

The Georgia Rail Road Depot on Carr's Hill

by Gary L. Doster

This essay is based on Gary Doster's presentation to the Athens Historical Society on March 20, 2016, at the Russell Special Collections auditorium at the University of Georgia.

The most important event that ever occurred in the history of East Athens was the coming of the railroad and the establishment of the depot on Carr's Hill in 1840. The track was terminated and the depot built on the east side of the river because it would have been very expensive to build trestles across Trail Creek and the Oconee River to bring the railroad into Athens. In addition, Athenians may have been like the citizens of Lexington in Oglethorpe County, and they just did not want to defile the town's peaceful and tranquil environs.

Commercial freight wagons hauled freight, and an omnibus transported passengers between town and the depot via the covered bridge across the river at the mouth of Trail Creek. It took 42 years before the trestle was built across the creek and river so the train could come all the way into Athens. Moving freight to and from the depot became easier after 1870 when the Athens Street Railroad was incorporated by William Dearing. Dearing's little mule-drawn flatcars traveled on rails attached to cross-ties and delivered freight to and from customers as far as College Avenue.

The Georgia Rail Road was among the very first railroads built in Georgia. It was, in fact, the first railroad charter authorized in Georgia when the state legislature granted a charter to several Augusta businessmen on December 27, 1831, "To authorize the formation of a company for constructing a rail road or turnpike from the city of Augusta to Eatonton and thence westward to the Chattahoochee River, with branches thereto ..." But apparently not many of the citizens of the Augusta community were excited about such an endeavor, and the charter was not activated. Two years later, in December 1833, the legislature granted a similar charter to a group from Athens, and the 1831 charter previously issued by the legislature was cancelled. Two

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other railroad companies also were issued charters in December 1833, and all three began construction in their respective areas (Central Rail Road and Canal Company, from Savannah to Macon, and the Monroe Rail Road Company, from Macon to Griffin). Several other railroads soon followed, and by the 1860s there were more than 15 railroad companies in operation in Georgia.

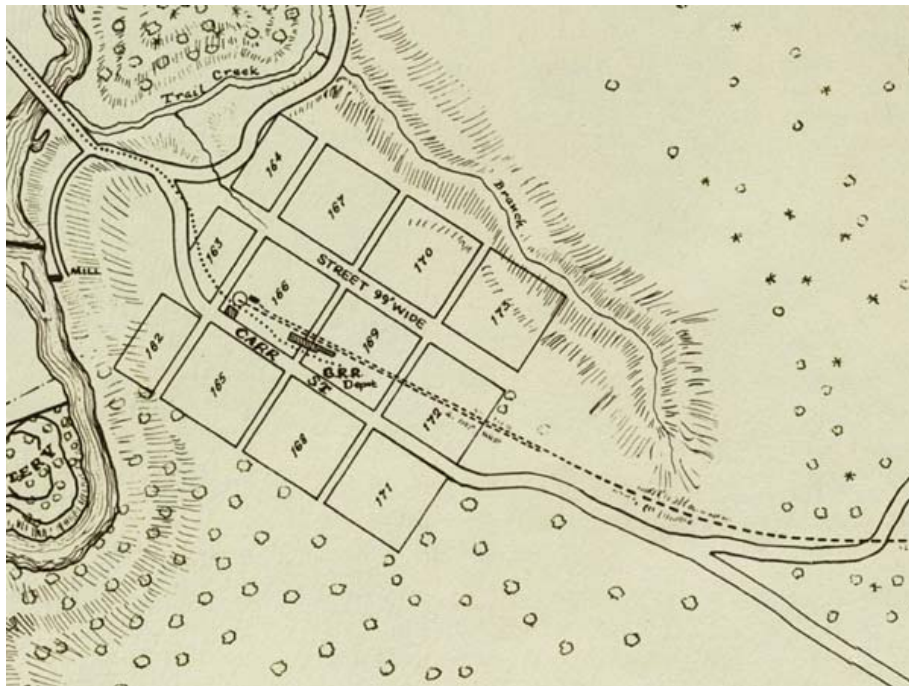


Figure 1. In this excerpt from a map of Athens drawn by William Winstead Thomas in 1874 and reprinted by the Athens Historical Society in 1974, the dotted line from the depot, which crosses the river bridge and continues up Oconee Street Hill, shows the route used by the freight wagons, omnibus, and, after 1870, the Athens Street Railroad.

Carr Street is present-day Oconee Street. The street labeled "Street 99' Wide" is present-day Oak Street. The railroad tracks across lots 166, 169, and 172 became Georgia Depot Street after the railroad was rerouted to a trestle across Trail Creek and the North Oconee River in 1882. Georgia Depot Street was paved in 1955 and the name was changed to Georgia Drive in 1957.

There were only a handful of railroads operating in the United States in 1833 when the first Georgia railroads were chartered, and only one of these was in the South: the South Carolina Canal and Rail Road Company, begun in 1830. Amazingly, by 1833 the South Carolina Rail

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Road was the longest railroad in the world, with 135 miles of track from Charleston to Hamburg (now North Augusta)! Hamburg was just across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia, and the founders of the Georgia Rail Road wanted to run their track from that point into the interior of Georgia.

Information about the beginning of the Georgia Rail Road was published in the July 6, 1833, issue of the *Athens Southern Banner* newspaper. The article reported that a group of Athens citizens met in the Chapel at the University of Georgia on June 26, 1833, to discuss the "... expediency and practicability of building a Rail Road from Athens to Augusta, and concluded with a motion ... that a committee be appointed to draw up a report on the subject and prepare it for consideration at a subsequent meeting." The appointed committee consisted of most of the "movers and shakers" in Athens at that time: James Camak, Augustin Smith Clayton, William Dearing, Judge Charles Dougherty, Edward Harden, John Nisbet, Jacob Phinzy, Stevens Thomas, and William Williams. When Judge Dougherty asked to be excused from serving because it would interfere with his official duties, Asbury Hull was selected to serve in his stead.

The July 6, 1833, newspaper article further stated that three days later, on June 29th, the group met in the Chapel again, and the committee submitted an exhaustive report extolling the virtues and potential benefits of building the railroad. The committee report was signed by Asbury Hull as Chairman and James Camak as Secretary. Included in the report was a resolution that a committee composed of John Addison Cobb, George R. Clayton, Leonidas Franklin, Edward Harden, and Thomas Mitchell prepare a document to present to the next session of the Georgia legislature asking them to grant a charter of incorporation to the group to build the railroad. Another committee, with members James Camak, University of Georgia Professor Jackson¹, William Lumpkin, John Nisbet, and James Shannon, was formed to contact proprietors of other railroads and collect information about building and successfully operating a railroad. A third committee, made up of Augustin Smith Clayton, William Dearing, Asbury Hull, Stevens Thomas, and William Williams, was to solicit input and support from the citizens of the villages and towns between Athens and Augusta through which the railroad would run. Other Athenians known to have been involved in founding the Georgia Rail Road were William R.

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Cunningham, Absalom Janes, Alexander B. Linton, William M. Morton, Elizur Lowrance Newton, and Henry B. Thompson.

When the committee charged with soliciting support from people along the proposed route from Augusta to Athens began their work, the citizens of Oglethorpe County were overwhelmingly in favor of the railroad. In fact, a committee chaired by none other than William Harris Crawford and with esteemed members George Rockingham Gilmer, Joseph Henry Lumpkin, John Billups, and others, passed a resolution approving the venture. Their resolution was published in the *Athens Southern Banner* July 27, 1833, and the committee requested that other newspapers in the state also publish it. However, when track was being laid, some of these same influential citizens of Lexington objected to having the train come through their little town “because of the noise that it made and that it frightened livestock.”² Consequently, their depot was placed three miles away, and the community was named Lexington Depot. Because the railroad depot was located there, the little community prospered, and the name later was changed to Crawford to honor local resident William Harris Crawford.³

Asbury Hull submitted the proposal to the Georgia legislature, and on December 27, 1833, the legislature issued a charter to create the Georgia Rail Road Company. The railroad line itself was to be called the Union Rail Road; however, from the beginning, everyone always called it the Georgia Rail Road, and very few references to the name Union Rail Road are seen.

James Wellborn Camak, grandson of founder and first company president James Camak, wrote a brief history of the Georgia Rail Road that was published in the *Athens Banner* on May 30, 1917. Camak reported that “The first meeting of the stock holders to organize, receive the charter, and elect officers and directors was held in the library of the home of James Camak in Athens on March 10, 1834.”

The charter allowed the company to issue 15,000 shares of stock at \$100 per share. The charter provided for “the formation and completion of a rail road communication between the city of Augusta and some point in the interior of the State, to be agreed upon by the stockholders, ... and the company shall have power to construct three Branch Rail Roads, beginning at the point agreed upon as the termination of the Union Road ... one running to Athens – one to Eatonton – and the third to Madison in Morgan County.” The company appointed agents to sell shares of railroad stock in Appling, Athens,

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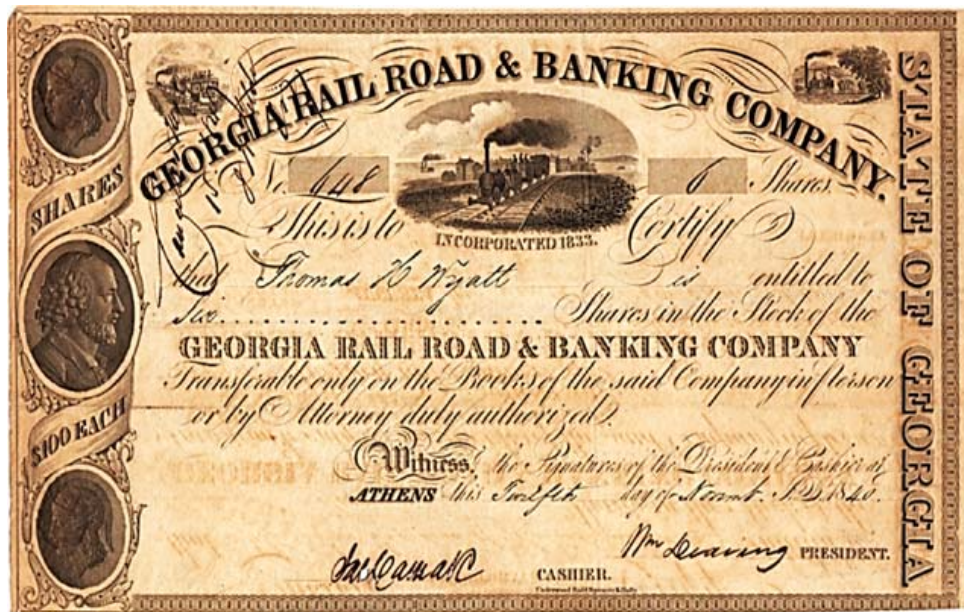


Figure 2. A certificate for six shares of stock in the Georgia Rail Road & Banking Company issued to Thomas H. Wyatt on November 12, 1840, and signed by James Camak as Cashier and William Dearing as President

Augusta, Crawfordville, Eatonton, Greensboro, Lexington, Madison, Sparta, Warrenton, and Washington.

In 1835, the directors of the Georgia Rail Road received permission from the state legislature to allow them “banking privileges,” and on December 18, 1835, the name of the company was changed to Georgia Rail Road and Banking Company. The establishment could now issue banknotes and scrip.

By the summer of 1837, 38 miles of track had been laid from Augusta to a site that later was named Thomson in honor of John Edgar Thomson, a civil engineer from Pennsylvania who had been hired in 1834 at age 26 to oversee the building of the railroad. By the spring of 1840, the railroad bed was graded and track was laid all the way to Union Point.⁴

While work continued on laying track from Union Point to Terminus (later named Atlanta), a 37-mile spur line was completed from Union Point to Athens by late 1840. Some towns along that route that were established or prospered because of the railroad were Woodville (formerly Beeman), Bairdstown (formerly Hurricane Branch), Maxeys (first called Shanty, then Salmonville), Stephens (formerly Antioch Depot), Crawford (formerly Lexington Depot),

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Arnoldsville (first called Edwin or Edwin Post Office), Pope's Station, and Winterville (formerly Winter's Station).



Figure 3. This \$5.00 bill was issued by The Georgia Rail Road and Banking Company in Athens on January 2, 1837, and was redeemable at the branch office in Augusta. It was signed by James Camak as Cashier and William Dearing as President.

The Athens group had, of course, established the headquarters in Athens. However, after the building of the railroad was well underway, some Augusta businessmen succeeded in gaining control of the endeavor, and in May 1841 the headquarters was moved from Athens to Augusta, where it remained for the rest of its existence.

By September 1845, the 172-mile-long railroad was completed from Augusta to Atlanta. Original plans were for the railroad to end in Decatur, but like the residents of Lexington, and maybe Athens, the residents of Decatur did not want it to stop there because they thought it would be a nuisance. In Atlanta, the Georgia Rail Road eventually connected with the Western and Atlantic Rail Road and the Central of Georgia Rail Road; hence the new settlement was called Terminus. The northern limit of the Western and Atlantic Rail Road was Ross' Landing on the Tennessee River, which became Chattanooga. The Central of Georgia Rail Road began in Savannah, went through Macon, and ended in Terminus. Several other railroads also eventually joined together here.

Samuel Mitchell, the man who owned the land where the railroads converged and where the village of Terminus was established, wanted to name the community Lumpkin after former Georgia Governor Wilson Lumpkin, but Lumpkin declined, saying that a county already

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Figure 4. As was common at that time, businesses with “banking privileges” issued currency that benefitted the company in many ways. This is a 50¢ note that was circulated the same as any other form of money, or it could be redeemed for a ten-mile trip on the railroad.

was named for him. Instead, Terminus was rechristened Marthasville in honor of Governor Lumpkin’s daughter Martha. Marthasville flourished and quickly outgrew the “ville” status, and in 1845 J. Edgar Thomson, chief engineer of the Georgia Rail Road, suggested the name Atlanta.⁵

Early in its existence, a steam engine was used to pull the railroad cars from Augusta eastward, but the railroad cars traveling northward on the spur from Union Point to Athens

were pulled by mules. The first railroad passenger cars came into Athens in December 1841, and the first passengers were Mrs. Elizabeth Preston Hodgson (the widow of Edward Hodgson) and three of her children: Anna Blanchall Hodgson, William Valentine Preston Hodgson, and Robert Rowell Hodgson. It was sometime later that the mules were retired and the first steam engine was put into use on the line from Union Point to Athens. One railroad historian claimed that it was as late as 1847 before the first steam locomotive replaced the mules.

On October 31, 1838, in preparation for the railroad to reach Athens, William A. Carr, the owner of 963 acres that made up most of East Athens, gave the use of five acres of land to the railroad upon which the railroad would terminate and where they would build a passenger depot, a freight depot, a warehouse, and other facilities. Carr, then a resident of Leon County, Florida Territory, no doubt realized that this would greatly enhance the value of his remaining 958 acres in Clarke County, Georgia.

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Figure 5. Change bills, or scrip, in the denominations of 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, and 75¢ were issued in 1862 and 1863. The Georgia Rail Road and Banking Company was one of the few Southern banks to survive the War Between the States, and continued to redeem its currency, even into modern times. Most of their bank notes were eventually redeemed and destroyed, and the surviving examples are rare and valuable to collectors. As with most change bills, or fractional notes, of the day, each denomination carried a small image of some commonly known animal. It is said that because a large portion of the population at that time was illiterate, this was to assist them in knowing the value of the different denomination in circulation.

In the very early days of the railroad, a nighttime accident near Union Point resulted in the deaths of two men. The directors immediately decided to forbid further operation of the train after dark. Augustus Longstreet Hull, in his *Annals of Athens, Georgia*, published in 1906, shared his thoughts about this: “There is a delightful simplicity about this. Why should trains be run at night anyhow, when people

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ought to be at home with their families or asleep in bed?” Hull shared another interesting observation about the railroad in his book when he wrote: “Even day trains make far better time than wagon teams, and teamsters used to be satisfied with them. A stage line to a summer resort makes seventeen miles in six hours, and its patrons do not complain, but let them get on a railroad, and if they don’t go that same distance in half an hour their rights are invaded, their dignity is upset, their digestion is impaired, and their religion is seriously threatened!”

After more than 15 years of use, the original depot became outdated and needed to be replaced. On June 25, 1855, Carr gave the railroad an adjoining lot, 75 feet by 190 feet, to build a new brick passenger depot. The deed specified that the railroad would “... erect and finish on said land ... a good substantial brick depot and passenger house with separate rooms, one for ladies and one for gentlemen, finished & furnished in as good stile & as of as good material as the one at Covington in Newton County, the whole house to be not less than one hundred [feet] by forty-five feet ...”

An article in the *Athens Southern Watchman* dated October 11, 1855, lauded the new brick depot under construction and informed the readers that James R. Carlton was doing the brickwork and “Mr. Witherspoon” was superintending the woodwork. Carlton had originally come to Athens in 1830 when he and Ross Crane acquired the contract to rebuild New College on the University of Georgia campus after the original building burned.

In 1882, the railroad built trestles across Trail Creek and the North Oconee River, rerouted the track, and built a new depot in Athens between Foundry Street and the river. The *Athens Banner-Watchman* published a lengthy and informative article in the August 29, 1882, issue entitled “The Georgia Railroad” to let the public know about the progress of the railroad in bringing the train into town:

Meeting a gentleman thoroughly conversant with the affairs of the Georgia railroad Saturday, we asked him when the extension would be completed.

“In time for the fall business” was his reply. “By the 15th of September the track will be completed to the river, when we will fill up the gaps as fast as possible. The new iron bridge is now ready to be put up. We will not get our new depot ready as soon as we would like, owing to the great

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amount of filling we have to do, but temporary sheds will be erected for the transfer of freight and passengers. We hope early in October to have the iron horse panting on Broad Street.”

“Will you not continue to use the old depot?” we inquired?

“Oh, no; it and all buildings around here will be demolished. In fact, I heard Major Green ask if the brick from it would not answer to build abutments. I think they will also tear up the track from here to where the extension begins.”

“I hear that your new depot will not be much larger than the old one.”

“It is a mistake. I have seen the plan and specifications, and it will be much larger and an improvement in every way over the old one. Our new depot is a duplicate of the one in Atlanta, and of the same size. Here we have room for only unloading one car at a time, but in our new quarters we have three doors on each side for this purpose. There are separate rooms for all the officers, instead of being crammed into one apartment, and different ticket offices for both whites and blacks. There will also be five side tracks to furnish plenty of space for moving trains.”

“How is business with you now?”

“It was never better at this season. We are averaging \$300 a day from this point, and, of course, will greatly exceed that when the fall business opens. We are preparing for a big boom with the extension, and on the 1st of October will run three trains a day, including a fast mail that will bring us several hours nearer Atlanta and Augusta. That is, we will run two trains in the day and one at night. We intend to have new coaches, a fine sleeper, and make this a first-class enterprise, and we intend to give it a test.”

“Your expenses will be greatly increased.”

“Yes, but our business [will be increased] commensurately, I think. Travelers have a very poor opinion of a place where they are rattled in on an old antediluvian coach at the speed of twelve or fifteen miles an hour, and are dumped at some insignificant-looking shanty for a depot. But

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with the extension we will have palace coaches, go at lightning speed, and spare neither labor nor money to create a good impression for Athens. It will greatly aid in advertising the place, and her citizens will doubtless show their appreciation by sustaining us.”

The report concluded, “In the last week work has progressed very rapidly on the extension. Hands are now at work lowering the old roadbed nearly three feet to make it correspond with the extension. The deep cut near the depot will be finished this week when, with a short embankment, the road will be graded to the river. The principal work is leveling the ground for the depot, but even this is pushed rapidly forward. The extension will undoubtedly be ready in plenty of time to haul off the new cotton crop.”

Almost three months later, on November 21, 1882, another item in the *Athens Banner-Watchman* informed Athenians that the old railroad depot in East Athens would be torn down as soon as the track extension into Athens was completed. Another brief note followed, announcing that “The new depot is up, and will soon be completed. It is much larger than the old one.”

A note in the *Athens Banner-Watchman* dated July 10, 1883, said that Mr. R.L. Bloomfield was starting a business in Athens to manufacture clay sewer pipes and clay jugs, and that “One of the guano houses at the old Georgia depot has been moved here for a warehouse.” In the same issue of the newspaper there was another item stating that “The track of the Georgia road leading to the old depot has been torn up and the property thereabouts left stranded high and dry.”

Thus ended the 42-year history of the old railroad depot in East Athens. Carr’s deeds of 1838 and 1855 both stipulated that if the railroad ceased to use the land for the intended purpose, ownership would revert to Carr or his heirs. And that is exactly what happened. Florida Carr was successful in reclaiming the abandoned depot property as set forth in the original deeds from her father to the railroad, and sold it to new buyers. The old track bed became Georgia Depot Street, a residential street that remains today; the street was paved in 1955, and the name was changed to Georgia Drive in 1957.

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ENDNOTES

1. It is unclear whether this is Professor Henry Jackson of the University of Georgia Mathematics Department, the brother of the late Georgia Governor James Jackson, and University colleague of the first Georgia Rail Road president James Camak; or refers to Professor James Jackson of the University of Georgia Chemistry and French Departments, nephew of Professor Henry Jackson, son of the late Georgia Governor, and also a long-time member of the University faculty.

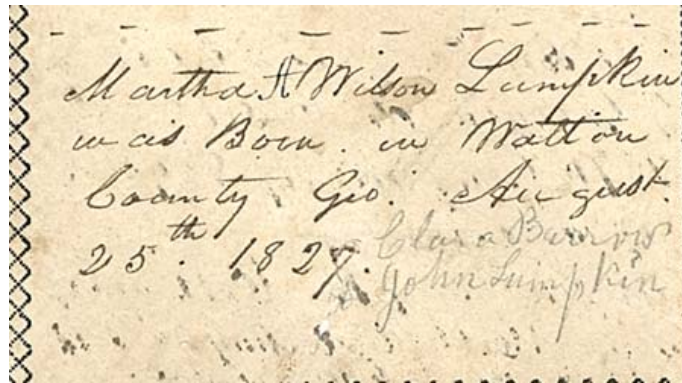
2. Later newspaper articles in 1886 and 1890 recalled that residents of Lexington also were concerned that the railroad would bring smallpox, cholera, and bad women to the community. They soon realized their mistake and petitioned the railroad to run a spur to the depot in Lexington. This was not done; however, half a century later, in 1889, local businessmen financed and built the spur, named Lexington Terminal Railway, which operated under various names until 1947.

3. William Harris Crawford (1772-1834) began his political career as a member of the Georgia House of Representatives from (1803-1807), later served as a United States Senator (1807-1813) and President *pro tempore* of the Senate (1812-1813), before he was appointed United States Ambassador to France by President James Madison in 1813. He returned to the U.S. in 1815 to serve as Secretary of War for a year, before serving as Secretary of the Treasury for three Presidents, from 1816 to 1825.

4. Union Point originally was called Thornton's Cross Roads, which was later changed to Scruggsville for a blacksmith named Scruggs. Railroad officials changed the name to Union Point.

5. When Marthasville was changed to Atlanta, Martha Wilson Lumpkin began to claim that her middle name was Atlanta, and that the town had been named for her a second time! She even went so far as to borrow the Lumpkin Family Bible from a relative, and after it was returned, it was discovered that on the family records page she had added A. as her middle initial, as seen in the image below. When she recorded her marriage to Thomas M. Compton, whom she married in 1878 at age 51, she entered her name as Martha Atlanta Wilson Lumpkin.

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Detail from the Lumpkin Family Bible where Martha Lumpkin added the initial "A." to her name. The Bible entry reads "Martha Wilson Lumpkin was Born in Walton County Geo[rgia] August 25th 1827." Added in pencil in a later hand were the names "Clara Barrow" and "John Lumpkin".

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For reviewing the manuscript and making valuable suggestions, I thank Richelle Brown, Steven Brown, Tom Gresham, Charlotte Thomas Marshall, and Beth Whitlock. I also thank Steven Brown for providing the scans of the pages from the Lumpkin Family Bible and George Cooke's 1846 painting of the end of the Georgia Rail Road on Carr's Hill for my presentation to the Athens Historical Society.