

JOINT SESSION WITH THE LEXINGTON GROUP

THE AKRON, CANTON & YOUNGSTOWN AND THE
POLITICS OF EXPANSION, 1890-1920*

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One of the last steam railroads built in Ohio was the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway Company. Although chartered by the State in June 1907, construction of the 7.7-mile line did not begin until 1912. Then eight years later - March 1, 1920 - this Akron-based industrial road acquired "Class I" status with the acquisition of the 162-mile Northern Ohio Railway.

The gestation and early growth of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown parallel Akron's rapid expansion. While the city in the late nineteenth century enjoyed steady growth based on a mixed industrial economy (farm machinery, matches, publishing, clay products, rubber and cereal milling), Akron's population skyrocketed in the decade 1910 to 1920. This was caused by the spectacular boom in rubber production during World War I. The Census of 1920 revealed a population of 208,435, a 201.8% increase over the city's 1910 population of 69,067. "Akron's growth was almost magic," wrote a local historian in 1925. "It outgrew everything it owned, and in 1916 and 1917, some twenty to thirty thousand workmen came to the city."¹ The burgeoning rubber industry during Akron's "magic" years is one factor, then, in explaining why the AC&Y came into being. In fact, the railroad's own brief history mistakenly argues that F. A. Seiberling's Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company build the road.² Yet, the reasons for construction of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown are varied and pre-date the decade 1910-1920.

*This study is based largely on the corporate papers of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway which the company recently deposited in the American History Research Center at The University of Akron. The collection, approximately eight cubic feet, is open to the public.

At the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century three trunk lines dominated the Akron railroad scene: the Cleveland, Akron & Columbus (Pennsylvania); the Erie; and the Pittsburgh & Western (Baltimore & Ohio). Within a year the Baltimore & Ohio strengthened its position when the subsidiary Akron & Chicago Junction Railroad opened, thus giving the B&O a main stem between Pittsburgh and Chicago.³

The year 1891 also witnessed completion of a small trunk line into Akron from the west, the Pittsburgh, Akron & Western--a road destined to play a key role in the future construction of the AC&Y. Built largely by area capitalists,⁴ the PA&W transversed some of Ohio's richest agricultural land, but, except for Akron, served no important community. At Delphos, the road's western terminus, it connected with the Clover Leaf (Toledo, St. Louis & Kansas City), which gave the PA&W direct access to the St. Louis gateway.

The decade of the 1890s, too, saw construction of a key industrial shortline, the Akron & Barberton Belt Railroad, immediately south and west of Akron. Built by Ohio Columbus Barber, "the match king," this road served his Barberton industries. The "Belt Line" connected with Akron's three principal trunk routes, but remained Barber's personal property until 1901.⁵

Although Akron by the nineties seemingly enjoyed an adequate transportation net (the city still had north-south barge service on the Ohio & Erie Canal), local interests, spearheaded by the Akron Chamber of Commerce, actively sought additional rail service. This came not so much from a "booster" spirit, but rather as a response to local transportation problems. The Chamber, for one, argued that increased railroad competition "would likely end the arrogance of the Central Traffic Association which has a stranglehold on area freight and passenger rates and services."⁶ Only the PA&W of Akron railroads did not belong to the traffic pool and area residents strongly backed the local road's growth.

Understandably the Pittsburgh, Akron & Western supported those Akronites who sought more railroad service, for the road had proved a financial disappointment. The PA&W had few important shippers and when the B&O built its line from Akron to Willard (Chicago Junction), hope of a profitable sale of the Akron property to that road evaporated. But if the PA&W could extend its line east to Youngstown and into western Pennsylvania, reasoned its owners, the railroad could tap the rich industrial and mining centers of the Mahoning and Shenango valleys, described by a contemporary study as "a region which for originating an immense volume of freight traffic is one of the first rank in the world."⁷

Therefore, in 1892, the Akron promoters, who had organized the Pittsburgh, Akron & Western, formed the Akron & New Castle Railway to

construct the "Eastern Extension." The new company quickly surveyed a line to the Niles-Youngstown area, a distance of approximately fifty miles, and acquired title or options for most of the seven miles of right-of-way between Akron and the village of Mogadore. There the A&NC planned to connect with the largely coal-hauling "Tip-Top Route," the Cleveland, Canton & Southern (later Wheeling & Lake Erie).⁸

As soon as the winter snows of 1893 melted, grading and track-laying began on the Akron & New Castle. Then disaster struck. After completing only two miles of track in and near Akron, depressed conditions coming in the wake of the Panic of '93 forced the company to suspend construction. The panic, moreover, threw the parent and financially weak Pittsburgh, Akron & Western into receivership. When reorganization plans failed, a district court ordered the property sold. At a public sale held October 27, 1894, on the front steps of the Summit County Courthouse in Akron, a syndicate, representing New York and Pittsburgh investors who held the PA&W mortgage, purchased the line. The sale also included the Akron & New Castle. Shortly thereafter a Lima-based group, headed by Calvin "Sellers" Brice, Ohio's junior senator and long-time railroad promoter, bought the PA&W and reorganized the property as the Northern Ohio Railway Company. The Eastern syndicate, however, refused to sell the ill-fated Akron & New Castle and "retained (it) as a security."⁹

Soon after Senator Brice acquired the Northern Ohio, he leased the line to his own Lake Erie & Western Railway Company for 999 years. The Senator had a marvelous plan. He wanted to provide his Sandusky to Peoria railroad (LE&W) with an outlet to the Eastern seaboard. He sought, moreover, the westbound coal and coke traffic that originated in the Clearfield District of western Pennsylvania. Brice believed that his objectives could be achieved by controlling (either through lease or purchase) the PA&W, A&NC, P&W, a portion of the Buffalo, Rochester & Pittsburgh, and the Beech Creek Railroad. Collectively these lines would connect Bluffton, Ohio on his LE&W with Williamsport, Pennsylvania on the Philadelphia & Reading system.¹⁰

While the Senator and his colleagues gained control of the Pittsburgh, Akron & Western and acquired substantial interests in the Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh, Brice's sudden death on December 12, 1898, caused the Lake Erie & Western's easterly extension plans to collapse. Within a year the Vanderbilt system, through its Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, purchased the Brice interests. Apparently the LS&MS desired the LE&W since it paralleled another Vanderbilt holding, the "Big Four" (CCC&StL); and the company wanted to prevent formation of a rival system to its lines in northern Ohio and western Pennsylvania.¹¹

At the turn of the century the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern "in quest of higher profits based on increased traffic," upgraded

its newly acquired Lake Erie & Western--Northern Ohio properties. The company spent heavily improving track and replacing obsolete rolling stock. Since the Northern Ohio had few large shippers in the Akron area, the Vanderbilt line sought to generate additional freight revenue. In fact, the local citizenry had dubbed the line the "NO Road" and "Two streaks of rust and a right of way." Understandably the Vanderbilt management backed O. C. Barber's plan to improve his own position by extending the Akron & Barberton Belt. In 1901 the "Belt Line" built a seven mile northern extension from Barberton to an interchange point on the Northern Ohio at Fairlawn, west of Akron.¹²

Also in 1901 Vanderbilt officials joined in talks with Barber and Wheeling & Lake Erie representatives to plan a more extensive Akron belt road. The two trunk lines wanted traffic and Barber sought better and cheaper service. After several meetings the three railroads decided either to construct a connecting link between the "Belt Line" in Barberton and the W&LE near Mogadore or to acquire the Akron & New Castle project and open a direct route from downtown Akron to a Mogadore connection with the Wheeling. The latter plan would include the Akron Transfer Railway Company which had leased the two miles of finished A&NC trackage built in 1893. But the same Eastern interests, headed by Pittsburgh railroad promoter D. P. Reighard, controlled both properties and reportedly wanted "top dollar for their holdings."¹³

Plans for the "Belt Line" spur disturbed Akron's big-three carriers. The Baltimore & Ohio, Erie and Pennsylvania handled most of the A&BB interchange business and desired, of course, to prevent any loss of traffic. They foresaw the Wheeling & Lake Erie (which did not have a physical connection with the Barberton road) receiving both a portion of Barber's car loadings and much of his coal business. The Wheeling, unlike other area roads, enjoyed the best route for coal traffic from southern Ohio coalfields into Summit County. And these officials feared that they might lose present on-line industries and future ones to an expanded terminal company.

Late in 1901 the B&O, Erie and Pennsylvania decided upon a concerted plan. They convinced the LS&MS to join them in an attempt to buy the "Belt Line" from O. C. Barber. After several "handsome" offers, Barber agreed to sell his railroad, except for rolling stock and sidings at his Barberton match works. Hoesea Paul, a Cleveland consulting engineer, reported five years later that the four new owners of the A&BB "did not construct a line to Mogadore, but did actually build far enough (in 1902) to make it difficult for another company, Wheeling or other wise, to secure an entrance into the City (Akron), except by the ill-fated Akron & New Castle route."¹⁴

Akronites generally expressed positive reaction to the series of local railroad events which began with the Brice takeover of the

PA&W in 1895. A variety of Akron shippers--Quaker Oats, Akron Machine, Robinson Clay Products, Buckeye Rubber and American Sewer Pipe--hoped during the late nineties that a strong and expanded Northern Ohio could provide better railroad service. And the old concern of transportation costs remained. While the Central Traffic Association had crumbled by the turn of the century, costs, particularly switching charges, seemed unreasonable to many area shippers. When the Pennsylvania took over the Baltimore & Ohio in 1900, Akronites cringed.¹⁵ The Akron Beacon Journal read the public pulse with these editorial remarks:

At present time there are really but two railroads in Akron--the Pennsylvania and Erie. It is not denied now that the Pennsylvania and B&O interests are nearly identical, and the Erie and Pennsylvania therefore are the only competing lines entering Akron. In making this statement, of course, the Northern Ohio is not considered in the light of a competing road, as it is a well-known fact that all of our business it gets is what is given it by the other roads. The less competition among railroads the less desirable is a city for manufacturers, owing to the increase in shipping rates.¹⁶

For years after the Vanderbilt take-over of the Northern Ohio, rumors persisted about the possibilities of a tie-in between this road and the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie, another Vanderbilt property. Some local shippers incorrectly thought that the sale of the "Belt Line" in 1901 signaled the beginnings of a new line to the east; major renovation of the Northern Ohio in 1902 and 1903 bolstered this view. But by 1906 Akronites were highly suspicious of such tales. "Many a man has seen the latent possibilities in that road and has promised a brilliant future for it," commented the Beacon Journal. "From the very beginning, however, it has been an ill-starred venture, and the great trunk line, which has been so often predicted, has never come to pass."¹⁷

While talk continued about an east-west bridge route, a series of area railroad maneuvers starting in 1902 in time bore positive results. In that year Charles W. French, who headed a group of Ohio shippers, persuaded owners of the Akron & New Castle to join in an attempt to revitalize their Akron holdings. French, a Cleveland businessman, planned to use the A&NC as part of a grandiose scheme to fuse several Buckeye State steam shortlines into a Sandusky to Bellaire railroad system, the so-called "Lake & River Railway." The entire system would be electric, presumably built to steam-road specifications and capable of interchanging steam-road equipment.¹⁸

By March 1906 financial reversals together with increased traction competition and steam road opposition forced French and his associates to abandon the Lake & River project. The various units of the system reverted to their original owners. However, the Akron & New Castle stockholders, including French and all heavily in debt to wealthy Canton businessman Zebulon W. "Zeb" Davis, sold him the firm's assets for \$50,000.¹⁹

"Zeb" Davis, owner and founder of the large Diamond Portland Cement Company at Middlebranch, north of Canton, long expressed interest in expanding local railroad service. He blasted the Wheeling & Lake Erie and its predecessor, the Cleveland, Canton & Southern, for being a "despicable monopoly" and "impossible to deal with fairly." Thus when Charles French proposed the Lake & River system in 1902, Davis willingly supported it. He envisioned a belt line around both Akron and Canton which would connect with area roads and serve as a feeder to the larger Lake & River system. For Davis, an integral part of the proposed railroad would be service to his cement works, which shipped an average of 350 cars of cement monthly. When the Akron & New Castle property became available, Davis acquired it, hoping to "extend the railroad from Akron to Mogadore and south to Middlebranch and Canton and perhaps east to Youngstown." And he succinctly expressed his motives when he said, "My reasons for joining with Charley French in the first place were simple enough. I had a transportation problem which another railroad could solve."²⁰

Before plunging into active railroad building, "Zeb" Davis hired a Cleveland consulting firm for an analysis of the transportation needs of the Akron area. This study, presented to David in August 1906, provided him with pleasant reading:

(The) increase of population and business and manufacturing importance (of Akron) has already reached a point where it is confidently believed this valuable property (A&NC), now lying idle, can, by the reasonable investment required to complete it, be made a factor in the further development of the city and suburbs and be converted into a successful business proposition; a shaper in a large existing traffic, a developer of, and if you please, a creator of a still larger volume of new traffic, a volume that will justify further independent construction, or that existing lines will be eager and solicitous to have turned over to them.²¹

The next year, June 1907, Davis organized the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway Company with an authorized capital stock of \$200,000 and a bonded indebtedness of an equal amount. Davis owned all bonds and held all stock, except one share each for the balance of the six directors. Fortunately, the recession of 1907 and the

growing national awareness of the financial plight of some railroads had no impact on the infant line.²²

Between June 1907 and the opening of the road to Mogadore five years later, "Zeb" Davis faced problems with his railroad venture. While the project appeared to possess a rosy future, he experienced difficulty acquiring nearly five miles of right-of-way between the eastern end of the old Akron Transfer Railway and Mogadore. The Akron & New Castle promoters, while purchasing outright land for the line, had only acquired options on other parcels, options which had expired by 1907. Not until 1911 did the AC&Y own the necessary right-of-way.²³

While engineering crews during 1908 surveyed lines to both Canton (via Middlebranch) and Youngstown, another feasibility study warned that construction of the Canton line, even with cement plant carloadings, would be a financial mistake. The report recommended only the Mogadore to Youngstown extension. "Such a line would be seven miles shorter than either the Erie or the B&O and would have a much lower over-all grade, not exceeding .3 of 1%." Moreover, the Mogadore to Youngstown route "would likely be the last profitable steam line extension in Ohio." At the June 1911 meeting of the board of directors the body approved Davis's motion that the line be built only to the east, specifically the vicinity of Sharon, on the Pennsylvania-Ohio line. But construction never began, owing largely to the line's failure to acquire a right-of-way in the greater Youngstown area and its inability "to reach terms with the B&O and Erie on cross-overs and interchange connections."²⁴

The years between the official opening of the Akron, Canton and Youngstown on October 1, 1912 and the take-over of the Northern Ohio in March 1920 marked the company's rapid development as a successful terminal property. The AC&Y easily raised funds through the sale of bonds locally and on the Paris and Brussels bond markets. New industries, mostly rubber shops (including two Goodyear plants) and clay-product firms, sprang up along its trackage; established companies along the old Akron Transfer Railway continued to generate traffic. And during World War I, the company organized a wholly-owned subsidiary, the East Akron Land Company, which acquired extensive real-estate holdings near Mogadore and aggressively promoted their development. By the 1920s this site had become the area's largest industrial park. The railroad's net operating level rose from \$111,893 in 1913 to \$652,071 in 1920 and by 1919 the company claimed twenty per cent of all freight traffic in Akron.²⁵

During its formative years the AC&Y experienced difficulties with Akron's "Big Three". Complaints were numerous and varied. The Pennsylvania, for example, refused repeatedly to grant the AC&Y a physical connection; the B&O charged fifty cents per car more for switching the AC&Y than it did the Erie; and the Erie failed to expedite AC&Y merchandise to Youngstown, Mansfield and other area destinations. Appeals to both the Ohio Public Utilities Commission

and the Interstate Commerce Commission brought satisfaction to the AC&Y, but often after extensive and costly delays. However, the Wheeling & Lake Erie aided the new shortline whenever possible, since the AC&Y had become the Wheeling's entry into Akron.²⁶

The war years saw a major change in the ownership of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown. "Zeb" Davis, in his seventies and desiring to retire ("The confusion and bother of the United States Railroad Administration make me long for the quiet and happiness of my home"), sold portions of his holdings to his long-time friend and legal adviser, H. B. Stewart, Sr., and to F. A. and Willard Seiberling, officers of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, now the road's largest shipper. By 1919 Goodyear acquired controlling interest in the line; in fact, it became the rubber company's transportation division--from unit coal trains between the Goodyear mines at Adena, Ohio and Akron (via W&LE-AC&Y) to McKeen car commuter service for Goodyear employees.²⁷

The March 1, 1920 lease of the moribund Northern Ohio from the New York Central System marked a turning point in the history of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown. The Seiberlings admitted that they desired the Northern Ohio to improve freight connections to the west and northwest. They particularly wanted the Northern Ohio's Columbus Grove interchange with the Detroit, Toledo & Ironton to provide their firm with the best and cheapest route between the Akron plants and the automakers of Detroit. Few officials talked of an eastern extension. The Seiberlings' own study (August 1, 1920) of the area's transportation picture explains this change of mind; the report concluded that "the proposed extensions beyond Mogadore cannot compare with the terminal line between Akron and Mogadore and the newly leased Northern Ohio with its valuable connections...." As H. B. Stewart, Sr., now the line's president, said, "Last year (1920) we were simply a progressive, profitable terminal operation and now we have acquired a railroad nobody really wanted, but a line that is of tremendous potential to our unique traffic (rubber products) situation. We'll never go to Youngstown, Sharon or Canton unless it's a trackage rights agreement." And he asked, "Why go there at all?"²⁸

Construction of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway typifies the development of other shortlines and terminal companies during the closing years of the nation's railroad expansion. Built largely as a response to transportation needs and abuses, the AC&Y provided a variety of Akron shippers with dependable and reasonably priced rail service. As with many contemporary railroad projects, entrenched steam roads expressed concern and even demonstrated hostility toward a new line independent of their control. Yet, the AC&Y, unlike the vast majority of new roads opened after 1910, proved profitable. The railroad became tangible proof that a line connecting Akron with the Wheeling & Lake Erie at Mogadore made sense, but it took Zebulon W. Davis's foresight and business acumen to show that the

AC&Y was "A road with a bright future...." Those promoters, however, who dreamed about a railroad from Akron into western Pennsylvania or to Canton never got the change to prove their point, for the Akron, Canton & Youngstown never reached two of the three cities in its corporate name.

Footnotes

¹A Centennial History of Akron, 1825-1925 (Akron: The Summit County Historical Society, 1925), 627-628. See also Akron Beacon & Republican, March 14, 1891.

²"History of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railroad Company," (Akron, ca. 1965), 2.

³Edward Hungerford, The Story of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928 in 2 vols.), II, 172; Akron Daily Beacon, February 5, 1890.

⁴Among the Akron backers of the Pittsburgh, Akron & Western were manufacturers David E. Hill, Lewis Miller and Col. A. L. Conger. Hill headed the Hill Sewer Pipe Company (later American Sewer Pipe), Miller led the farm machinery firm of Aultman, Miller & Company, and Conger served as president of Akron Steam Forge Company and several other local industries.

⁵Poor's Manual of Railroads (New York: H. V. & H. W. Poor, 1901), 309; Thirty-Fourth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Railroads and Telegraphs (Columbus: F. J. Heer, 1902), 112-113.

⁶Akron Beacon & Republican, June 6, 1891; The New London Record, April 9, 1891; "Preliminary Report on the Akron, Ohio Railroad Situation," (Akron, 1892), in AC&Y Papers.

⁷Ibid., 6-7.

⁸"Report and Estimates Relating to the Completion of as Much of the Akron and New Castle Railroad as Lies Between Akron and Mogadore, Ohio," (Cleveland, 1906), 1-2, in AC&Y Papers (hereafter cited as "Hosea Paul Report.")

⁹Ibid.; Akron Beacon & Republican, July 31, 1893; October 17, 1894; Philip D. Jordan, Ohio Comes of Age, 1873-1900 (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1943), 214-215, 304.

¹⁰"The Northern Ohio Railway Company Secretary's Minutes," Book I, 15, 23, 56-61, in AC&Y Papers.

¹¹Ibid., 73, 91-101; "Hosea Paul Report," 4-5.

¹²Ibid., 5, 9-10; Akron Beacon Journal, February 1, 1902.

¹³"Hosea Paul Report," 10.

¹⁴Ibid.; See also "Northern Ohio Railway Company Secretary's Minutes," Book II, 11-15.

¹⁵"Memorandum from Arkon Clay Products Company to Northern Ohio Railway Company," August 24, 1899, 1-7; H. B. Stewart, Sr. Memorandum, ca. September 1908, 2-13, both in AC&Y Papers.

¹⁶Akron Beacon Journal, February 1, 1902.

¹⁷Ibid., June 24, 1903; September 14, 1905; August 1, 1906; "Hosea Paul Report," 17.

¹⁸"Richland & Mahoning Railway Company Record of Proceedings," Book I, 1-31, 277-283, in AC&Y Papers. French's Lake & River Railway included his Mansfield Short Line Railway, the Ashland & Wooster (later Ashland & Western), and the Bellaire, Zanesville & Cincinnati Railway.

¹⁹Letter to Z. W. Davis from C. W. French, Canton, Ohio, March 16, 1906, in AC&Y Papers; Memorandum, June 7, 1909 in ibid.

²⁰Ibid.; Edward T. Heald, The Stark County Story (Canton: Stark County Historical Society, 1950 in 4 vols.), II, 596-5991

²¹"Hosea Paul Report," 7-8.

²²"Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway Company Minute Book I," 62, 101, 106, in AC&Y Papers; Memorandum, June 7, 1909 in ibid.

²³Akron Beacon Journal, June 17, 1910; "Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway Company Minute Book I," 56.

²⁴H. B. Stewart, Sr. Memorandum, ca. September 1908, 7-9; "Report to Mr. Z. W. Davis on the Proposed Extension of the Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway," (New York, 1909), 2-21, in AC&Y Papers; Akron Beacon Journal, June 30, 1911; "Akron, Canton & Youngstown Railway Company Minute Book I," 220-223.

²⁵Ibid., 173-174, 294; Akron Beacon Journal, November 8, 1919; Poor's Manual of Railroads (New York: Poor's Publishing Company 1921), 1852.

²⁶Akron Beacon Journal, December 5, 1912; January 7, 1916; July 6, 1916; June 27, 1917. The three railroads, particularly the Baltimore & Ohio, opposed the AC&Y according to Z. W. Davis, "because they see us tapping the East Akron territory which has long been under their control...(They) bitterly resent our presence." Letter from Z. W. Davis to H. B. Stewart, Sr., Canton, Ohio, July 9, 1914, in AC&Y Papers.

²⁷Akron Beacon Journal, November 29, 1919; Alva W. Hochberg Oral History, August 14, 1973, 8, in AC&Y Papers.

²⁸Akron Beacon Journal, March 3, 1920; Karl H. Grismer, Akron and Summit County (Akron: Summit County History Society, n.d.), 805-806; Harriet Taylor Upton, History of the Western Reserve (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1910 in 2 vols.), I, 842; Simeon D. Fess, ed., Ohio: A Four-Volume Reference Library (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1937), IV, 13; "Report on the Proposed AC&Y Extensions," (Cleveland, 1920), 4, 7-9, 11-22, 40; undated clipping from the Commercial & Financial Chronicle, in AC&Y Papers.