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CENTRAL OF GEORGIA RY

“The Right Way”



⚡ BLUE & GRAY BEAUTY — There’s no mistaking the lineage of Central of Georgia E7 #803 in her shiny blue and gray dress with black banding. On this sunny afternoon in 1953, she’s in charge of Local #4 seen departing from Birmingham Terminal Station for Columbus, Georgia. In a rare passenger appearance, GP7 #130 is along to help with an unusually heavy consist. In less than a year, the colorful local would make its last run. (*Ed Dismukes*)

As this text illustrates, the decades following World War II brought sweeping changes to Birmingham’s railroads. The transition from steam to diesel power was just the beginning of a transformation that eventually would strip most lines of their former identities through mergers and consolidations. One of the first roads to succumb to this change was Central of Georgia Railway Co. or “Central” as local railroaders knew it. Remembered for friendly crews and colorful diesels, Central’s disappearance into the vast Southern Railway System (“Southern”) in 1963 heralded the eventual loss of most distinguishing characteristics of Birmingham’s railroads from the “last golden era.”

What came to be known as Central of Georgia’s Birmingham District was formed, as were most railroads during that time, by the piecemeal acquisition of existing short lines and branches. The Central Rail Road & Banking Company, holding company of Central of Georgia Railroad, owned a handful of small connecting lines throughout Georgia. In 1875, the banking company acquired The Western Railway of Alabama between Montgomery and West Point, Georgia. As part of the deal, it also acquired a 29-mile branch between Columbus, Georgia

and Opelika, Alabama, which in 1882 was conveyed to the banking company’s Columbus & Western Railway (“C&W”).

C&W already owned a line from Opelika to Goodwater, and only 68 miles to the west lay Birmingham, with its vast mineral resources and growing iron industry. To reach the “Magic City,” construction engineers were faced with surveying a grade across the mountainous terrain lying along the borders of Jefferson and Shelby counties. Two tunnels had to be bored; first, the 2,431-foot Rattlesnake Tunnel through Coosa Mountain, followed by the smaller, 1,198-foot bore through Oak Mountain. From Oak Mountain, the line descended onto a 665-foot wooden trestle over the Birmingham - Atlanta main line of Southern subsidiary Georgia Pacific. After crossing the trestle, the railroad curved westward down a long fill through the town of Leeds. Just west of Leeds, Central would construct the 12-mile Margaret branch northward to tap the Cahaba coal field.

The new line then proceeded across the Cahaba River before joining Southern’s grade near McCombs for a parallel ascent up Rose Hill to the junction at Weems. From Weems, Central