Railroads and Time Consciousness in the Antebellum South

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Historians have often looked to industrial capitalism to further our understanding of “time consciousness.” This article explores time consciousness through the experience of a railroad in pre-Civil War South Carolina. Examining the South Carolina Railroad allows us to examine how time consciousness operated in a region not associated with industrial capitalism, and also see how multiple times could function simultaneously. While clocks were important to railroad operations, companies also had to address an array of non-clock times. Moreover, companies were never fully in control of their own time, but were in constant conflict and negotiation with various groups in the community. While industrialization and factory labor remain important ways to understand time consciousness, looking beyond the factory walls can help historians make better use of the analytical power of time.

As one of the USA’s earliest railroads, the South Carolina Railroad (SCRR) faced a variety of critical questions. How should the track be constructed? Should trains be pulled by horse or steam power? What combination of public and private financing should fund
its construction? Directors and stockholders wrestled with these questions and many others during the early years of the railroad’s development. But in June 1835, less than two years after the railroad began operation along its entire 136-mile track, a resolution was put forth at the stockholders meeting about an entirely different topic: not running the trains.

A stockholder, one Rev. Dr. Gadsden, submitted a resolution that read: “it is the decided opinion of the Stockholders of the Rail Road Company that the Rail Road should not be used in any manner on Sundays, and that the Direction are hereby requested to take measures in conformity with this opinion of the Stockholders.”1 The company’s existing policy on Sunday travel is not entirely clear from extant documentation, but debate over the resolution suggests that some limitations were already in place. On these grounds, railroad superintendent Alexander Black argued against the resolution. He pointed out that “every thing which could be done to promote the views of the mover had been tried,” but the necessity of delivering goods “in regular order” meant that trips could not be cut back any further. To lose a day’s work would damage the business that the assembled stockholders had worked so hard to promote. Another stockholder, Mr. Masyck, moved that the directors be asked to make a report to the stockholders on the topic. After the second, Mr. McBeth argued that “he thought the Direction were already pursuing the object of the Motion,” thus rendering any activity by the stockholders unnecessary. Before the vote to table Gadsden’s motion could be taken, yet another stockholder, J. Harleston Read, asked if the motion had been demanded by “any religious Society, as there had been movements of a similar nature under similar circumstances and he was extremely adverse to any such intervention.” Gadsden stated that he was not under the influence of a “religious Society,” but considered the matter to be an important one for the stockholders. With that, the resolution was tabled.

This brief skirmish over the propriety of running trains on Sundays is the earliest recorded effort of Sabbatarians to influence the SCRR’s schedules. Why might an unsuccessful resolution hold interest for modern historians? At the local level, the setback did not spell defeat for the Sabbatarians; they continued to press their demands throughout the antebellum era. But this Sabbatarian debate is simply

1. All quotations taken from the entry for June 13, 1835, South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company, Minutebook of the Board of Directors (1835–1841) [hereafter SCRR Minutebook], Norfolk Southern Historical Archives, Norfolk, Virginia.
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one example of the role that time played in railroad operations. Certainly, time was crucial in a conventional sense, since trains needed schedules for safe operation. Yet the railroad’s time involved far more than clocks, as the Sabbatarian example suggests. A thoroughgoing investigation of time and the railroad reveals the multiplicity of times that antebellum Americans experienced, and offers a compelling way to understand how this early American business interacted with the communities it served.

Business and economic historians have contributed substantially to our understanding of “clock consciousness.” Most famously, E. P. Thompson argued in 1967 that industrial capitalism—not agriculture—introduced this consciousness, which valued punctuality and regularity.2 In agricultural employment or fishing, tasks “seem to disclose themselves by the logic of need,” instead of being linked to clock time.3 The introduction of the clock routinized labor. Moreover, “time-measurement” was a “means of labour exploitation.”4 Workers performed tasks not on the basis of need, but with unstinting regularity under the eye of a manager armed with a watch. Industrial workers fought “not against time, but about it.”5 To demand a ten-hour day is to accept the manager’s desire for time management and discipline. In antebellum America, free-wage laborers experienced the time discipline Thompson described. While the transition was not a monolithic one, managers adopted “the notion of time as a measured commodity in the employment transaction,” and in so doing used time as a regulatory and disciplining device.6

As valuable as Thompson’s insights have been, the experience of the SCRR forces us to revise Thompson’s argument in two important ways. First, its location in the South takes us to a region not characterized by industrial capitalism. Although advancements in time management and movements toward precision have been closely indexed to free-wage labor and industrial capitalism, the South’s comparative lack of industry did not mean that time did

2. Thompson, “Time,” 56–97. While Thompson’s work has come under criticism from a variety of angles, his fundamental insight into the importance of time is not in question. For criticism, see Glennie and Thrift, “Reworking E. P. Thompson’s ‘Time, Work-discipline’.” For a historiographical overview of time within the context of business history, see Parker, “‘Presenting’ the Past.”
not have signal importance to southerners as well. As Mark M. Smith has demonstrated, examining time-consciousness in the South lets us see how the South modernized on its own terms. Southern planters “wanted to be perceived as modern, and they wanted to make money,” but they did not want to challenge the regional social order, or “invite the dangerous democratic tendencies associated with modernization into their society.” Planters demonstrated their facility in co-opting the aspects of modernity that they desired while avoiding larger social implications by adapting the time techniques of northern factories to their own plantation management, while remaining steadfastly opposed to free wage labor. Since much of the southern labor on railroads was being exploited by virtue of workers’ enslavement, examining a southern railroad allows us to move beyond Thompson’s conception of time management as labor exploitation. Pushing his insight beyond the realm of the worker and boss, we can use time to examine how early corporations interacted with the communities they served. Railroad companies soon discovered that they could not simply dictate time at their pleasure. Instead, debates about time and the railroad were about power within the communities in which railroads operated. Time had to be negotiated with a wide range of partners in order for the railroad to function.

The second revision that an analysis of the SCRR provides is a much more nuanced view of time. Thompson focused much of his attention on clock time, and rightfully so, given the importance of time discipline in factories. But “time” for antebellum Americans was far more complex than simply the clock, and multiple times could function simultaneously. Social theorist Barbara Adam argues convincingly for the “multitude of times which interpenetrate and permeate our daily lives.” At any one moment we are in the midst of multiple calendars or time cycles. The month of March, for example, can be viewed from a variety of angles. It is the third of twelve months in the Gregorian calendar. In the northern hemisphere, it contains the vernal equinox, when spring begins, marking the change to one of four seasons. For academics, it may mean spring break and entering the final months of the academic year. For practicing Christians, it often means the time of Lent and a new phase of the religious calendar. For

7. The nature of the antebellum South—capitalist, noncapitalist, or something in-between—has been subject of a lengthy debate among historians. For a review of recent literature, see Downey, Planting a Capitalist South, introduction.
8. Smith, Mastered by the Clock, 4–5.
9. Adam, Timewatch, 12.
10. Ibid., 84.
American sports fans, it means “March Madness,” when the national champion is determined for college basketball. All of these calendars operate simultaneously, and we move among these different times and calendars without much conscious effort. March is capable of holding beginnings, middles, and endings concurrently. Antebellum Americans also experienced multiple times, and the railroad provides an excellent illustration of this process.

When antebellum southerners discussed time and the railroad, they recognized that different times were important. Clock time itself was described in many different ways. Corporations valued the regularity Mr. Black advocated: being able to offer services without a break, thereby building public trust that railroad service was dependable. Regularity was enshrined in schedules, and the SCRR issued a fine of $5 to any train that departed too soon from one of six stations that had a clock in 1834, a move made “[w]ith the view of attaining the greatest possible regularity in the time of running of the Passenger Engines.”11 In addition to regularity (using the same times from day to day), the practice of fining forced employees to be punctual, or leave and arrive at specified times. The company also demanded punctuality of passengers: in 1835, the company resolved that each car would have “a large Card” notifying passengers that during meal stops “20 minutes are allowed for Breakfast and 25 minutes for Dinner.”12 An early schedule published in the newspaper also reminded passengers that “Great punctuality will be observed in the time of starting.”13 Closely related to punctuality was coordination. In an era before trackside signals, train schedules had to be coordinated in order to ensure safety when multiple trains moved in opposing directions on a single track. The SCRR and other antebellum railroads were surprisingly successful in this regard, with few accidents stemming from coordination problems. Railroads also had to consider nonclock times. God’s time and the sanctity of Sundays mattered to Sabbatarians. Finally, Nature’s time influenced railroads as well. Agricultural production formed a large portion of the SCRR’s business, and the road had to be prepared for the onslaught of cotton at harvest time.

11. Annual Report of the Directors, May 6, 1834. 12. The report does not specify which member of the train crew would have to pay the fine.
12. Entry for May 28, 1835, SCRR Minutebook. For more on southern punctuality, see Smith, Mastered by the Clock, 87.
Contemporaries quickly drew the connection between railroads and time. “A Country Stockholder” wrote about his experiences on the SCRR in a Charleston newspaper in 1831:

We got into the Cars, and really Mr. Editor, we were “rattled” along at such a rate I did not think to time her in going up; but in coming down, I timed to a second. We had three cars, and upwards of fifty passengers, and were 20 minutes 37 seconds, exclusive of stoppages, in performing the 5 miles. This is an average of nearly 15 miles per hour—on some of the strait parts of the road, the speed must have been at the rate of 20 miles. As I got off the Car at the Lines, I said to myself, our Horses that are “worn out,” don’t work in this way.14

Country Stockholder was aware of the time advantages of rail travel, and brought a watch to time the journey. He was well-prepared to judge for himself the effectiveness of this new form of transportation. The discovery Country Stockholder made would be repeated endlessly across the European and North American continents in the early years of railroading as travelers marveled at the speed of this new form of transportation. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch has observed, early European commentators noted that the railroad brought the “annihilation of space and time.”15 In the American context, historian James Ward has argued that the railroad brought the clock into the everyday life of Americans.16 While the most significant linkage of time and railroading in the popular imagination—standard time zones—would not occur until much later in the nineteenth century, the experience of Country Stockholder and others makes it clear that southerners were well aware of time’s importance to railroads.

The SCRR was constructed to connect Charleston, South Carolina, with Hamburg (near modern-day North Augusta).17 Promoters dreamed of capturing the inland cotton trade for Charleston, and saw

16. Ward, “On Time,” 87–8. John Kasson makes a similar point, placing more emphasis on the post-Civil War period. See Civilizing the Machine, 188–9. The impact of railroads on time has also been seen in other countries: Graeme Davison noted that at the end of the nineteenth century in Australia, “as the railway and the telegraph began to set the standard of time for the whole society . . . the time notations in the farmers’ journals became more consistently precise.” Davison, The Unforgiving Minute, 31–2.
17. For a complete history of the company, see Derrick, Centennial History. Information can also be found in Downey, Planting a Capitalist South. The
the railroad as a potential savior of the city’s economic fortunes. “Industry and business talent, driven by necessity, have sought employment elsewhere,” lamented a committee formed in 1828 to investigate the utility of constructing a railroad from Charleston. “Many of her houses are tenantless, and the grass grows uninterrupted in some of her chief business streets.” Faced with a dire situation, Charleston’s leaders were willing to turn to a new, relatively unproven technology in order to improve the city’s condition.

The SCRR did not succeed in completely reviving Charleston. Although the company had no direct competition into Charleston via other railroads until the eve of the Civil War, there were other ports with their own railroad projects (or served by important rivers) that competed for shipments. The SCRR’s earliest major rival was the Savannah River, which served the port of Savannah. Charleston had overtaken Savannah by 1839 thanks to the railroad. The company’s business steadily improved throughout the antebellum era, as additional branches to Camden and Columbia, South Carolina brought more freight and passengers to the road. Chart 1 records the income the SCRR received from freight from 1834 to 1857, and the railroad’s business improved steadily until the mid-1850s. The SCRR also received regular passenger traffic, and Chart 2 shows the increase in passengers carried by the road during the same time period.

The SCRR was ultimately unable to save Charleston, and as other port cities developed railroad linkages, Charleston suffered. Yet the SCRR should not simply be judged on the basis of its economic fortune or misfortune. The corporation stands as a pioneering part of our country’s railroad history. Chartered at a time when the debate between steam and horse power was unresolved, the SCRR made an early commitment to steam, and its first locomotive, the Best Friend

18. For Charleston’s economic trouble, see Coclanis, The Shadow of a Dream.
of Charleston, was the “first successful locomotive built in America.” The railroad, when completed in October 1833, extended 136 miles and was then the “longest in the world under one management.”

Some of the risks taken by the SCRR’s management did not pay off—such as the initial strategy for building the entire track on piles—but others, such as steam, did.

Multiple Times and the Railroad

Time was an important part of railroad rhetoric even before the SCRR’s construction. The SCRR’s boosters placed a great deal of importance on the time advantages of rail transportation. A committee formed to consider railroads in 1828 found that businessmen could not get punctual or regular service from water transportation. Low water levels grounded pole-boats and too much water also halted trade until the river receded. In either event, the implications were clear: "Long delays cause frequently very great losses. The injury sustained by our growers and dry-good merchants in such cases, is also very considerable on account of extravagant high freights, much delay, and the damaged state in which goods very often arrive."23 Not only was water transportation slow, but it damaged goods and harmed business. To these men, the railroad presented clear advantages.

Once the railroad was constructed, managers recognized that temporal coordination was critical to operations. Although historian Alfred Chandler dated the interest in strict scheduling to 1841 on the Western Railroad in Massachusetts, the SCRR was aware from the outset of the importance of both punctuality and coordination. The desire to provide punctual service led the SCRR to put clocks at six of its stations in 1834. Agents at these stations with clocks were required to submit a return to the main office in Charleston detailing when the trains arrived and departed. The company proclaimed the system a success, and noted that the lack of a “uniform standard of time” at the different places along the road had made it necessary for the road to intervene on its own. Although the report did not specify how the other clocks were kept in synchronization, management expressed satisfaction that the system was working and reliable.24

Before the development of the telegraph or trackside signals, temporal coordination was the only guarantor of safety.25 Like all other early American railroads, the SCRR operated in both directions on a single track. Railroad engineers anticipated the need for turnouts to prevent trains from colliding. Turnouts were short stretches of track that took the train off the main track and allowed another train to pass. "A turn-out between Midway and Graham’s will be found advisable," wrote the chief engineer in 1834, "as on that

23. Report of a Special Committee, 32.
25. Bartky, “Running on Time.”
central portion of the road, the meeting of the Engines will be of frequent occurrence. The system adopted for the supervision and care, of the Road has proved to be well calculated for that object.”

Even as traffic increased, the use of turnouts enabled the company to maintain safety and regularity. Dismissing the need for building a second complete track to accommodate traffic in both directions, the company told its stockholders in 1837 that “less interruption in passing has occurred in the present season, when 5 or 6 trains are met on the road, than with half the number, in years past, when the subject was not so well understood, and the accommodations incomplete.”

The company took temporal coordination seriously: a well-operating system rendered expensive additional construction unnecessary.

Thanks to the clear safety and economic advantages that time control presented, the SCRR labored hard to achieve this. But other time aspects remained beyond the company’s control. The railroad’s business occurred on a seasonal cycle—months of slack would be followed by a mad rush of business as each year’s cotton crop needed transportation to the coast. Insofar as the harvest dictated the busiest season of the road, trains were still subject to Nature’s time. The SCRR attempted to react quickly to Nature’s impact on its business, and learned to anticipate the seasonal cycle based on the performance of that year’s crops. When cotton began to be shipped in the last months of the year, freight traffic down to Charleston was at its highest. The directional asymmetry in traffic meant that equipment needs were imbalanced. The company attempted to address these needs early in its operation. “In anticipation of a heavy business in the fall,” the company explained in its report for 1835, “extensive arrangements were made early in the last spring for machinery” to insure that the SCRR would have equipment equal to the harvest. However, “delays which seem invariably and every where, to retard the progress of construction” meant the equipment was not ready and led the board to be “disappointed” in the results. The company was unable to “bring down all the cotton that was offered.”

Because of what directors referred to as the “periodical character” of the road’s business, there was a danger that cotton could accumulate at the northern end of the line. The company admitted in its early years that building all the equipment necessary to accommodate all the cotton “would involve an outlay of capital, which the rates allowed

28. Planters experienced similar problems. Smith, Mastered by the Clock, 91.
by our Charter would not sustain.’’ Therefore, the railroad ran the appropriate number of cars for the trains running to the interior, and then carried back down to Charleston as much cotton freight as possible. But the company also embarked on a more permanent solution: building bigger freight cars, with twelve wheels, that the SCRR hoped would lead to fewer trains, and therefore fewer delays.\(^30\)

By 1843, the SCRR reported that it had enough motive power and freight cars to “be equal to the transportation of 2,000 bales of cotton daily, with the corresponding quantity of upfreight.”\(^31\) Clearly, the company was making strides to anticipate Nature’s time. In so doing, the corporation demonstrated the multiple times that it had to accommodate: the clock-oriented time that preserved safety and measured punctuality, and Nature’s time that determined the level of business taken by the road.

The company noted that equipment took a beating during the “busy season,” and thus used the summer downtime for repairs, anticipating heavier business to follow.\(^32\) The seasonal cycle also created uncertainties for workers: as shipments rose and fell, so too did cycles of employment. “The rolls in the Workshops and Transportation Departments do not exhibit a uniform or fixed number,” explained the company in 1848. “They vary as the business of the Road fluctuates, as the last season the construction of new cars, and other additional work connected with an increase of locomotive power, necessarily swelled the number of operatives and laborers beyond the usual demand.”\(^33\)

Indeed, no one experienced the shifting demands of the railroad more than employees. Running the railroad was a nearly round-the-clock affair, and to keep up with the freight business, railroad employees worked irregular hours. Laborers in Charleston, for example, began work early. One SCRR committee noted in 1848 that “in the morning before daylight there is a heavy force of men and mules engaged in adjusting the several trains for the engines going to Hamburg or Columbia.”\(^34\) A newspaper account reported that this remained the case in 1850: “The Rail Road is also taking off the goods as fast as received at the depot; all sent there, before

\(^{30}\) Semi-Annual Report, Accepted December 31, 1836, 6–7.

\(^{31}\) Semi-Annual Report, Accepted July 20, 1843, 8–9.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{33}\) Action of the Stockholders, May 30, 1848, 12.

\(^{34}\) Report of the Committee of Inspection, 2nd of May 1848, 22. Smith identified plantations which also required their laborers to start before daybreak, see Mastered by the Clock, 139–40.
sun down one day, are taken away by the 5 o’clock trains of the next morning.”35 While the punctuality of trains may have been measured by the clock, workers labored irregularly in order to ensure that the goal of punctuality was met.

Although working at night could be the unavoidable result of the press of business, it was quite intentional when the SCRR began scheduling nighttime trains. The company’s early preference was clearly for running trains during the day whenever possible. In 1837, the railroad reported with pride that trains seemed to be leaving Charleston consistently around 6 o’clock each morning and arriving at the northern terminus between 4:30 and 5 P.M. This meant that “the trip may be performed between sunrise and sunset in the shortest days.”36 Note that the company felt the need to operate within Nature’s constraints in order to perform its job safely. Stockholders on the Louisville, Cincinnati, and Charleston Railroad (the LCCRR, which merged with the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company to form the South Carolina Railroad in 1843) urged trains to begin running at night in 1842. The resolution pointed out that “the large amount of capital invested in our Roads ought not to be idle if employment offers, and that freight trains ought to be run by night as well as day, if adequate freight can be had.”37 Stockholders wanted the trains to operate as often as possible, in order to secure as much business as possible. The professionals who worked on the road did not necessarily agree. Considering a similar effort to add night service eight years later, civil engineer John McRae argued that nighttime travel required not only double pay for the workers but it kept engines under constant use, wearing them out more quickly.38

Time and Community Relations

From printed schedules to the harvest season, the internal operations of the SCRR involved multiple times. Yet time also shaped the company’s relationship with the wider community. Investigating the relationship between the SCRR and the community it served shows

36. Semi-Annual Report, Accepted December 31, 1836, 5.
that arguments about time were at the center of power struggles between different interest groups.

In the SCRR’s passenger service, time schedules evolved from informal arrangements between passengers and engineers to stricter published schedules. In its first year of operation, departure times could be negotiated: “The times of leaving the stations in Line-street [in Charleston], will be 8 o’clock and 10 A.M. and 1 and at half past 3 o’clock P.M. Parties may be accommodated at the intermediate hours by agreeing with the Engineer. Great punctuality will be observed in the time of starting.”39 As late as 1848 the railroad “as a matter of accommodation” allowed passengers and freight to be “received and delivered, at the Turn-outs and Pump Stations along the line of Road: and at points convenient to gentlemen’s residences.”40 Here, it is clear that passengers (and more important to the railroad, those shipping cotton) could request that the train stop near their residences as long as it was during the normally scheduled run of the train.

Not everyone possessed this power, however. Passengers of “inferior” races and classes paid reduced fares, but also had to fit their schedules to the company’s demands. In 1850, the SCRR announced that beginning March 4, a train would leave at 8 A.M. each day except Sunday, and that “Gangs of Negroes and Emigrants carried at reduced rates” must take that train, “or they will be charged full rates” on later trains.41 When the company instituted second class passenger and freight service later that year, the new second class trains left at special—and much earlier—times. The Columbia to Charleston train left at 4 A.M.; the Charleston to Columbia train departed at 4:30 A.M.42 While planters with cotton to take to market were accommodated at their residences, the lower orders had to attend to the train when the company demanded.

Company demands met with more resistance when the Post Office was concerned. Time management was not driven by private enterprise alone: here, the government set the bar.43 The mail was important to the Charleston community: the Courier published almost daily a brief notice of what mails had been received in the city and were available for pickup at the Post Office. When mails did not

40. Report of the of Committee of Inspection, 2nd of May 1848, 6–7. Not all states were this accommodating. As Colleen Dunlavy has noted, North Carolina (1833) and Virginia (1837) laws “empowered” companies “to require passengers to get off only at regular stops.” Dunlavy, Politics and Industrialization, 121.
41. Charleston Courier, February 26, 1850, 2.
42. Charleston Courier, May 16, 1850, 3.
43. John, Spreading the News, 102.
arrive as scheduled, that made the news as well. Speedy delivery was also newsworthy. “It affords us real pleasure,” the editors noted in spring 1840, “to inform our readers, that the Mail of yesterday came through from New York, in regular course, in three days and fourteen hours, as it was wont to do some weeks since.” When, shortly after this, the New York mail arrived in two days and fifteen hours, the newspaper claimed that “this saving of time is a matter of much moment,” and quoted a Baltimore newspaper which referred to the quickened service as “flying” to Charleston.

The SCRR carried mail before construction was completed. Once the link to Hamburg opened, the company set about securing a permanent contract from the government. When deliberating whether or not to accept the Post Office business, managers had to consider whether they wanted to meet the government’s demands. The company worried about time lost by taking on the mails. There were nine places to deliver the mail between Charleston and Hamburg, and the company estimated in July 1838 that a total of ninety minutes would be lost in stopping the train, delivering and taking on mail, and restarting. Thus, the SCRR announced it would attempt to get the Post Office to accept a schedule that would allow the railroad to deliver and take on mail at way stations without stopping, with an additional charge if trains were required to stop. The company also balked at having to transport the mail on Sundays when “in many instances extra wages are required to be paid.”

The Post Office was happy to allow the railroads to set the time of operation, if they would in turn accept a reduction in fees. The Post Office offered $237.50 per mile per year if railroads would accept its timetable, but only $200 otherwise. The SCRR was not pleased with the times offered, since they made no allowance for delays, and if delayed, “as the cars frequently are by unavoidable accidents,” the Post Office would “require them to run at night, to the great discomfort and some risk of the passengers.” Ever mindful of its own time requirements, the railroad did not hesitate to make suggestions about how the process might be made more efficient. The mail arrived in Charleston from Wilmington via boat between five and six each morning; mail for Charleston was separated from other mail at the

44. For an example, see Charleston Courier, March 19, 1831, 2; and March 10, 1840, 2. See also Smith, Mastered by the Clock, 73–7.
45. Charleston Courier, March 2, 1840, 2 [emphasis in original].
46. Charleston Courier, May 18, 1840, 2 [emphasis in original].
47. Annual Report, May 7, 1832, 4–5; John, Spreading the News, 92.
Post Office, before the upcountry mail reached the railroad. The railroad suggested that the sorting process take place on the boat, thus eliminating the hour or so that was wasted by conveying the mail to the Post Office and sorting it there. Without this change, the company worried that the trains would get too late a start, and would then have to run at night, inconveniencing the passengers. Moreover, since the freight trains left after the passenger trains, any delay to passengers invariably delayed the freight. Finally, the company grumbled about running the mails on Sundays, which it estimated would lead to an additional $20,000 in expense per year—a sum that would have swallowed most of the income from the contract.49

And yet, the mail was important enough that public pressure could force the company’s hand. The SCRR’s board of directors decided to cease carrying the mail in 1835 when they felt the Post Office had mismanaged their account. The community’s response was swift. Fifteen “merchants of Charleston . . . feeling seriously the embarrassment occasioned to the trade of this city and the interior by the suspension in the transportation of the mails on the Rail Road,” petitioned the company and asked that the company “tender to the Post Master of this city the use of the Rail Road for carrying the mails until the first of next month free of expense, unless before that time some satisfactory arrangement is made between the company and the Department.” The mail was important enough that the merchants demanded the company’s acquiescence. The company listened to its customers, and agreed to carry the mails for free until the first of January 1836.50 The public noticed when mail service was interrupted throughout the antebellum era. “The South Carolina Rail Road & Mr. Secretary Campbell have got into a dispute about carrying the mails & the R. Road has discontinued service the 1st,” Charles Colcock Jones informed his son, who was studying in Massachusetts, in 1854. “Consequently we are some 6 or 8 mails behind, and, in this we may account for our not receiving letters from yourself or your Broth[er]...
And the railroad did not always gain public sympathy in its disputes with the Post Office. The credit reporters from R. G. Dun were not particularly impressed by the SCRR’s attempt to play hardball with the mails. An 1855 reporter characterized the road as “a miserable monopoly.” Referring to the mail dispute, he commented that the company “endeav[ore]d to extort a higher price altho’ getting enormous pay before. The conse[uenc]e was a return for some weeks to the old stage system.” While the company may not have felt it was being treated fairly, its negotiations with the Post Office demonstrated that the railroad was not full master of its own time. The government made demands, and the community could also apply pressure.

If the Post Office’s power derived from its ability to give or withhold mail contracts, Sabbatarian pressure on the company had a less economic rationale behind it. Sabbatarians—those who demanded that the Christian Sabbath be kept free for religious observance—never had a formal organization in South Carolina. But diverse groups operated under this ideology and acted in concert to present their demands to the railroad companies. Here, people who did not always have direct financial interest in the corporation—some, like Gadsden, were stockholders, others were not—attempted to put their stamp on how the railroad should value its time.

Sabbatarians, having failed to change the SCRR’s policies with their first efforts in 1835, soon had a minor victory. In 1836, the company rejected an offer from “several persons, among whom were large Stockholders,” for a special train to be sent to Hamburg on a Sunday, for which they were willing to pay $200. It was moved and adopted that “the rule prohibiting the transportation of passengers on the Sabbath be strictly adhered to.” Thus, it appears that the railroad had a policy against some Sunday trains—outside of the trains required by the Post Office—at this early date. These efforts did not satisfy all Sabbatarians, however, because opposition to Sunday trains resurfaced at an LCCR meeting in 1842. Sabbatarians delivered

51. Letter from C. C. Jones to C. C. Jones, Jr., November 8, 1854, box 3, folder 4, Charles Colcock Jones Collection, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries, Athens.
53. For Sabbatarianism generally, see McCrossen, Holy Day, Holiday, chap. 2; and John, “Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously.”
54. Southern Sabbatarians have not received sustained historiographical attention. For an examination of Sabbatarian sentiment in the upper South, see Marion, “The Gentlemen Sabbatarians,” esp. chaps. 2–4. 6. For opposition in the lower South, see Quist, Restless Visionaries, 91.
55. Entry for April 6, 1836, SCRR Minutebook.
five petitions or memorials to that year’s stockholders meeting: one from the clergy of Charleston, one from the citizens of Charleston, one each from the members of St. Paul’s and St. Peter’s churches in Charleston, and one from the citizens of Columbia. The result, after some discussion, was only that the board would consider eliminating Sunday trains.56

When Sabbatarians returned in the 1850s, they had a much more complex argument intended to gain the ear of money-minded stockholders.57 Led by Dr. Whitfoord Smith, the memorialists claimed that the fact that the trains operated on the Sabbath prevented morally inclined investors from purchasing stock, since their consciences would not let them support a business that violated the Lord’s day. Thus, the policy drove off potential purchasers. The petitioners next appealed to the stockholders’ sympathy for the workers on the road. “Is it right, is it justice,” the petitioners asked, “to any class of men in any station or pursuit in life, to cut them off from every opportunity of domestic tranquility and enjoyment, and doom them to toil without intermission, and to labor without rest?”58

Fundamentally, the petitioners wanted the railroad’s voluntary submission to God’s time. Sabbatarians worried that the false doctrine of “necessity” was proving too seductive. If “necessity” forced shipping on Sunday, why not selling on Sunday? With such an attitude, men might lose their moral bearings, and Sunday would become a day of business “as well as any other[.]”59 The memorialists, all of them preachers, criticized the moral effect that the railroad was having on their charges. Not only was the railroad itself violating God’s time, but the SCRR encouraged others to disobey God’s time as well. The preachers were finding it increasingly difficult to hold the public’s attention on the day appointed for religious instruction: “Often are the villages and hamlets in which they preach roused from their Sabbath stillness by the shrill shriek of the whistle. The children they would train and educate to virtue are frequently led

57. Forest Marion argues that after the mid-1830s Sabbatarians in the upper south were more likely to emphasize “social-economic” than “moral-religious” reasons for opposing Sabbath defilement. See Marion, “Gentlemen Sabbatarians,” 216–21. Richard John also argues that Sabbatarians worked hard at that time to appear interdenominational and nonsectarian. See John, “Taking Sabbatarianism Seriously,” 539–40. While no comparable study of Sabbatarianism exists for South Carolina, the arguments of the Sabbatarians who petitioned the railroad seem to be in line with efforts elsewhere.
59. Ibid., 12.
off to see the passing cars. And the slaves whom they would teach their duty to God, and those in his providence placed over them, too often find employment where the temptation of a pecuniary reward is too powerful for their weak resistance.”60 Children and (child-like) slaves were believed by these ministers to be the most susceptible to the influence of the railroads and the distraction from the Sabbath.

Further efforts in 1854 proved equally unsuccessful in changing the SCRR’s policy. On this occasion, a committee from the Protestant Episcopal Church attended the stockholders meeting, to make the now familiar arguments against Sunday operations.61 Sabbatarians finally claimed partial victory in 1856, when the president discontinued freight trains on Sundays, with an exception for the mails.62 The company later reported that ending the Sunday trains had been a success.63 The general superintendent was able to report in 1857 that Sunday trains had been reduced yet again, with the permission of the Post Office. Only two trains operated on that day, one from Columbia and one from Charleston, both which left in the mid-to-late afternoon.64 While the Post Office prevented the elimination of Sunday trains, the company balanced community demands with business needs.

Railroads outside the South also dealt with Sabbatarian concerns among their stockholders and in the communities they served. The Boston and Worcester Railroad received petitions from the citizens of West Needham and Natick, Massachusetts, regarding the running of trains on Sunday in 1835, the year of Gadsden’s SCRR proposal.65 Nine years later, Albrect Koch reported that in Connecticut “even the steam carriages and the steamboats rest [on Sunday], and anybody who should by chance take it into his head to travel can be punished by law.”66 The Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) discussed the prospect of closing on Sunday early in its operation. In 1849, the board of directors adopted a resolution asking the superintendent to end all Sunday operations and to not require any employee of the company to work on that day. Explaining the decision, the PRR noted that it

60. Ibid., 13.
63. Annual Reports for the Year Ending December 31, 1856, 8.
64. Annual Reports for the Year Ending December 31st, 1857, 8.
66. Entry for August 18, 1844, in Koch, Journey, 32.
had a responsibility to its workers to spare them laboring on Sunday. “Universal experience shows the necessity of occasional rest,” the company opined, declaring that it hoped to obtain better quality work by letting workers devote one day per week to rest. John Rockwell, a director of Massachusetts’s Norwich and Worcester Railroad, carried his opposition to the extreme in 1857. He put forth a successful resolution whereby the company’s express freight train left Norwich at 1 A.M. on Mondays instead of on Sunday evening. Although employee reaction went unrecorded, it is doubtful that being required to be at work for a 1 A.M. Monday departure allowed them the repose on Sunday that Rockwell professed to value. In short, railroad companies, North and South, had to address community members who favored Sabbath observance, whether or not those members held stock in the corporation. The companies’ hopes for regularity had to be balanced against appeals to God’s time.

Beyond customers, the government, and Sabbatarians, the SCRR had to coordinate its time with other transportation enterprises. Such coordination was critical for providing customers the service they wanted. Although the SCRR did not have to fear competition from other railroads in its early years, it did not enter a transportation vacuum. Wagons bumped down roads and boats plied the rivers, presenting the newcomer with ample competition. Although it would take time for them to offer the full advantages of speed and direct routes, railroads could, from the outset, claim the advantage of punctuality. Steamboats, dependent on the tides, made clear their disadvantages in their own advertisements. The Maryland and Virginia Steam Boat company announced that it left Charleston, at 4 P.M. and would arrive in North Carolina the “next day about 6 o’clock P.M.” an admission that it was unable to keep exact schedules. In 1850, another steamer, the Southerner, declared in a Charleston newspaper that it had to alter its schedule “to suit the tide.” One month later, the same steamer found itself again “detained on account

69. Despite the powerful advances made by railroads in the early nineteenth century, water remained crucial to the country’s transportation needs in the form of canals, improvements to navigable rivers, and the ocean. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution*, chaps. 3 and 4.
70. *Charleston Courier*, June 6, 1840, 3.
of the tide,” but promised to leave “To Morrow Morning, at 9 o’clock, precisely.”

Although railroads could be wary of rival firms who threatened their territory, they also cooperated with them. The Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad informed the SCRR in 1837 that it “was about to put into operation a line of steam boats, railway and stages from Charleston via Wilmington to Halifax on the Roanoke river,” and hoped that the two companies would be able to coordinate their schedules. The SCRR’s board of directors promised “hearty cooperation” in this endeavor. After all, giving customers easier connections to more destinations would serve to increase their own traffic. Levels of integration varied. In 1853, the SCRR announced its agreement with the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad to build a depot for joint use where the WMRR intersected with the SCRR’s Camden branch. This depot would allow freight and passengers to be moved more conveniently from one train to another, a benefit that would bring savings in time. When companies did not build depots together, they could still coordinate their efforts. The Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad built a depot near Columbia, and the SCRR claimed that it hoped to integrate its schedule with the CSCRR so that passengers would not suffer delays.

Conclusion

Exploring the SCRR’s internal management and community relations demonstrates that time was a complex matter for antebellum railroads. While time was important, the clock did not rule all. Rather, the railroad had to address and operate on multiple times. Railroad corporations proudly touted their time advantages over other forms of transportation, but their control of time was never entirely complete or successful. Once the SCRR was built, the company found it could not simply dictate time at its pleasure. Debates about time and the railroad were debates about power: who controlled when the train departed, where it alighted, and how often it arrived. Sabbatarians, federal officials, passengers, planters, merchants and other transportation enterprises were just some of those with which

72. Charleston Courier, February 16, 1850, 3. A similar delay but promise of prompt service can be found in the Charleston Courier, March 19, 1850, 3.
73. Entry for May 8, 1837, SCRR Minutebook.
the SCRR had to negotiate issues centered on time. With some of these groups, the SCRR held the upper hand or was an equal partner; with others—notably Nature—the railroad could only adjust. However successful or unsuccessful railroads may have been in this process, these debates reveal how sophisticated antebellum southerners were about time. They did not need the railroad to teach them time discipline; rather, the railroad became an arena where southerners, already aware of time’s significance and multiplicity, could argue about whose time was more important.

Although railroads are often linked in the popular imagination with timetables and other trappings of clock consciousness, antebellum southern railways actually wove varieties of time throughout the infrastructure necessary for a modernizing society. E. P. Thompson was surely right to point to time as a crucial way of understanding changes wrought by industrialization. Yet, by recognizing the myriad and interlocking ways that overlapping cultures of time conditioned and influenced railroad operations, historians can fully appreciate the analytical power of time as a way to better understand these changes.

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