



Bringing Northwestern Virginia's History
into the Classroom

It happened near me . . .

Pieces of the Past from Where *I* Live

Counties: Loudoun, Fairfax, and Arlington **Date:** 1932

Topic : The 1930s, Transportation, and Race Relations

Background: The Washington & Old Dominion Railroad

had been serving Northern Virginia under one name or another since the late 1850s, extending from Alexandria through Arlington and Fairfax counties eventually to as far as the Blue Ridge at Bluemont. For many Northern Virginians, it was a lifeline. It allowed commuting to Washington and Alexandria or just to the next town—Leesburg, say—and brought mail, supplies, and baggage. It allowed us to ship our grain or our daily milk down the tracks to a port city. We set our clock by it. By the 1930s, it was an electric railway struggling to compete with the automobile and Route 7. Here are a selection of railroad regulations from the W & OD, telling of a very different time in terms of technology, safety, and race relations. Think about why these regulations have come to exist!

- S-4. When a train stops or is delayed under circumstances under which it may be overtaken by another train, the conductor or train driver must go back immediately with red signals a sufficient distance to insure full protection, not less than two thousand (2,000) feet . . . The front of a train must be protected in the same way . . . by the conductor or train driver.
- S-10. Standard clocks are located in telegraph offices at Purcellville, Leesburg, and in the Dispatcher's office at Rosslyn.
- S-11. Conductors shall set apart and designate in each car certain seats to be occupied by white passengers and rear seats to be occupied by colored passengers, and shall not discriminate between the two races as to the quality or convenience of the accommodations allotted. Whenever it may become necessary or proper for the comfort and convenience of passengers to do so, the Conductor shall change the designation of seats so as to increase or decrease the amount of space or seats set apart for either race, provided no contiguous seats on the same bench shall be occupied by white and colored persons at the same time, until all of the other seats in said car shall be occupied. The Conductor shall require any passenger to change his or her seat as often as it may be necessary or proper to do so.
- S-13. Passengers will not be carried on freight trains.
- S-17. Bulletin Boards and Special Order Boards are located at: Rosslyn, Bluemont Junction, Leesburg, and Purcellville.
- S-18. Passenger trains meeting at Leesburg will use the side track opposite the passenger depot and the eastbound train will take the siding unless otherwise instructed.
- S-29. All trains will maintain a speed not exceeding eight (8) miles per hour within the corporate limits of Purcellville.



Purcellville Station along the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad that ran through Loudoun, photographed in 1940. This was an electric line rather than steam after 1911, and one of the electric cars is shown. Below at left, the interior of a W & OD railway car, including the seats to be divided by regulations between white and black passengers. Below at right, a modern-day evening view of Purcellville Station, now restored at the western end of the W & OD Trail. In the restoration process, in order to put in restrooms for bikers and walkers, the segregated waiting rooms suffered. The black waiting room got the axe for the restrooms. The station was built in 1903-04, closing as a railroad station in 1968.



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Making Sense of Evidence from the Past.

1. Why is there a “standard clock” at Purcellville, Leesburg, and Rosslyn? Why would this be needed? Is there a reason a railroad would particularly need it?
2. Why the extreme “red flag” stipulations for a train breakdown? What technologically doesn’t exist yet? Are breakdowns a problem for smaller railroads in 1932? What would cause this at that time in our history?
3. Why is it stipulated that “passengers will not be carried on freight trains”—is this a problem in 1932? Explain.
4. Why just *eight* miles per hour through Purcellville? What has obviously given rise to this regulation in a small, country town?
5. Rule S-11 seems ordinary enough—what is it actually about? Read it carefully!
6. In Rule S-11, who, evidently, is going to have to move if asked?
7. Find the sentence in Rule S-11 that ends with “*until all of the other seats in said car shall be occupied.*” Translate this from bureaucratic “mumbo-jumbo”—can you figure out just what’s going to happen as the car begins to fill up on a busy run?