In the early 1900s, a bit of sophistication came to Fluvanna County. The glamorous-sounding Virginia Airline Railway, headed by a hype man called “Captain,” connected the county to such exotic places as Chicago, New York and Charlottesville.

Towpath becomes railroad

Before the railroads, Fluvanna relied on the county’s two canals for transportation. After Union troops trashed the canals in 1865, the Richmond & Allegheny (R&A) Railroad purchased the James River canal and converted its towpath to a rail bed. As part of the purchase, the R&A agreed to upkeep the Rivanna canal. When the behemoth C&O Railroad gobbled up the R&A, this changed.

The C&O started to neglect the little Rivanna canal. Fortunately, Fluvanna had a very clever legislator. Delegate A.J. Taylor made sure that if navigation on the Rivanna was ever discontinued, the C&O must make up for it by building a railroad branch in the county. Fluvanna officials dragged the C&O before the State Corporation Board (SCC) and won. The C&O was going to be held up to its part of the deal.

Troy blows through

But the C&O didn’t get to be one of the largest railroads in the country for nothing. Wanting to avoid union wages and bureaucratic red tape, the company set up a shell company called the Virginia Airline Railway. They brought Captain T.O. Troy to the county to make sure things were done to its liking.

Partly due to the public relations efforts of Troy, county officials were not aware of his relationship with the C&O and the agreement that the C&O would impose freight tariffs on the line.

The C&O used the Fluvanna branch to connect two of its larger lines. It connected the line along the James that took freight and passengers as far as the Western states with a northern line that ran all the way to New England. As a perk, it would carry local freight and passengers.

It was the best of both worlds. You could ride from Bremo to Boston, Palmyra to Wildwood.

The railway was built in sections using mules and wagon. Mules furnished power for everything. As many as six were hitched to a plow. They were known around the county for having more power than a Caterpillar tractor. One mule, “Scott” even made local appearances as the “kickin’est mule in seven counties!”

The line was completed in 1908. The 30-mile stretch began near Bremo and stopped in Albemarle County. The first train ran May 1, 1908. On its maiden run, students from Palmyra School boarded the train and rode it to Wildwood. They had to walk back to school. Since there was no turnaround in the county, the engine had to back all the way to its starting point in Louisa.

By the end of 1908 the C&O purchased all of Virginia Airline Railway’s stock. Troy was then named president of the railway’s operations. The C&O, who now technically owned the railroad, kept a low profile since the federal government has not officially allowed the Airline to become part of its larger railroad system.

Monopoly troubles

The C&O began using more and more of the railroad and starting forcing off local freight by raising the rate. The Fluvanna Farmers Association dragged the C&O in front of the SCC and alleged that the C&O was now operating the Airline as a part of its regular system. The SCC ruled in the farmer’s favor and forced the railroad to lower its rates.
In 1912, the C&O made it official. It legally acquired the Railway’s tracks, land and equipment.

Early 20th Century rail

The railroad became a daily part of Fluvanna life. Railroad stations littered the countryside. Riders could also catch the train at “flag stops,” where passengers could display a flag in order to catch the train. Many students in the southern half of the county used flag stops to catch the train to the high school at Palmyra.

Mr. Claude Petit made the most dramatic use of a flag stop. On dark winter mornings, he would roll up a newspaper, set it ablaze and wave it at the accommodating engineer who would recognize his unusual flag and bring the train to a stop.

The train moved Fluvanna livestock, sorghum molasses, tobacco, corn, pulpwood, firewood, turkeys, chickens and rabbits. One could catch the train to Charlottesville, get a haircut and be home in time for dinner.

Fluvanna stations

Like the canals before it, business thrived around the stations. Here's a list of some of the busier stops in the county.

- **Cohasset** served the Fork Union area. FUMA cadets would depart and arrive there. There was also a cannery, hotel and oil business.
- **Carysbrook** became a thriving business center. There was an impressive store with an elevator, school and post office located behind what is now the Carysbrook complex.

- **Palmyra** flourished during the height of the railroad. Residents built sidewalks, new homes, a church and two hotels.
- **Wildwood** had two blacksmiths, two livestock yards, a wood yard and general store. This stop became known for its delicious drinking water flowing from a lithia spring. Passengers would disembark and bring back gallons of water to the train.
- **Troy** started out being called Clarksland and had a small stop with a modest shed. When a grander and more official-looking railroad station was built, Captain Troy was on hand for the groundbreaking. He brazenly cut down a persimmon tree–Fluvanna's official symbol–and announced that "the keystone of the community's future prosperity would thereafter bear his own name."

Fond memories

Many long-time residents still remember the Virginia Railway. Palmyra folks would pause to listen to the clatter of the heavy coal trains chugging up the hill just before the village. During World War II, the military sent special trains over the Airline carrying freight and men. Fork Union residents remember waving to the soldiers as they passed through town.

It was a special treat to eye the sleek "Southern Crescent." Sometimes Pullman cars came through, each window lit by a small shaded lamp. These trains were known for their distinct and beautiful whistles, so different from the local train.

If any work needed to be done, the railroad would bring in a work train, or “shanty train.” These camp cars served as living quarters for the workers, a motley crew of characters. They were described by one Fluvanna resident as “almost as exciting as the coming of the gypsies.”

Roads improved

In 1932, three major roads in Fluvanna were hard-surfaced and rail travel began to decline. By the 1950s, passenger travel was reduced to one car tacked to the end of the freight train. By the late ‘60s, freight traffic had dwindled to an average of two cars per week.

In 1971 the C&O announced it was abandoning the Airline altogether. After four years of legal wrangling, the Interstate Commerce Commission gave its blessing to officially shut down the line. In 1977 workers began to dismantle the tracks and the last of track was removed Aug. 25, 1978. Honeysuckle, thickets and cedar trees now obscure the track.

Now a walking trail

Thanks to a Fluvanna grassroots organization, part of the old Virginia Airline Railway bed is now a walking trail. The Fluvanna Heritage Trail Foundation purchased a section of the right of way in Palmyra and volunteers converted it to a trail in 2004.

You can access it by parking at the small lot directly across from the new courthouse in the Palmyra village. Hikers are cautioned to stay on the old bed while hiking and to avoid the steep cliffs on the riverside. The walk is easy, however; be on the lookout for a few small tree stumps and an uneven trail in some places. There are winter views of the Rivanna.

There are benches along the trail and picnic facilities soon to come.

Ultimately this trail will be connected to the Palmyra Mills site and to the Heritage Trail at Pleasant Grove by a new Rt. 15 replacement bridge.

It is approximately two-thirds of a mile long.

The information in this article was taken from Noel Harrison's article, "Years with the Airline," published in the Fluvanna County Historical Society's Bulletin, No. 37, April 1984. You may find it in the county library at Carysbrook.

Sally Browning was editor of the Fluvanna Review from 2003 to 2008. This story first ran in the Fluvanna Review in Jan. 6, 2005.