

By Howard Wayt

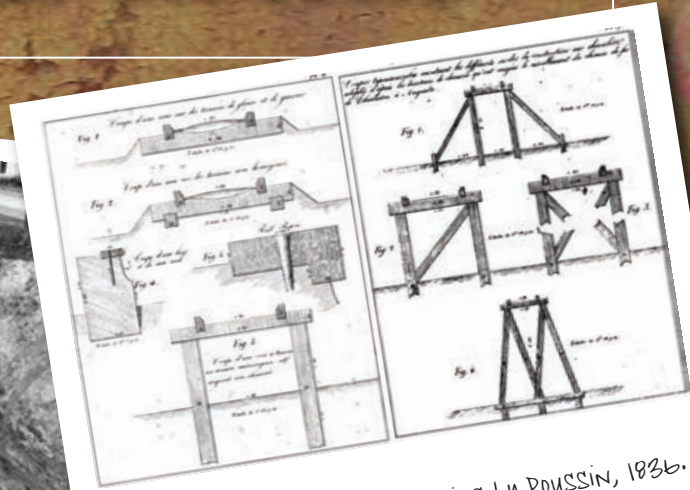
# WHEN LONGLEAF RULED THE RAILS



The Gregg-Graniteville Archives,  
UNIVERSITY of South CAROLINA Aiken.



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FROM CHEMINS DE FER AMERICAINS by POUSSIN, 1836.

The wooden frame I held in my cotton-gloved hands was intricately pierced and carved, with gold-leaf around the edges. Professor Deborah Tritt, in charge of the Gregg-Graniteville Archives at the University of South Carolina Aiken, had presented it to me for my inspection. It held a photograph of the steam locomotive Best Friend of Charleston probably taken in the 1930's. Not of the real one, of course, but of the replica built by the Southern Railway for publicity in 1929. The original Best Friend blew up in 1831, long before photography was even invented. It was a nice picture, very evocative of the time, but one I had seen many times before. There was a tiny brass plaque nailed to the frame below the picture. I didn't bother to read it.

"The frame is made from some railroad wood," said Deborah in a rather casual way as I was about to put it down.

"What railroad wood?"

"From the railroad tracks they found."

"...Whaaaaat?" I looked closer. I had been fooled by the dark wood stain, but flipping the frame over revealed lighter patches where the aged pine wood color and grain showed through untinted. Construction workers had found those tracks in 1944 when digging sewer line trenches in nearby Warrenton, SC, four feet down in the damp, sandy soil. They belonged to the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company (SCRR), the first railroad in the South, and were part of a railroad mainline that, at 136 miles, was the longest in the world in 1833. Back

then even the rails had been made of wood and were only capped with a thin bar of English-rolled iron to protect them from the wear of iron wheels. "The wood was the Southern pine," former Chief Engineer Horatio Allen would reminisce fifty years later, "the hard, resinous surface of which was as suitable for the iron bars as wood could be." Given that they were using virgin timber stands, most of his "Southern pine" was probably longleaf.

Well, well, two-hundred-year-old longleaf pine. It looked good for its age, considering it had been buried in the ground for nearly one hundred years before being unearthed. South Carolina Governor Hayne and his entourage had rolled over that wood in 1833 on their way to Augusta, GA in celebration of the completion of the railroad. When the track had been unearthed in 1944, Graniteville Company President S.H. Swint, excited by the find, had paid for excavation and documentation, and had taken a big piece of wood out and had this frame made from some of it as a souvenir. I squinted at the little brass plaque. In tiny letters it read, "The frame was carved from piling used in constructing the original road between Charleston and Hamburg." That'll teach me – I should have known better than to skip the plaque. If Deborah hadn't said anything I might never have known.

The railroad used that pine for everything, not just for the tracks, but for sheds, shanties and depots of all kinds, turntables, railroad cars – they even burned it in the boilers of

their locomotives to generate steam. The *Best Friend of Charleston*, the first steam locomotive put into regular service on a railroad in the U.S., was operated by the SCCRR beginning in 1830, and was likely

Recently uncovered by storm-water erosion, the tracks have sprouted from the forest floor much like the longleaf pines that now tower overhead. Laid down when Andrew Jackson was still President of the United States, weathered but still mostly intact, those longleaf pine rails now show us just how “suitable for the iron bars” they really were. Thanks to the careful work of archaeologists we now know that there is far more of that pine down there in the sand and clay waiting for us, much of it as solid as the day it was hewn. The existence of those tracks is just beginning to be recognized as potentially one of the most important historical discoveries in a

century, encompassing what are believed to be the only intact examples of iron-capped wooden rails in existence. Yet they emerge from the white sand of Hitchcock Woods in such a subtle and understated way that you might pass right over them without even knowing they were there or what they were. Long forgotten, it’s almost as if they had buried themselves, waiting to re-emerge at just the right time, hoping they would be recognized and remembered.

Waiting to remind a disposable society of what permanence could be achieved with resinous wood and imagination. Waiting for their resurrection so as to bear witness of a time when pine fueled the South, and longleaf ruled the rails. Waiting no more, revealed at last.

I passed the frame back to Deborah, who put it gently away.

*The Hitchcock Woods Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that is solely responsible for the ecological stewardship and management of Hitchcock Woods, the largest privately owned urban forest in the country, with over 2,100 acres of forestland resources and 70 miles of sandy trails that provide access to a stunning variety of ecosystems. The Foundation’s work is made possible thanks to donor support. To learn more about Hitchcock Woods and the Foundation’s work visit [www.hitchcockwoods.org](http://www.hitchcockwoods.org).*



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often fueled by longleaf pine, though obviously any wood would, and did, do. Before the invention of headlamps, they even burned pitch-pine torches to light the way of night trains, also a first.

But the tracks were the main consumers of longleaf, with crews cutting a two-hundred-foot-wide swath through the countryside to provide the wood necessary for building them. Ancient longleaf pines were cut down, split, and hewn into timbers sometimes as big as one-foot square in section and as long as could be got from the tree. These timbers became sills, laid on the ground in long parallel lines across marshes, swamps and streams to provide a stable, firm base for the cross-ties and rails to mount to. Where the land dipped low, they cut pine piles and drove them deep in the soil, sometimes twenty-five feet down, building wooden trestles where others would have raised earthen roadbeds. Across those sills, piles, and trestles they ran mile after mile of pine cross-ties, and then pine rails topped with those thin, flat, iron bars.

Today you can see those same iron bars still spiked to their pine rails in the Hitchcock Woods of Aiken, SC, not far from either Warrentonville or the Gregg-Graniteville Archives.



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