

VITAL RAILS

The Charleston & Savannah Railroad and the Civil War in Coastal South Carolina

H. David Stone, Jr.

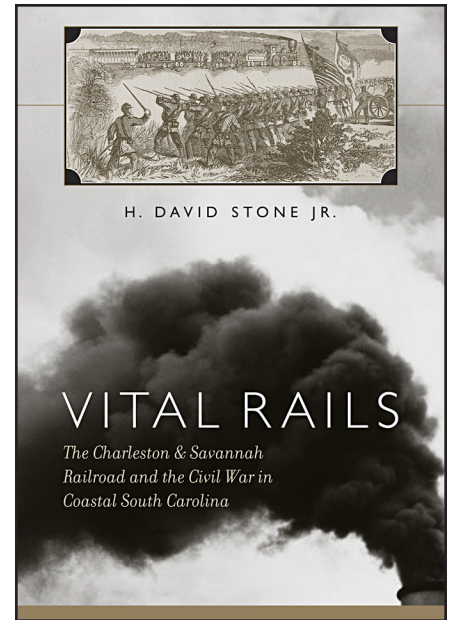
Completed in 1860 and spanning more than one hundred miles across rice fields, salt marshes, and seven rivers and creeks, the Charleston & Savannah Railroad was designed to revolutionize the economy of South Carolina's lowcountry by linking key port cities. With the onset of the Civil War, the railroad became an integral part of the Confederacy's military, economic, and communications efforts along the coast and a frequent military objective of Union assaults. In *Vital Rails*, H. David Stone, Jr., provides the first detailed recounting of the C&S line's history and of the railroad's valuable role in the Civil War.

Originally conceived as a means to stave off commercial isolation in Charleston and Savannah by placing the cities on the shortest trade route between the Northeast and the Gulf Coast, the C&S was chartered by a coalition of lowcountry planters, merchants, and politicians. Construction was aided by state government funding and completed by crews of slaves just prior to the onset of war. Following the Union capture of Port Royal in November 1861, the railroad's importance became not only economic but also logistical as a communications line and troop transport for the Confederacy. From November 1861 to March 1862, while commanding coastal forces, General Robert E. Lee supervised construction of the line's fortifications and situated his headquarters near it at Coosawhatchie in Beaufort District.

The railroad was essential in containing Union attacks on Charleston after the capture of Beaufort. In total the C&S was the objective of eight battles and skirmishes with Union forces—including the Battles of Pocotaligo in May and October of 1862 and the Battle of Honey Hill in November 1864. It was not until General William T. Sherman's army took Savannah in December 1864 that the Union forces had the strength to mount a successful campaign against the railroad.

Left in financial ruin after the war, the C&S faced a series of bankruptcies before its route's eventual incorporation into one of the most important commercial transportation arteries on the eastern seaboard, the Plant System, later the Atlantic Coast Line, the Seaboard Coast Line, and finally CSX Transportation. In mapping this first full history of the railroad, Stone has arduously sifted through company records, annual reports, and other public and private documents to record fully the story of the C&S and of the men—including William J. Magrath, R. L. Singletary, and Henry S. Haines—who managed it during wartime with resourcefulness and a strong sense of their role in defending South Carolina.

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H. David Stone, Jr. is a physician in Florence, South Carolina. He is a graduate of Furman University and the University of South Carolina School of Medicine.

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