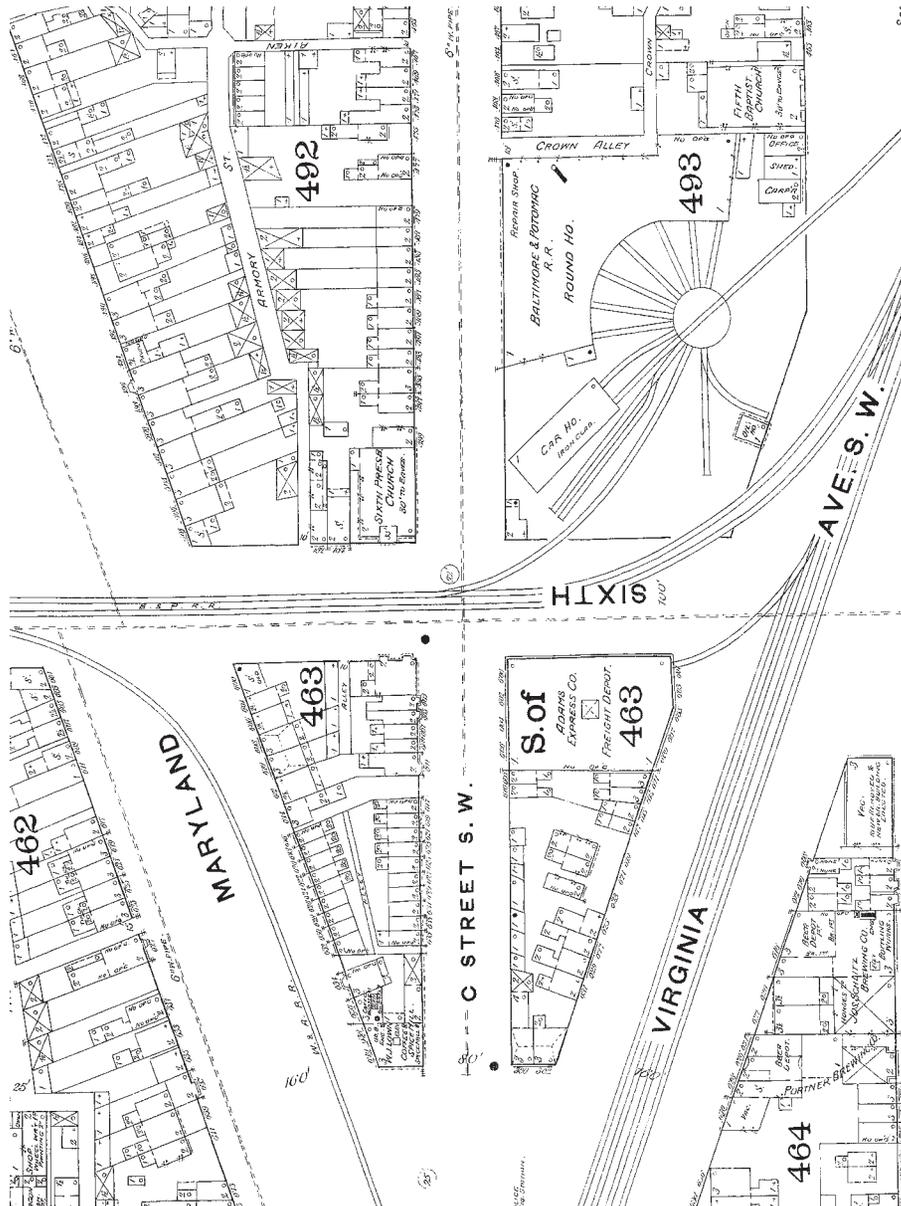
Even if the bridge was not to blame, citizens and the Army Corps of Engineers agreed that its instability demanded repair or replacement. Yet the company refused to do anything but minimal maintenance, and chief engineer William Brown later told a reporter from the *Evening Star*: “You people in Washington want a new bridge across the Potomac, to take the place of the long bridge. Well, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company does not intend to put one there. The present

structure suits us, and we will continue to use it, unless the government shall decide to build another bridge for us.”

The harshest criticism of the railroad originated in the center of the city. The experiences of two churches on the Island showed why residents of Southwest had at one point volunteered, not entirely in jest, to rip out the PRR’s rails. On the southeast corner of Sixth and C, fronting the PRR’s tracks as they ran up to the depot, was the Sixth Presbyterian Church; on the north side of D, just east of Sixth, stood the Fifth Baptist Church which faced the main line. The congregations knew what would happen: Mason Noble, pastor of the Sixth Presbyterian, protested to the Senate once the Pennsylvania proposed its route that his parishioners would be subjected “every day and many times every day to the horrible noises of Locomotives passing and repassing with their bells incessantly ringing (as they must do according to law) and the screaming of their steam whistles drowning the voices of praise and prayer.”

Actual conditions would be worse, largely because the Pennsylvania decided to locate its main Washington engine house and machine shop at the corner of Sixth Street and Virginia Avenue. The building, which included sixteen smokestacks, sat across C Street from Sixth Presbyterian and just six feet from the western wall of Fifth Baptist. Its minister soon reported that ash, cinders, and dust were constantly “settling upon the pews and furniture, and soiling the clothes of the occupants, accompanied by an offensive odor, which greatly annoyed the congregation.” In addition, parked locomotives often blocked the sidewalk, moving ones barely missed congregants, and attendance declined noticeably.

Both churches sued the railroad. Sixth Presbyterian went to court early in 1874, asking for compensation for the “great damage” the tracks



The Pennsylvania Railroad repair facilities in Southwest, 1888, from a Sanborn Fire Insurance Map. (North is to the left.) Just to the east is the Fifth Baptist Church; to the north is Sixth Presbyterian. Most of the other buildings are homes, though immediately east of Crown Alley is a saloon. The large numbers (463, for example) are the square numbers.

and the engine house had caused. A special jury awarded the church \$11,500, a ruling the U.S. Supreme Court upheld. Fifth Baptist filed its suit a half-dozen years later, using as one of its precedents the *Sixth Presbyterian* ruling. The Pennsylvania again defended itself with the “necessary and expedient” clause, but the District superior court, the District Court of Appeals, and the U.S. Supreme Court all disagreed. The latter ruled that the shops “were a nuisance in every sense of the term” and that the railroad’s charter “did not authorize it to place [its facilities] wherever it might think them proper in the city, without regard to the property and rights of others.”

But the “grounds of public hostility,” as one article put it, remained on the Mall. Opposition to the railroad’s presence kept growing, particularly as people found it easier to imagine the Mall as a sweeping park. The Washington Monument had been completed in 1885, Congress had improved the Botanic Garden at the base of Capitol Hill, and other areas had been cleaned and landscaped. Easier, that is, until one approached the terminal: there cars moved around constantly, piles of material lay scattered about, and the air was so bad that evergreens planted to screen the station were dying because of acidic locomotive smoke.

The Pennsylvania added insult to these injuries by claiming that its facilities were the Mall’s greatest public benefit. PRR vice president John Green told Congress that during years of traveling to the capital, he had not seen a total of more 1,000 people in the park, while 1,500,000 passengers annually used the station. Sadly, no one hearing this testimony happened to ask him whether the latter figure might have affected the former. Green’s argument that convenience required a station at Sixth and B was particularly ridiculous since it came in 1890, two years after the introduction of electric trolleys, which would

have reached a depot south of the Mall in only three extra minutes.

As much as they tried, however, residents found it almost impossible to change the behavior of men they described as “outlaws, grabbers, and robbers.” This failure was, most people concluded, the result of the “peculiar form of the government which rules the District of Columbia.” American cities initially had only limited autonomy, with state governments retaining control of important decisions such as taxation and public works. Congress occupied a similar position over Washington, based on its Constitutionally-defined “power...to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever” involving the District. During the first half of the 19th century, it exercised this authority with some restraint, typically intervening only on controversial national issues such as slavery, and so the capital enjoyed a degree of self-rule similar to most municipalities. By 1820, Washington city had an elected mayor and bicameral legislature, as well as administrative powers that included the right to set up schools, regulate business, impose taxes, and make public improvements.

After 1860, however, the local government lost authority. During the Civil War, Congress created and managed a District-wide police force, believing that only a federal authority could properly manage southern sympathizers. After the war, when the cities of Georgetown and Washington rejected referendums that would have given blacks the right to vote, Congress overruled them, and African Americans, one-third of the District’s population, quickly gained eight of the thirty seats in the legislature’s lower house. That development that led some unhappy residents to ask Congress for an exchange: the city would trade local control for more federal money.

In 1871 President Grant signed legislation that restructured District government. After much argument Congress had come

up with a bill that consolidated Georgetown, Washington city and Washington County into the Territory of the District of Columbia. Under this “territorial system,” voters still chose the District’s lower house, and for the first time they sent a non-voting Delegate to the House of Representatives. Now, however, the President, with consent of the Senate, appointed the governor and the members of the upper legislative chamber. This reduction of local control did not bring with it a specific federal contribution to the municipal budget, only the general sense that the U.S. should supply about fifty percent of the total amount.

The territorial government retained fiscal authority, and that power created a scandal that helped end its life. The administration of Governor Alexander Shepard decided to improve Washington’s reputation through a massive system of public works, which it funded by heavily taxing and borrowing. Horror stories soon followed: about corruption in contracts for sewer construction, street paving, and other improvements; about owners who lost their homes because they could not pay radically higher assessments; about the city’s mounting debts. Men upset by municipal finances joined with those unhappy about the territorial government’s continued support for civil rights and made a claim quite rare in American history: what the residents of Washington needed was less authority over their own affairs.

A Congress quickly backing away from Reconstruction agreed, and the next year it instituted the distinctly undemocratic Commission system. This arrangement, which would continue until the 1960s, replaced the governor and legislature with three Presidentially appointed commissioners. One of the three was always an officer in the Corps of Engineers responsible for matters such as streets and subdivisions; political appointees, one Republican and one Democrat, filled the

other seats. Commissioners served staggered three-year terms, and they were often re-appointed, sometimes more than once. This system did bring benefits, most notably Congress's promise to begin covering half the cost of public works, but at a time when authority over municipal governments across the U.S. was shifting from state legislatures to city voters, residents of the capital no longer elected any of their leaders.

Washingtonians retained some influence. The local administration still set and enforced regulations in areas such as education, public safety, and health, and the commissioners frequently held public hearings before issuing their rules. Residents organized into dozens of neighborhood associations that publicized issues, circulated petitions and lobbied Congress and the Commissioners. Business and professional leaders created the Board of Trade, which, despite a membership heavily weighted towards commerce and the upper class, would "embody the city to itself" on questions from sewer service to insurance to schools and universities. The various groups pushed the President to select commissioners sympathetic to local issues, then tried to educate those appointees. Although the three men had trouble getting their bills through Congress, their opposition could normally stop legislation they saw as unfavorable to the District.

Not surprisingly, the overall effect of the new system was to increase the power of the body that created it. Now only Congress passed the laws affecting Washington, and it did so without any fear that those affected would vote them out of office. Even areas supposedly the responsibility of the commissioners came up on Capitol Hill, because the House and Senate had used the scandals of the Shepard administration to give themselves the right to approve each year's municipal budget. The limits they set shaped general policy, particularly when they refused to live up to their commitment, written

into the 1878 legislation, to provide half of local expenses. Members also intervened on minor topics, telling the city how much it could pay employees or where it should spend money for parks and street improvements.

Over time, the most important force in local affairs became the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia. Lessoff has explained how in the House, rapid turnover and fierce competition to move up meant that ambitious representatives avoided the District Committee, which offered neither glamour nor much opportunity to do favors for constituents. But since Senators could hold four or five committee assignments, rather than the one or two their House colleagues were allowed, taking a seat on the interesting but unimpressive District Committee did not prevent serving on more significant panels like Appropriations or Commerce. They tended to remain in office longer, creating an institutional memory that increased the likelihood of earlier promises being fulfilled. Finally, these longer stays made it more likely senators would move to the District, which naturally increased their engagement with the city's affairs.

Even senators sympathetic to local concerns, however, provided little help when it came to managing the railroads. There were a few, most notably Justin Morrill, who consistently supported the District against the B&O and the PRR, but an acerbic cartoon from *Harper's Weekly* illustrated what normally happened. "The Senatorial Roundhouse" portrayed a chamber filled with men whose bellies resembled the fronts of locomotives and whose heads were smokestacks. District residents knew the railroads were just as powerful in the House, where their issues had even fewer strong champions. They again felt trapped, realizing that their attempt to use the Pennsylvania to escape the B&O's monopoly had backfired and that, if anything, other railroad problems

were getting worse.

#### IV

Harry McDonald found the horse immediately in front of him pretty dull after the ones he had seen during the summer. Between May and October, the seventeen-year-old had traveled throughout the Northeastern U.S. as an exercise boy for James Gray, a successful thoroughbred trainer based in District. When the 1898 racing season had ended, Gray had brought McDonald to live with his family in Ivy City, a small working-class Northeast neighborhood east of the city's old racetrack and west of the B&O's Washington Branch.

Since then the teenager had helped out around the Grays' new home, and the bay gelding McDonald now sat behind was part of his new responsibilities. It was hitched to the Grays' two-bench buckboard, which each weekday shuttled George and Herbert, the family's sons, and Fannie Harris, the daughter of Mrs. Gray's widowed sister, to their elementary school a mile away. McDonald sat in the driver's position, front right, and alongside was six-year-old George. The other children, both nine, were in the back, with Fannie behind George. Everyone was bundled up against temperatures in the low thirties, unusual for a December 1st in Washington and made colder by a cutting northeast wind.

After leaving the house, where Fannie and her mother also lived, the wagon turned left onto Mt. Olivet Road and rattled down into the cut carrying the Washington branch. As the foursome reached the bottom of the little valley, McDonald looked ahead to check the gates that guarded either side of the tracks. Often their steel arms blocked the road in anticipation of the 8:55 express from Baltimore, but this morning both barriers stood upright and the accompanying

bells remained silent. McDonald encouraged the gelding ahead, not bothering to look left because the sides of the cut made it impossible to see.

As the horse reached the near, or southbound, tracks, the routine ride exploded. The bells began ringing, and the gate swung down, hitting Oliver on the head. The shriek of metal on metal filled the air as the 8:55's engineer saw the buckboard and frantically threw on his brakes, but it was impossible to stop a train a running forty miles an hour quickly enough. Realizing what was about to happen, McDonald yanked the reins to the right in hope of creating a glancing collision.

He failed. The train plowed through the gelding, killing it instantly. The reins wrapped under the locomotive, jerking the wooden wagon forward into forty tons of metal. Oliver, sitting farthest from the point of impact, jumped clear just before the crash, but the others did not escape. The collision threw Harry into the ditch, his legs injured so badly that doctors first thought they might have to be amputated. George and Fannie, sitting on the left side, smashed into the engine's wheels. They died barely two thousand feet from home.

This accident provided a particularly brutal reminder of what Washington hated most about its railroads. Grade crossings, the spots where rails and roads intersected, were already a concern when the Pennsylvania entered the city, and they dominated citizen complaints by the end of the century. While the District's long-awaited growth—between 1870 and 1900 the population doubled to 278,000—delighted the city in many ways, it had also increased the chances of an accident. There were now more people on the roads, which meant more trips over the tracks. There was more railroad traffic, because the bigger population now supported more than one hundred passenger trains a day and a rapidly growing freight business. And there were more

grade crossings, fifty-two by the middle of the 1890s, as subdivisions to house the newcomers produced additional intersections.

The railroads and the District government tried to limit the danger. The companies fenced tracks near busy roads such as Virginia Avenue and North Capitol Street, each built one bridge that carried their tracks above the street. After 1871, trains within Washington city had a speed limit of six (later twelve) mph, and engineers were occasionally cited for violations. A 1894 law required trains approaching intersections with street car tracks to stop and ring their bells before proceeding, and by the 1890s the majority of the fifty-two crossings had manually operated gates.

These measures shared two characteristics: they were cheap, and they did not work very well. Gatemen sometimes failed to lower the barriers when trains approached, either because they were not paying attention—in rare cases literally sleeping on the job—or because they refused to leave their sheds in cold weather. The men might drop the gates for a train that never appeared, and these false alarms created the fatally misleading impression that ducking under a barrier carried no danger. About one-third of the gates stood untended between 9 PM and 6 AM, their arms left in the supposedly safe “up” position so that traffic could pass.

The result was a cortege of deadly accidents. A 45-year-old black man died on his way home for dinner when he skirted the gates rather than wait an hour for the PRR to stop shifting its locomotives in a yard south of the Capitol. An eccentric 75-year-old woman, erroneously reported killed by a train a year earlier, died under the wheels of a backing engine; an investigation determined that the gatekeeper had failed to lower his barrier because he had too many responsibilities. A 6-year-old boy, running to the store to buy his 3-year-old sister a flag

like the one he had received two days earlier, died when he sailed under the gates into the path of a train. Two elderly women, on their way home from a birthday party, died when an express hit their carriage at an intersection with no gates and an unreliable bell.

The number of deaths caused by grade crossings varied according to who counted. The Board of Trade reported that between 1892 and 1895 the Pennsylvania killed twenty-six people, the Baltimore & Ohio fourteen. Yet the PRR claimed that of the five people its trains killed in 1895, only one—the middle-aged African-American man—actually died at an intersection. It argued that the others, three boys walking along the tracks and a man leaving one platform to cross to the other side, were actually trespassers. Even the most conservative counting, however, showed that throughout the 1890s the District averaged three grade crossing deaths annually, and there was a serious accident about every three weeks.

Casualties were not the only reason residents complained. An *Evening Star* reporter who spent a Tuesday at the intersection of Maryland and Virginia Avenues found that passing trains delayed a total of 8,000 pedestrians, 2,000 carriage riders, and 1,000 trolley passengers. There was always the possibility that fire trucks and ambulances would be prevented from rushing to a scene, and back-ups became even worse during special events because of more and longer trains.

The existing arrangements also restricted economic development. In beleaguered South Washington, the PRR “practically cuts in two the business of the city, so that merchants and business men have almost ceased to look to the river as a means of transportation because of the inconvenience and delay.” In Northeast, the B&O had developed the flattest route possible to give its locomotives an easy trip, which left its tracks significantly above or below the surrounding area. The city

would not or could not pave streets that dead-ended into embankments up to seven feet tall or plunged into trenches as deep as eight feet, drastically reducing the appeal of property along them.

Similar troubles existed across the country. In the late 1880s, Philadelphia witnessed an average of 45 killings annually; Chicago, the nation's railroad center, reported over two hundred deaths in 1891 alone. (In both places there were also questions about counting) There were only two solutions: tracks could be carried over the streets, or vice versa. But deciding which method was best and who would pay, both for the work itself and the damages property suffered when the level of the adjoining street changed, proved so controversial that one survey judged grade crossings the most "vexed question present[ing] itself to many of our American cities."

Progress occurred many places—but not in the capital. After reviewing the Pennsylvania's behavior in Philadelphia and Washington, the *Evening Star* compared the company to the lead character in Robert Louis Stevenson's new book, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In its headquarters city the PRR bought 500 acres for a new terminal and depressed its main line into the suburbs, but it did nothing in the District. The paper also pointed out that "Long before track elevation was seriously discussed in Chicago it was promised Washington by those who were commissioned to speak for the Baltimore and Ohio management. Today the work in Chicago is well under way, while in Washington the menace to human life and the destroyer of property is more conspicuously dangerous and obstructive than it ever was."

Pressure on the B&O and the PRR gradually grew. Congress changed local law in 1885 to allow the estates of people killed through negligence to sue those responsible, which began to raise the cost to the railroads of continued inaction. At a time when a three-bedroom house



The results of an 1880s grade crossing accident in Northeast involving the B&O. Note the arm of the gate standing up in the center of the photo and the coaches in the back right, including one on its side. (*Washingtoniana Division, District of Columbia Public Library*)

in a growing suburb like Mount Pleasant cost \$3,000, the family of a father of four who died when a PRR gateman fell asleep was awarded \$4,000. A wife who saw her husband killed as they tried to cross the tracks so they could walk along Anacostia River won \$7,000; the award to a 12-year-old boy hit as he helped his father light gas street lamps in Southwest was \$8,000.

But occasional judgments, particularly because the maximum award was \$10,000, were not enough to make multi-million-dollar corporations rebuild their routes. A greater incentive came from the District commissioners' 1895 regulation that required locomotives to stop before they crossed streetcar tracks. The B&O and PRR had opposed this rule, arguing that gates and bells provided enough safety, that only Congress could make such a requirement, and that it would

cause too much hardship. They refused to follow the law even after the courts confirmed the city's authority, and District officials began citing engineers who did not stop and even jailed two who refused to pay their fines. The railroads did have a legitimate complaint, since restarting a locomotive stopped on an upslope normally took between five and eight minutes. But their characteristically dismissive reaction backfired when they sued to stop the regulation, since they had no evidence that it was an unreasonable burden, and so the courts again ruled in the city's favor.

What really made Washington's railroads consider eliminating grade crossings was their desire for new stations. The *Evening Star* called the existing ones "inadequate and discreditable," and a Pennsylvania vice-president later told Congress that his line's terminal was a "mere flea-bite compared to what it ought to be." By the 1890s, over one million travelers passed through each depot annually, traffic that at times overwhelmed the facilities, forcing extra and inefficient shifting of trains. Shortcomings were especially noticeable during major events: during a three-day reunion of the Grand Army of the Republic, the main tracks of the B&O were never free for more than three minutes.

The railroads wanted better stations partly because they wanted more business. Ridership had boomed after the Civil War, with lower fares, higher speeds, more routes, and greater wealth making travel far more accessible to the public. New terminals would allow carriers to solicit more traffic, particularly as part of large crowds. The president of the Chesapeake & Ohio told the commissioners in 1897 that New York, Chicago, and Washington were the country's three great passenger destinations, but the local facilities were so limited that "When there are conventions to be held, no passenger agent dares to vote for Washington, because we cannot get the passengers in."

Interest in better terminals was not just financial. As the *Evening Star's* criticism indicated, the present buildings created public relations problems. A station was the most visible part of a railroad, providing travelers their first, final, and often most lasting impressions. At a time when there were continuing stories of railroads bribing government officials, overcharging customers, and swindling investors, no carrier wanted to waste an opportunity to polish its image. Yet their present facilities in Washington benefited neither the B&O nor the Pennsylvania, even though there were few cities where improving one's reputation made more sense.

This desire for new stations encouraged an end to grade crossings because the two objectives had become almost inseparable. Engineers and architects believed that anyone who expected to do either type of work in the near future should undertake both simultaneously, for one significantly affected the other. The site of a new station would determine whether it was better to eliminate crossings by elevating or by depressing the tracks, and the approach would in turn shape the design of the building.

In Washington, the connection between the two projects was political as well as physical. Community leaders knew they would never be able to force the companies to fix their intersections; as one commissioner sighed after another unproductive negotiation with the Pennsylvania, conditions in Congress made it "next to useless to propose any plan that the railroad does not approve." On their side, the railroads knew that the commissioners had the power to block bills they disliked, including those necessary for new stations. So the two sides began moving towards an exchange: the District would allow the railroads to build bigger terminals, and the companies would eliminate grade crossings.

This deal could be an excellent one for people in the capital, for they also wanted new terminals. Part of their desire was economic, for increasing the tourist trade was crucial to a city that still had little industry. Historian Carl Abbott has shown how the Board of Trade, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Retail Merchants Association aggressively recruited visitors, seeing them, in the words of the Chamber, as “great commercial resources.”

Washington’s boosters also shared the railroads’ concern about perceptions. As early as the 1830s, English railroad executives and architects had started comparing terminals to the gates of medieval cities, and this idea grew as railroads did. “The train station was the image of the community, presenting at a glance something about its size, affluence, livelihood and social range of its citizens, their taste in architecture,” one survey of American terminals has noted. “To each place the railroad terminal was its hallmark, standing for all the cultural, productive, and commercial facts of which the people were capable.”

The desire for an impressive gateway was particularly strong in Washington. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, residents thought their hometown was growing better as well as bigger, its architecture, public services, and cultural life all much improved. They believed the capital was much closer to being “worthy of the nation,” a substantial achievement considering the amazing development of the United States during this period. Between 1870 and 1900 the country went from fourth in world manufacturing to first, with American steel mills producing more than those in Britain, France, and Germany put together; the Spanish-American War would soon offer a statement on America’s growing international ambitions.

Boosters wanted these successes declared proudly to new

arrivals, but the present terminals were a stammering, ungracious announcement. Limited traffic handling created delays during the special events, such as conventions and inaugurations, that should have offered Washington a chance to show itself off. A traveler leaving the B&O depot initially saw the front doors of the Hotel Cosmopolitan, not one of the city’s finest establishments; once on New Jersey Avenue, he looked at a wooden fence hiding a lumber yard and a billboard for “Quaker Oats—Nature’s Perfect Food.” The scene was similar opposite the B&P depot: second-class hotels, a meat packing plant, and lots to do with liquor, including saloons, a wholesaler, and signs promoting two competing brands of whiskey.

Though most people in the city supported new stations and an end to grade crossings, developing an actual plan proved difficult. Much as they had a generation earlier, the companies, residents and politicians fought when anyone tried to turn general ideas into specific plans. Their disputes once again raised the question of the proper place, both literally and figuratively, for railroads in Washington.

## V

For a man who would later be called the “Mayor of Washington,” it was an appropriate introduction to local politics. In 1890 James McMillan was in his second year as a senator from Michigan when Congress addressed the railroads’ need for additional freight yards. The same growth now taxing passenger terminals had significantly increased commercial traffic, 80% of which was goods coming into a city that produced little. Inadequate facilities often led the B&O and the PRR to unload their cars in the streets and created inefficiencies that drove up prices. The commissioners had granted the railroads temporary permits for larger yards, but proposals to provide permanent solutions

“were pinned down in crossfire among corporations, pro- and anti-railroad factions in Congress, and neighborhoods.”

The legislation intended to provide more space for the PRR set off a furious debate. (The disagreements in Congress prevented plans for the B&O from making much progress.) Known as Atkinson bill because of its sponsor, a Pennsylvania congressman who also referred to the PRR as “we,” it tried to give the company more room in two ways. It officially awarded the railroad five government reservations it presently occupied illegally, and it gave the PRR highly unusual power to condemn virtually any land adjacent to its right-of-way. People in South Washington rebelled, fearing that these changes, clearly an attempt to reverse the Supreme Court’s rulings, would let the railroad engulf their neighborhood.

Other parts of the city joined the opposition. They believed that the PRR’s need for new freight facilities offered a great opportunity to test the theory of a House member who argued that “if you want to get anything out of a railroad, the time to get it is when the railroad company wants to get something out of you.” More than 13,000 people signed petitions supporting the arguments of neighborhood associations and the Board of Trade asked Congress to give the company more freight facilities only if it left the Mall and eliminated grade crossings.

Senate leaders gave McMillan, a member of the District Committee, responsibility for developing a compromise. The result of his negotiations tilted heavily towards the Pennsy, which used its influence to get the five reservations and to suppress any discussion of the Mall station or grade crossings. McMillan did convince the railroad, however, to accept amendments that defined where it could take property through eminent domain, a restriction that limited its future expansion into South Washington, and he refused to confirm

the company’s right to the Mall. But his most impressive achievement, according to Lessoff, was that “given the ill-will that existed” between the company and the community, McMillan managed to produce legislation that expanded freight facilities and still left the two sides “speaking to one another.”

McMillan’s life before the Senate had prepared him well for his task. He understood railroads because he had helped found one in Northern Michigan and because much of his million-dollar fortune had come through ownership of the Michigan Car Company, the nation’s largest manufacturer of freight cars. He had experience balancing competing interests in a city, since before coming to the Senate he had operated urban businesses and been chairman of the Detroit Park Commission. His personality equipped him for complicated and contentious negotiations, as he was admired for “good judgment, fairness, experience with affairs, absence of self-seeking, and conscientious study of all problems presented.” He knew how to make deals that would stick, having created a Republican machine that dominated Michigan politics.

McMillan, whose white mustache and goatee and frameless glasses made him look like the grandfather that he was, integrated himself into all levels of Washington life. He bought a home on Vermont Avenue just north of the White House, where he hosted the Tuesday night meetings of the “School of Philosophy Club,” a poker game and strategy session for the Republicans who dominated the Senate. He became chairman of the District Committee, where he oversaw municipal affairs, and he used his Senate influence to benefit the community. He helped residents get government jobs and pensions, built ties between the Board of Trade and Congress, and listened to the neighborhood associations.

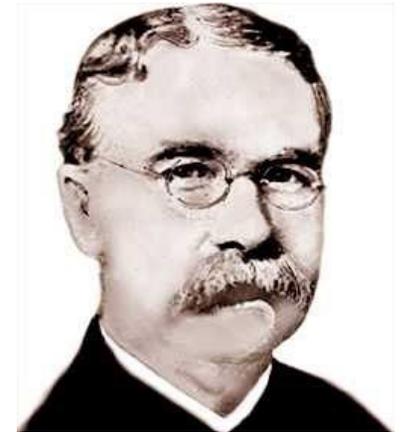
But even the city's unofficial mayor struggled with the railroad problems. The most elegant solutions for ending crossings and providing an appropriate gateway called for a union station. Bringing many or all of a city's railroads under one roof was almost exclusively an American practice, as the dozen stations in London or the seven in Paris illustrated, and the first one had opened in Indianapolis in 1851. Proposals to handle Washington's railroads in that way appeared even before the Pennsylvania had reached the Mall, and they had continued after its arrival. In 1881 the District Engineer designed such a depot for the PRR's original site at Virginia and Maryland Avenues; the Commissioners echoed that idea in 1886 and 1892; a 1887 citizens' committee proposed placing it five blocks directly south of the Capitol; and others suggested the southern end of the C&O canal. Experience elsewhere—in St. Louis, for example, which in 1894 opened a union station that hosted all eighteen lines running into the city—indicated real benefits came from combining facilities. Transferring between carriers was much easier, and fewer tracks in the city simplified the elimination of grade crossings.

In Washington, these ideas never moved off paper. While locals supported a union station, they could never agree on where it should stand. Any plan immediately generated protests from the chosen area, whose residents immediately suggested moving the terminal somewhere convenient for, but not immediately next to, their neighborhood. These episodes of “not in my backyard” were a gift for a Congress reluctant to push the railroads: members justified inaction by claiming they would pass a bill just as soon as residents agreed among themselves.

Community divisions actually made little difference, for the Pennsylvania did not want to share facilities with the Baltimore & Ohio. No longer would the Pennsy be closer to downtown, and a union

depot would make it easier for the B&O to re-establish a connection south. The PRR's clout ensured that such proposals would remain only that, and Washington's railroads followed separate paths towards new stations and the elimination of grade crossings.

Developing a solution for the B&O turned out to be relatively simple. Both the community and the company favored lifting the tracks onto a masonry viaduct, preferably something similar to a well-known one in Berlin. Residents liked this plan because it would allow streets run under the tracks at their existing grades, protecting the value of nearby property and saving horses and people from passing through smoke drifting up from passing locomotives. It was the area's topography that made a viaduct, estimated to cost between \$1 and \$1.5 million, appealing to the B&O. A new station would sit



Senator James McMillan

at one of the lowest points in the city, forcing trains to climb nearly one hundred feet as they headed to Maryland, and the simplest and cheapest method to reduce the grade was to raise the southern, or depot, end of its tracks.

This basic arrangement emerged in the early 1890s, but disputes developed over its specifics. The company's plan had its two branches keeping their present rights-of-way, which meant they would share the same viaduct for just six blocks before splitting. The adjacent neighborhoods objected: not only would two thick structures clutter up what had become a well-settled area, but the “Y” that allowed the B&O to shift trains between its branches would as well. Residents

wanted the two branches to head north together to Boundary Street (now Florida Avenue), producing only one viaduct within the old city limits and pushing the wye into a mostly empty section. The B&O objected to this plan, however, because it would have to buy additional land and because the rerouting would give its trains a steeper climb.

The District and the company also disagreed over the location of a new terminal. The B&O wanted to expand on its existing New Jersey Avenue site, where during the last twenty years it had reconstructed platforms, added new freight facilities, and rebuilt its waiting room. But this location left the railroad blocking North Capitol Street, preventing it from becoming the important thoroughfare L'Enfant had intended. The District therefore wanted to push the station two squares east, freeing North Capitol for the first time in half a century.

There was more time to settle these disagreements than either side wanted. During the 1870s and '80s, railroads across the country competed ruthlessly to capture more of the traffic generated by the booming industrial economy. Most paid for their expansions by issuing stock, often manipulating their shares in outlandish ways, but the B&O followed its tradition of issuing bonds. That preference led to trouble in 1893, when a brutal depression reduced traffic. The B&O tried to protect its market share by cutting rates, but other lines also adopted this strategy and set off a spiral that drove prices even lower. While companies could tolerate drops in their stock prices, the B&O's reliance on bonds meant it had to keep paying its creditors even though revenues were tumbling. In 1896 it declared bankruptcy, after which it had little money for improvements.

The Pennsylvania had a different problem. Its finances were so strong that it responded to the depression by purchasing struggling rivals, giving it even more control of rates within its territory. Instead,

it had trouble finding a solution largely because of the rolling terrain of South Washington. The PRR's present route followed the area's contours: after leaving the Long Bridge, it climbed a small hill that topped out at 12th Street, ran down to a bottom near South Capitol Street, and rose again to enter the Virginia Avenue tunnel at 7th Street, east. This landscape and the preference for a flat route led to a plan that ended grade crossings by putting the tracks into a cut. This proposal, the result of nearly four years of discussions between the railroad, McMillan, and the District engineers, also included an expanded passenger station on the Mall, a new Long Bridge, and still more freight facilities in South Washington.

McMillan introduced a bill with these terms in the spring of 1896. After nine months of study and citizen complaints, however, the commissioners declared their opposition. The railroad refused to put its tracks below +10' datum, or ten feet above the mean level of the Potomac, arguing without irony that any lower would make the cut too susceptible to a flood like 1889's. The city pointed out that, given the neighborhood topography, the +10' limit meant that east of 6th Street west, trains would project above the surrounding area; at these points, only if the roads were substantially elevated could they cross the tracks. The estimated municipal price for that work, because of construction and damage payments to adjacent property owners, was over \$500,000, too much for a city that needed better schools, parks, and streets. (The PRR had to pay for construction within its right-of-way, an expense it calculated at \$1.2 million.) The commissioners called this plan, which would also close nearly two dozen streets where bridges would not be built, was "highly unsatisfactory to the public interest."

They responded with a series of counterproposals. If the company

had to keep its existing route, the depression should drop to +4' in order to reduce municipal costs and to halve the number of streets closed. This level was safe, the commissioners argued, because the 1889 flood was a "once-in-a-century" event. One variation of this design left the station on the Mall, while another pushed it back to the intersection of Maryland and Virginia Avenues. Even then, though, the merits of these two were "comparative, not inherent," since they still cost the city nearly half-a-million dollars and closed a dozen streets. The commissioners preferred to elevate the tracks, either along the existing route or, even better, along a new one. "Most satisfactory" to the commissioners was building the station at Maryland and Virginia and moving the cross-town approaches a half-dozen blocks south. This recommendation would cost the District only \$170,000, just three streets would be closed, and Virginia and Maryland Avenues would be free of tracks for the first time in a generation—as would the Mall.

The PRR rejected all of the commissioners' proposals. It still saw no benefit to relocating its terminal farther from downtown, and it refused to go lower than +10', citing a different flood in 1887 that reached +6'. A viaduct along its existing route made using its present yards and shops enormously complicated and expensive, and a new right-of-way would require buying and developing entirely new facilities.

Though differences between the PRR and the commissioners seemed to make a compromise impossible, the *Evening Star* reported during the summer of 1897 that the two sides had reached one. That plan kept the station on the Mall, to be reached by a viaduct standing west of Sixth Street. The tracks going toward Baltimore would follow Virginia Avenue and be elevated until South Capitol Street, where they would enter a cut (to run no lower than +7') that led to a new,

longer tunnel that eliminated "Dead Man's Curve." Trains towards Richmond would enter a depression soon after leaving the Mall and remain there until just before the Potomac, where they would jump on a short viaduct that led onto a new Long Bridge. There would now be two structures crossing the river: one for trains, the other for all other vehicles.

After this news, however, nothing happened. Surviving records do not explain exactly why work did not proceed, but personnel changes probably had a large part in the delays. Engineer Commissioner William Black, an Army captain who had led the District negotiators, left in 1898 to take part in the Spanish-American War; Frank Thomson had become president of the Pennsylvania in 1897, but he led the company for less than two years before his death brought Alexander Cassatt into office. The two sides may also have been working out engineering details, and letting the public calm down may have been a factor, since leaving the railroad on the Mall was going to be unpopular.

Around New Year's 1900, McMillan introduced two bills, one each for the B&O and the PRR, that proposed to solve the city's grade crossing and terminal problems. They seemed likely to pass—their existence indicated they had already received railroad approval, and McMillan had previously predicted that Congress would act this session. His support was not a guarantee, however: his big recent attempts to improve Washington, extending L'Enfant's street grid into the suburbs, had been a surprising failure.

Legislation for the Baltimore & Ohio, which had emerged from bankruptcy six months earlier, pleased District residents. Motivated to cooperate by the knowledge that its charter in Washington expired in 1910, the railroad had yielded on the two major issues. It agreed to put both branches on the same viaduct to the city line and to leave

North Capitol Street open by moving its terminal to the intersection of C Street and Delaware Avenue. Long-time critics like the Northeast Washington Citizens' Association (initially formed as the Northeast Washington Grade Crossings Committee) extended McMillan "most hearty congratulations...upon the success of your able and earnest efforts."

A few provisions did cause conflict. The C Street terminal would handle only passengers, forcing the company to establish new places to handle freight. Residents argued with the B&O and among themselves over the best location, everyone again preferring that they be someone else's yards. A similar fight developed farther east over how to realign the Washington Branch once it left the shared viaduct. In both cases the railroad got its way, establishing its freight yards on thirteen acres it already owned in suburban Eckington and having the right to choose its new route towards Baltimore. There were also people in the city, most notably the Board of Trade, who attacked the decision to give the B&O \$1.5 million to offset the cost of eliminating crossings, arguing that after years of misbehavior, the company should carry the entire burden. But even the Northeast Washington Citizens' Association concluded that this payment, which would cover approximately half the total cost, was reasonable considering government contributions elsewhere, particularly after Congress agreed it would provide half the money.

The Pennsylvania would have welcomed such limited disagreement. Its bill followed the 1897 plan, starting with the decision to build two Potomac crossings. Though the Corps of Engineers preferred a single span to decrease the number of obstructions in the river, locals were happy to separate their horses and themselves from the noise, dirt, and vibration of locomotives. The depressed section from the Potomac,

the viaduct to South Capitol Street, and the cut to the longer tunnel eliminated grade crossings but closed only four streets, and regrading work would require just \$250,000 in public money, which the federal and city governments would split.

While almost everyone accepted those provisions, many detested how the bill fed the Pennsylvania additional government land. The company already controlled twenty-six acres originally reserved for the public, and the government now made its contribution to the cost of eliminating grade crossings by serving up thirty-four more. About two-thirds of this land would allow the PRR to expand its freight yards, as it would swallow sixteen small reservations and much of Garfield Park, which lay a few blocks southeast of the Capitol. Named after the President assassinated in the Sixth Street terminal, the park was almost unusable at present because tracks at grade cut across its southern section. The new arrangement was not much better, as it dedicated most of the land to the new tunnel's western entrance and a fenced freight yard.

What upset the bill's opponents the most was its treatment of the Mall. It extended the PRR's property line nearly two hundred feet west and stretched it all the way down to B Street SW, thereby doubling the company's present occupation of fourteen acres. A massive new depot would use the northern section of this land, while the rest would be dedicated to a sixteen-foot high embankment, located just west of Sixth Street, that would carry trains to platforms located on the station's second floor. In the middle of this viaduct would be a grand arch, through which a new "West Capitol Street" would run from the Capitol to the Washington Monument.

Reaction to the bill showed how views of the railroad and its place in the capital had evolved since the Pennsylvania's arrival after the Civil

War. There were still supporters of using the Mall in this way, most of whom were businessmen, and they generally recalled earlier arguments about the necessity of good rail service. John Wight, formerly secretary of the Board of Trade but now a District Commissioner, told the PRR in a private meeting that he “would be glad to give the road the entire park from 6th to 7th, because...Washington cannot grow without railroad facilities.” If anything, men like Wight claimed, the Sixth Street station was now even more important to the local economy, since “the city has adjusted itself to these conditions and to disturb them now would be...a practical impossibility.”

Supporters of the Pennsylvania were far fewer now, however, and opponents used arguments both old and new. Though “the possibilities of a public park in the center of the city and south of the Executive Mansion have never been realized,” as the Corps of Engineers put it, there had been enough improvement that it was easier to imagine what the area could be. Public knowledge of L’Enfant’s plan and support for parks had continued to grow, and critics emphasized how the PRR’s proposal would damage, if not ruin, any hope of giving the Capitol a great central green space. Helping make their point were ridiculous statements by the other side: though trains sitting on top of the viaduct meant an almost permanent a thirty-foot wall across the Mall, the bill’s Senate report claimed that, under the new arrangement, the Mall “will be greatly improved so far as sightliness is concerned.”

Those fighting the Pennsylvania had also learned how to attack the claim that a railroad on the Mall was good business. The Board of Trade had recently explained that “Washington is not, and, perhaps, never can be a great commercial city,” and its chances of becoming an industrial center seemed even more remote. Forty percent of the workers in Milwaukee and Detroit, which had similar populations,

were in manufacturing; that figure in the capital never exceeded twenty percent, and most of those jobs were in light industries such as printing and construction.

Yet this failure had suggested an alternate route to growth. An 1880s guidebook noted Washington was appealing precisely because it lacked factories and their accompanying slums and pollution and because it offered an escape from a frantically industrial, commercial country. Washington’s boosters now claimed that its future lay as a “residential city,” as a center of “art, science, and literature” and particularly as the “fountain-head of the National government.” But the capital could not be this oasis of culture as long as a railroad ran right through its center. The Pennsylvania’s bill was therefore more than just a giveaway: because it “irreparably injured” the capital’s beauty, it damaged the District’s economy.

Opponents also had loftier arguments. Though it was L’Enfant who deserved credit for the city’s design, more people knew who had chosen and supervised him, a history that allowed those fighting the Pennsylvania to say they were trying to preserve the ideas of “our immortal President Washington.” Col. Thomas Bingham, the officer in charge of public buildings and grounds, recommended moving the station to the intersection of Maryland and Virginia Avenues and argued that allowing the railroad to remain on the Mall was “a desecration which no patriotic citizen...can view with equanimity.” Though the Chief of Engineers forced Bingham to tone down his criticism of the city’s political leaders, his official report still labeled the plan “unpatriotic, and even irreverent.”

Bingham’s final comments led back to the goal of creating a city “worthy of the nation.” If the capital was to become a source of pride and a symbol of greatness, he said, decisions about its future had to

consider what was best for the entire United States. Accepting the railroad might be the most convenient solution, but only by removing the tracks and terminal could “the national interests—for this is not merely a town of local interest, but one which is the pride of our great nation—...be very much improved and advanced in the estimation of the entire country.”

When Congress took up two railroad bills, it had been nearly thirty years since the Pennsylvania had established itself on the Mall. Frank Lutz had recently passed the saddle shop onto his son, Frank Jr., who had been born after the first train had rattled up Sixth Street. Six Presidents had lived in the White House over that time, and the number of states had grown from thirty-seven to forty-five. Residents now enjoyed amazing new technologies such as the telephone, developed in part at Alexander Graham Bell’s lab in upper Georgetown, the electric light, and even the automobile.

But what had not changed over those three decades was the Pennsylvania’s influence. Its bill had sped through the Senate around Memorial Day, with only a few members raising any objections. Opposition was stronger in the House, where a number of Democratic Congressmen submitted amendments to force the PRR off the Mall; one of them, William Cowherd of Missouri, conducted a brief filibuster before Christmas because of his frustration about the limited time allowed for debate. Yet more discussion would have made little difference, since this decision was not being made on facts: the chair of the House District Committee, for example, said on the floor that 99 out of 100 people in the District favored the bill.

The bill the House finally passed in varied slightly from the Senate’s, but a conference committee resolved the differences early in February. President McKinley signed legislation for the PRR and for

the B&O on February 12, 1901, confirming what Washingtonians had feared for months. While an end to grade crossings would soon arrive, the future of their city center would remain clouded by locomotives. A comment from *Evening Star* the previous spring now seemed truer than ever: freeing the Mall from the railroad remained “highly desirable... but impossible to do.”