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CHAPTER NINE

TRANSPORTATION IN ROBESON COUNTY

Stephen M. Marson and Rasby Marlene Powell

Ancient Roman civilization discovered centuries ago that the first line of providing economic opportunity is transportation. Since then, nothing has changed except advances in technology have created more efficient modes of transportation. This chapter addresses the various modes of transportation that influence economic development in Robeson County. These include roads, bus travel (nonprofit and for profit), air travel, and rail.

Highways

Governor Cameron Morrison (1921-1925) insisted that North Carolina farmers should have paved roads on which to bring their produce to market. Robeson County, following the lead of the governor, made an aggressive effort, beginning in 1921, to pave all primary and secondary roads in the county. Now, as seen in the chart below, Robeson County is second only to Wake County in the number of miles of roads in the state. In addition, thanks to political foresightedness, state and local administrators negotiated for I-95 to run directly through the center of Robeson County.

In the past, Robeson County was perceived as rural and isolated. Although still rural, it can no longer be considered isolated because of the quality and number of major highways that pass through the county (Fig. 9.1). Two factors mostly account for the large number of highways in Robeson County. First, as stated elsewhere in this book, Robeson is the largest county in the state, in land area. Second, local administrators and politicians have aggressively fought to improve and maintain the roads. Fortunately, the mostly level terrain and good drainage of the county's soils result in less costly maintenance than in some other counties. Even so, Robeson County spends an average of ten million dollars annually improving and maintaining the roads. In 2000, the North Carolina Department of Transportation reported 1,347 miles of paved secondary state roads in addition to 339 miles of primary roads (Interstate, US, and NC highways) in the county.

The high quality of the roads and the fact that a major north-south interstate highway (I-95) runs directly through the middle of the county makes Robeson County a prime location for industrial development. Because I-95 runs through Lumberton, the town has a disproportionate number of hotels and restaurants for its size. Visitors using these accommodations spend money on goods and services within the local economy. In fact, one only need observe all the major national chains that have opened retail stores within the past ten years along the I-95 corridor in Lumberton to recognize the positive impact good transportation routes can have on local economies.

Another major improvement for Robeson County's road system is in the works. Through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), US 74 from Maxton will become

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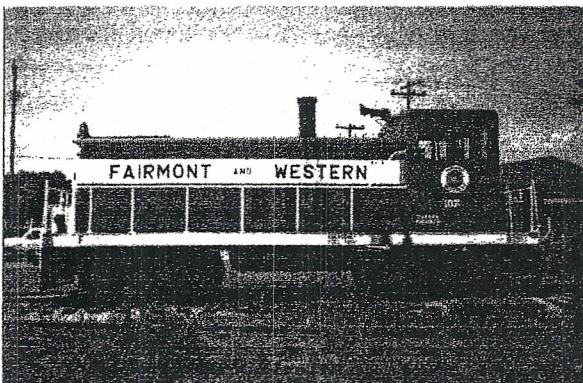
an expressway connecting to I-95. This will ease traffic congestion for people within the county as well as those traveling through the county. Eventually, US 74 will be upgraded to Interstate Highway standards and will be called I-74. A wide range of smaller projects is planned to make connections to I-95 less congested. Additionally, other proposed projects will relieve congestion from targeted intersections in the county.

As illustrated in the map below, a rail transit system between Charlotte and Wilmington is currently under study (Fig. 9. 2). In addition, an additional rail pathway linking Raleigh to the Charlotte, Wilmington path is under consideration. If these railways materialize, the intersection will be located in Robeson County. This would definitely have a positive economic impact on Robeson County. Not only will it provide links to other areas, but it will also provide many labor positions in the county.

Rail Transportation

Rail passenger service declined in Robeson County and throughout the U.S. during the early part of the twentieth century. Several factors led to this decline: advances in the internal combustion engine; improved road systems; and increasing availability of motor vehicles and gasoline and diesel fuel. Thus availability of new modes of transportation coupled with the added convenience of not being tied to railroad routes pushed people off of trains and into cars and buses. However, recent problems caused by these new modes of transportation may, ironically, renew the desirability of train travel.

Pollution from combustion engines is costly and is a major environmental problem. Trains create less pollution than the other major transportation systems. Buses, which are competitors to rail traffic in urban areas, may be on the decline because much of their funding comes from grants for the needy. These grants are expected to diminish greatly as the federal government and states try to balance budgets. In addition, according to one study, 22 percent of elderly bus travelers have difficulty getting on and off of buses. Another drawback for bus travel is that demographic research shows a clear pattern of migration from urban to rural areas as well as higher fertility rates in rural areas. Some long-range planners believe that train travel may provide answers to these problems.



This locomotive was owned by the now defunct Fairmont and Western Railroad, one of two shortlines in Robeson County during the 1980s. Photograph by Tom Ross.

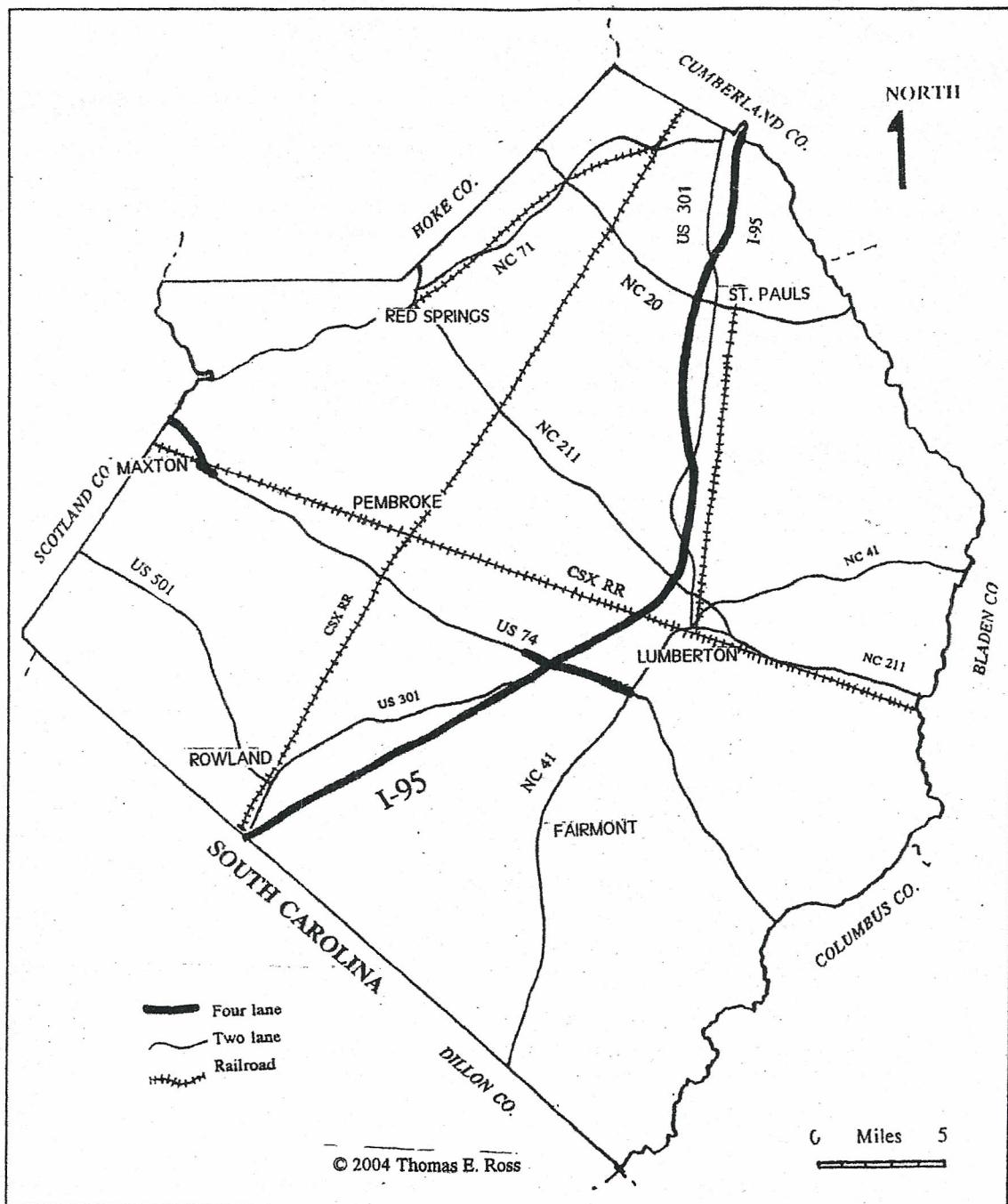


Figure 9.1 Major Land Transportation Routes in Robeson County. (Map constructed by Thomas Ross)

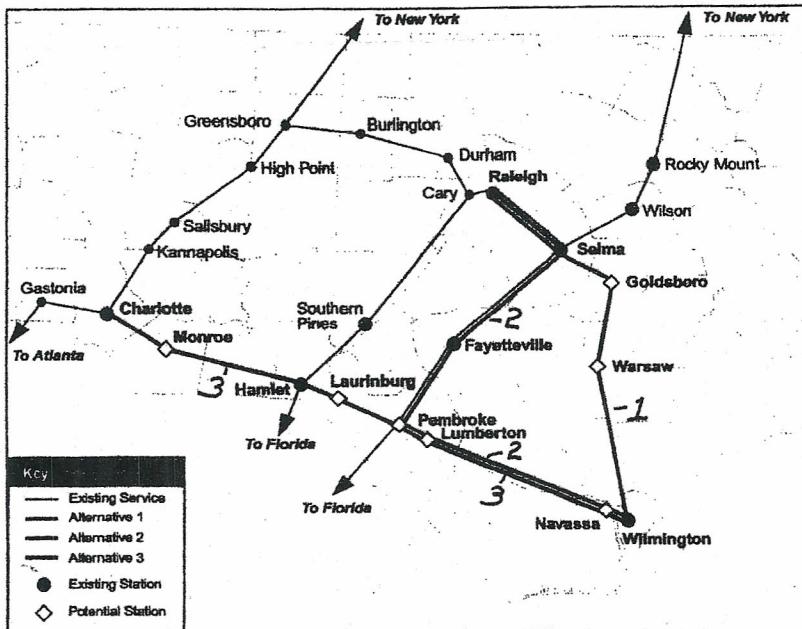
Study Methods

The North Carolina Department of Transportation developed ridership and revenue forecasts for rail service to Wilmington using information assembled for the Southeast High Speed Rail Study (1996) and Piedmont High Speed Corridor Study (1996). The models used to forecast ridership demand incorporated factors such as comparative travel cost, travel time, frequency and other travel characteristics.

Due to the specific markets of interest in this study, additional data about travel origins and destinations was collected along I-40 near Warsaw and US-74 near Lumberton. More than 4,500 travelers were surveyed during two weekends in March 2000. Additional attitudinal surveys were conducted in Wilmington during the October Riverfest and April Azalea Festivals. Also, local business leaders and Chamber of Commerce members participated in surveys about business travel patterns.

The study analyzed five alternatives over three routes:

- 1) Wilmington to Raleigh via Goldsboro with no connections to other routes
- 1a) Wilmington to Raleigh via Goldsboro with connections to the *Carolinian* (and Northeast corridor)
- 2) Wilmington to Raleigh via Fayetteville with no connections to other routes
- 2a) Wilmington to Raleigh via Fayetteville with connections to the *Carolinian* (and Northeast corridor)
- 3) Wilmington to Charlotte with no connections to other routes



Source: North Carolina Department of Transportation Website.

Figure 9.2. Proposed Passenger Rail Corridor Southeastern North Carolina.

Rail transportation is of critical importance to the economic development of the region because it provides a means to move large amounts of freight at less cost than trucking companies. Railroad freight service in the county is provided by the CSX System, a giant railroad conglomerate that is the culmination of mergers of many eastern railroads, including two that traversed Robeson County—the Atlantic Coast Line and the Seaboard Air Line Railroad.

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The first railroad in the county was the Wilmington, Charlotte & Rutherford. It entered the county in 1860, and according to Judge Henry A. McKinnon¹, a noted local historian, ". . . on October 24, 1860, records show that the first train ran from Riverside to a second crossing of Lumber River, just beyond the (present-day) I-95 overpass of the railroad west of Lumberton." During the Reconstruction Period after the Civil War, many miles of track were laid in Robeson County and by ". . . 1920 six different railroad lines were providing service in the county, and three passenger trains passed through Lumberton in each direction daily. Today, Amtrak passenger trains run through the county in a north—south direction, but do not stop.

Non Profit Bus Transportation

Robeson County established its first public bus system during World War II. Although used by the general public, the primary reason the system for the establishment of the system was to get factory workers to and from work. The economic boom after the war enabled most factory workers to afford their own cars. No longer needed, public bus transportation was eliminated. Although records no longer exist, oral history suggests that the elimination occurred around the late 1940s or early 1950s.

It was not until 1976 that Robeson County acquired another nonprofit bus system. As part of their effort to identify social problems, the Robeson County Church and Community Center (RCCCC) observed that handicapped citizens were having transportation difficulties. These citizens had no way to get to the Department of Social Services or to appointments with their physicians. Reverend Robert Mangum, the first executive director of RCCCC, spearheaded a successful transportation grant from the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT). The grant included funds for one van, partial servicing of the van, and partial staffing to handle transportation related issues. Their mission was limited to "urgent" transportation needs of the "handicapped."

Further grants were secured from 1985-1987 to fund non-emergency travel needs for the handicapped and elderly. For example, the new vans could be used to transport the qualified persons to shop, pay bills, and non-emergency medical visits. During 1989 and 1990, additional grants were secured to provide long distance medical transportation to locations outside the county. Many clients were being referred by local physicians to specialists at Duke Medical Center, more than 100 miles away, but many patients had no way to get there. During this same time period, a county-funded contract to transport economically-disadvantaged kidney dialysis patients to dialysis units was turned over to RCCCC when a local ambulance company failed to do an adequate job. By this time, the county had procured 10 vans.

¹Henry A. McKinnon, Jr. County has near record straight line. *The Robesonian*. January 5, 1992, p. C1.

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Taking their lead from RCCCC, the city of Lumberton also wrote and received transportation grants. However, the city's grants limited their service to needs within the city limits while RCCCC could use vans to provide services county-wide and for long-distance medical travel.

Over time, RCCCC administrators realized that they were neglecting their overall mission because they were overwhelmed by the job of administering the transportation services. The tasks of scheduling, as well as hiring and keeping good staff became overly cumbersome. Bookkeeping became such a nightmare that administrators could not accurately determine the cost of the transportation program. The city was experiencing similar problems. To alleviate these problems, both RCCCC (in 1996) and the city of Lumberton (in 1998) transferred the transportation program to the Lumber River Council of Governments (COG).

Established in 1972, COG's primary purpose is to identify local and regional needs and locate the resources to address these needs fairly and effectively. COG offers a wide range of macro and micro services to governments and other institutions in a four-county rural environment. COG elected to administer the transportation program through the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) because a majority of clients were elderly. Under the management of Betty Rising, the Director of AAA, another matching fund grant was secured from the NCDOT, and the transportation program quadrupled in two and one-half years. During this period, ten more vans were added to the original fleet of nine inherited from RCCCC. Eight of the vans were purchased with matching funds from the county while the other two were purchased with matching funds from the Smart Start Program.

AAA staff members soon found that the rapid growth of the transportation program was taking so much of their time that they could no longer fulfill their original mission to the elderly. Instead of focusing primarily on meeting the needs of the elderly, staff members were dividing their time among Medicare patients, sheltered workshop clients, community mental health patients, kidney dialysis patient, Smart Start clients, welfare recipients, low wage workers, and the elderly. During the summer of 1999, COG administrators realized the rapid growth of the transportation needs required an additional administrative change. Transportation became a separate department. It is predicted by people in the agency that it will become a separate agency.

For Profit Bus Transportation

As mentioned previously, foresighted administrators made road improvement a priority in Robeson County. As a result, by 1921, the number of paved roads made bus transportation not only feasible but desirable. Until then, train service was a main mode of commuter transportation. Train travel is limited to the location of tracks, making it inconvenient to those who do not live near the train route or those who are trying to get somewhere not accessible by train. People in Robeson County as well as throughout the U.S. immediately recognized the convenience of bus travel compared to train travel.

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The first bus stop in Robeson County was at the Lorraine Hotel in downtown Lumberton. The bus stopped in the alley adjacent to the hotel, and passengers purchased their tickets directly from the bus driver. Interest in bus service spread rapidly, which encouraged a local entrepreneur to construct the county's first privately owned bus station. The bus station operated from 1925 to 1934 on Chestnut Street between 2nd and 3rd Streets. Because the service was efficient and the location convenient, the number of passengers quickly outgrew the capacity of the building. The bus station moved to the corner of Walnut and 2nd Streets in 1939, where it remains today.

Bus travel in Robeson County thrived until the early 1990s, coinciding with the closing of many local industries. The closing of these factories in Robeson County has significantly reduced the number of local people traveling by bus. In fact, the decline has been so dramatic that Robeson County is in jeopardy of losing its only bus station. At the time of this writing, the bus station is only open to the public from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Ten buses a day from two bus lines (Greyhound and Southeastern Stages) stop at the bus station.

Air Transportation

Robeson County has one public airport, owned and operated by the City of Lumberton, and approximately ten privately owned landing strips. The 600-acre Lumberton Municipal Airport is located at 150 Airport Boulevard in Lumberton. It is defined as a general aviation airport which is a licensed facility that excludes routine landing services for commercial aircraft. They can, however, be used for overflow from commercial airports or emergency landing of commercial aircrafts. The airport has two 5,000 feet runways and an instrument landing system on the main runway to facilitate inclement weather landings. At the time of this writing, the airport is used as base for 34 private planes.

Currently, the airport serves five major community functions: 1) It services industrial air traffic for local business and industry; 2) It houses two businesses. One business provides flying lessons and airplane maintenance. Another provides airplane rental and airplane maintenance; 3) It houses the area office for the North Carolina Forest Service; 4) It serves as the staging area for water bombers for the eastern section of North Carolina; and 5) Because it is located halfway between New York and Florida, it serves as a refueling station for private air traffic vacationers.

The future for Lumberton Municipal Airport looks bright. Because of current crowded conditions of commercial airports and increasing delays and canceled flights, corporations are relying more frequently on smaller airport to meet their needs. For example, a New York corporation calculated that it was more cost effective to rent a plane to visit a Robeson County factory than to use a commercial carrier to Fayetteville, the nearest commercial airport. According to management, staff members benefitted not only by avoiding delays and cancellations but also from being able to work together during the flight. Airport administrators believe that these types of benefits will cause corporations to use the services of smaller airports with greater frequency in the near future.

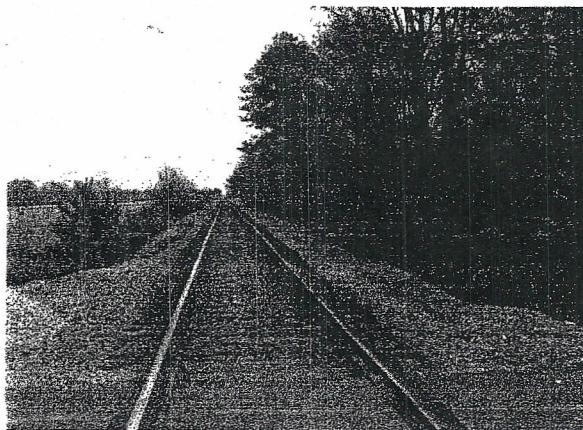
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Lumberton Municipal Airport is scheduled to grow in the coming decades. Three important projects already mark the beginning of the expected expansion. First, because of insurance regulations requiring a minimum runway length of 5001 feet, the main runway will be lengthened 500 feet. Second, two additional industrial parks are planned to attract industry. Several studies by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association find that industry, particularly high tech industry, is attracted to sites on or near small airports. Finally, Lumberton Municipal Airport is preparing to accommodate more airfreight traffic. The airport already services United Parcel Service during holiday seasons. If the data from the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association are correct, the airport can expect an increasing need for airfreight services.

With the increasing number of closings of general aviation airports across the U.S. (approximately 50 per year), Lumberton Municipal Airport will play a critical role in the future economic development of Robeson County. When general aviation airports close, businesses must either close or locate another airport to handle their business. Robeson County is committed to providing the kinds of airline services that businesses and entrepreneurs need.

Summary

Since the second edition of *One Land, Three Peoples* the transportation situation of Robeson County has improved dramatically. All this incremental enhancement was facilitated by elected officials, private nonprofit agencies' administrators, and local entrepreneurs. The future of transportation in the county looks exceptionally bright. It is hoped that the county's leadership will continue to see the connection between economic development and transportation.



This photograph shows a segment of the 78 mile straight stretch of railroad track that runs through Robeson County from Hamlet to Southport. It is the longest railroad track in America without a curve.
Photograph by Tom Ross.