



# Lexington's Final Chapter

Stephen P. Brown

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the removal of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway's main line through downtown Lexington, Kentucky. To some, the Lexington Subdivision may only be considered a branch line, or even a spur, but for those of us who live in the area and embarked for points east on the George Washington and the Sportsman, it was a very memorable route and a very important one to those it served along the way. The ceremonial "pulling of the spikes" was a moment of victory for those involved in getting Lexington to move forward and progress economically, yet they felt that while the railroad's "final chapter" was being written for downtown Lexington, a brand new beginning was east of downtown on Delaware Avenue, with the new depot, awaiting its travelers.

Starting some 157 years ago, seven miles of track was laid when the Kentucky legislature first granted a charter to the Lexington and Ohio Railroad Company. Seven spike were driven into stone sills commemorating the seven one-mile sections of the track. It seemed fitting that when the rails were pulled, a similar ceremony would take place. Lexington city officials took a holiday with a train ride to nowhere and back, as the last train from downtown Lexington pulled out of the Rose Street Station.

Cannons boomed a seven gun salute as dignitaries, led by the City Commissioner, pulled the spikes, and a crane lifted the first section of track. Some two hundred officials and guests entrained for the final ride across city streets and back on the new route. But, while citizens and other officials were applauding their achievements and sounding their cry for progress, one railroad veteran was quoted as having second thoughts. Gene Warner, a freight car repairman and inspector for some 49 years, reminisced of another era. As an apprentice in 1917, Warner, then seventeen years of age, handled the sledge that drove home the spikes that were pulled that day. He was recalling the days when there were no torches to cut through track, just the use of "bull chisels," wielded by section hands.

There were very few younger people in attendance, not many middle-aged, but most were Lexington's senior citizens for whom the railroads brought them the age of the "iron horse," which ruled as the leader in long distance travel.

The Lexington-Leader, the city's evening paper at that time, best captured the feeling of the December day in 1968, by reporting, "For one city official the downtown depot closing must mingle some personal relief with the satisfaction of writing history through progress. City Commissioner, Tom Underwood, Jr., labored for four years hustling freight at the C&O station. M. M. Harnett, a C&O conductor since 1932, and a 47 year railroad man, sounded the final ALL ABOARD..." It further reported, "as Christmas shoppers paused to watch the parade and the nearly 1,000 local old-timers gathered threatened to overflow wherever one looked. For the last time railroad crossing warning lights choked traffic in the downtown streets and Lexington, Kentucky began writing a new page in its history."

As the last train left Lexington's downtown depot, it became the first train to christen a new connector link to the old northern loop track around the city. It would cross the new steel railroad bridge at North Broadway and pass over the new rubber grade crossing, which was the first of its kind in Kentucky, at the Winchester Road, both of which still exist today. The modern pastel blue depot on Delaware Avenue still stands and serves as the home of a computer company. It would only be three short years before passenger service on the C&O was gone forever.

Lexington today is a rapidly growing city. New office towers revamp the skyline, shopping centers seem to grow like grass, and the leaders for the past twenty years have seen great success, with the birth of a new Lexington. But have they? The belief that railroads, particularly passenger service, would play an important part in Lexington's future, has been lost.

The contract, signed in 1966, that made the downtown track relocation project come to pass, was finalized by Charles Wylie, then Mayor of Lexington, by presenting a check for \$1,142,800.00 to Hays Watkins, Jr., Vice President of Finance of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, for some eighty acres of right-of-way property, thus sending what was part of one of the first railroads west of the Alleghany Mountains into the history books.

(The author wishes to thank the Greater Lexington Chamber of Commerce for the use of their archives.)



An aerial view of Lexington Union Station (preceding page) reveals steam power with C&O blue and yellow cars bound for Louisville. Photo courtesy of the Greater Lexington Chamber of Commerce. This page, BOTTOM: The near-by freight station was converted for passenger use after the closing of Union Station and before the construction of the Delaware Avenue depot (CSPR 10468.3). See the August, 1986 issue of the Magazine for another view of this station. RIGHT & BELOW: An E8 threads its train through downtown Lexington and then is gone. A short time later its pathway has been converted to parking and the site of Union Station (TOP CENTER) has been obscured with a large commercial structure (CSPR numbers not available).



Yardmaster W. B. Golden maintains a lonely vigil at the C&O's empty Delaware Avenue station after the end of passenger service in May, 1971. Lexington Herald photo, author's collection.



The hustle and bustle of travelers will never again be heard at the Delaware Avenue station. The George Washington has made its final departure for Ashland, Kentucky and beyond. Lexington Herald photo, author's collection.



Mentor Systems, Inc., a computer software company now occupies the former C&O station. Photo by the author.

