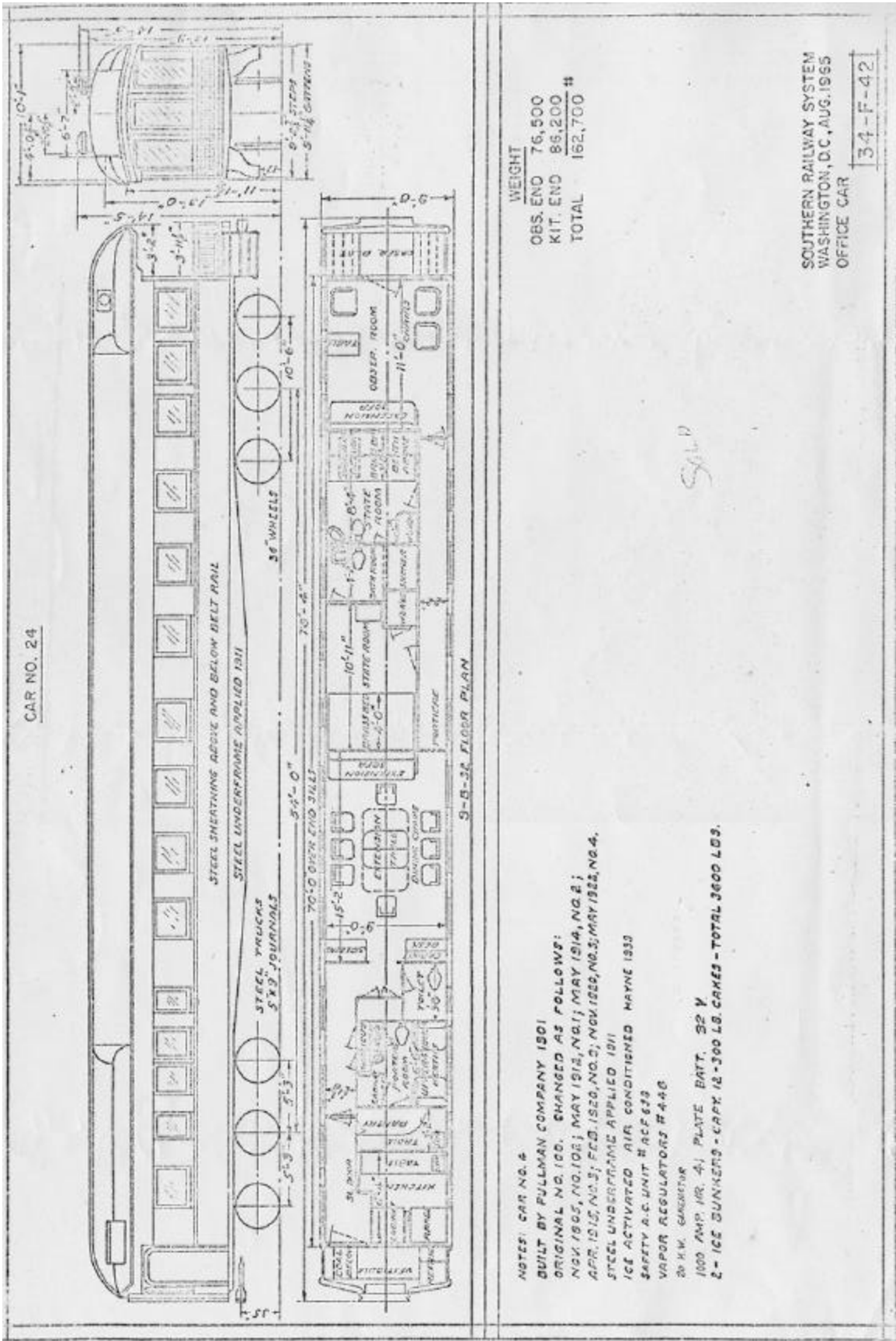


# A History of Atlanta - Appendix F



## **A History of Atlanta - Appendix G**

“The Airline Belle Makes Final Run in North Georgia,” by Harry Wilensky © 2002 *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Reprinted with permission from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

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### **The Airline Belle is dead**

Throughout north Georgia, in Chamblee, Norcross, Buford, Gainesville, Alto, Cornelia, Toccoa, and a score of other towns and hamlets, thousands are regretting the passing of the historic train. For more than half a century, the Airline Belle made its round trip between Atlanta and north Georgia, going up to Toccoa in the evening and returning in the morning. It was perhaps the oldest train running out of Atlanta. Saturday it made its last run.

As the train chugged up the Piedmont Ridge Saturday afternoon, skirting the foothills of the Blue Ridge chain and threading “the hills of Habersham and the valleys of Hall” which Sidney Lanier described in his poem, its whistle echoed mournfully. And when the train pulled into the Toccoa yards just as the last orange splash of the sun faded out of the sky, the Belle’s whistle gave one last, mournful, parting blast.

### **Other Trains on Run**

It was a Redskin chief, killed by the ruthless thrusts of a changing order, uttering his death cry. It was a Cyrano de Bergerac, with one last noble gesture, standing up to die. It was the end of an epoch. It was the passing of an institution.

Southern Railroad trains 135 and 136, running between Atlanta and Washington, Sunday took over the Belle’s schedule. They will make all the stops the Belle made. They will bring commuters to Atlanta at 7:50 a.m., and they will take them back home at 5:20 p.m., just as the Belle always did. But it won’t be the same.

The Atlanta-Toccoa run is only ninety-three miles long. Yet in the course of that ninety-three miles, the Belle had no less than thirty-nine stops. Some of them were in cities. Some were in little villages and hamlets. Some were at points where the highway crossed the railroad tracks. And some stops were simply at points on the right of way where passengers knew they could catch the train.

Along with Chamblee and Buford, Gainesville and Cornelia, on the list of intermediate stops were Mechanicsville and Beaver Dam, Carolina and Suwanee, Sugar Hill, Flowery Branch, Oakwood, Cagle, Raoul, New Switzerland, Ayersville, and a host of others.

The Belle did not make all the thirty-nine stops each day. It wasn’t necessary. The engineer, looking up the right of way, could see whether passengers were waiting to board the train at a particular point. If passengers were in evidence, he could bring the train to a halt in time. If no one was waiting, the train sped on.

### **An Institution**

To a stranger, the Belle may have seemed a "Toomerville trolley" affair. But to the thousands of north Georgians who have been riding it for more than fifty years, it was more than a train. It was an institution.

Practically every resident of north Georgia, who rode the train knew the engineer, fireman, flagman, and conductor personally. And the conductor knew most of his passengers by name. "There has been many a day when I knew every passenger in the two coaches by name," stated Conductor H.T. Cox. Surprisingly enough, the Belle made excellent time despite the frequent stops, many of which were only a mile apart. A light train provided with a large engine, it picked up speed quickly, quite often making fifty miles an hour between stops. The entire run was covered in three hours flat, and the train was on time practically every day. During its entire career, the train maintained a punctuality record of 98 or 99 per cent.

### **Remarkable Safety Record**

Along with this remarkable time record, the train chalked up an equally amazing safety record. The Belle, in all its fifty-two years of operation, figured in only one major accident, and that, a head-on collision near Armour, occurred over thirty years ago in the days before double tracks and the block signal system.

The Airline Belle was born in 1879. With no automobiles and no good roads between Atlanta and north Georgia, transportation was extremely difficult. A delegation of leading citizens from Norcross approached Colonel G.J. Foreacre, then general superintendent of the Piedmont Railroad, and petitioned him to run a line between Atlanta and Norcross.

The executive, after giving careful thought to the matter, decided that such a line would not pay. The matter would have languished and died a natural death had not the Norcross delegation guaranteed to make good any deficit the line might incur during the first year of operation.

The line was laid and a train was run. In ninety days railroad officials voluntarily released Norcross from its obligation. The line was a success. School children by the score daily flocked to Atlanta aboard the train. Farmers and business men boarded it on their journeys "to the city." All of north Georgia rode the train.

### **Named for Colonel's Wife**

Soon it became apparent that the train needed a name. It is believed that Colonel Foreacre's wife suggested the title which was adopted. In a few years, the name of Airline Belle was known throughout Georgia. By gradual stages, the line was extended beyond Norcross to Suwanee, Gainesville, Lula, Cornelia and finally to Toccoa.

One of the first engineers on the Belle was the late B.F. Dewberry. For many years, the late Captain Ike Roberts, veteran railroad man known throughout the south, presided at the throttle. A pioneer railroad builder, he had worked his way up from the bottom in fifty-eight years of continuous service. He had piloted every type of locomotive, from wheezing "wood burners" to clanking yard engines and from freights straining under a heavy load to powerful passenger/locomotives gripping the rails as they tugged with monster energy.

Passengers riding the Belle could tell when Captain Roberts was at the throttle: they knew his touch. An expert engineer, he could set the train in motion without a perceptible jerk, and he could nurse it to a stop without a jar.

### **Engineer Died at Throttle**

He died on duty, a railroad man in service to the end, Captain Roberts had indignantly rejected suggestions that he retire, and at 77 was still piloting the Belle. On May 15, 1929, he collapsed at the Terminal Station, and died within a few minutes of a heat attack.

Old-timers Saturday were glad that the veteran engineer had not lived to see the passing of the Belle. "It would have broken his heart," they said. H.R. Blackwell succeeded Captain Roberts at the throttle of the historic train. With J. O. Lowe as his flagman and Conductor Cox in the coaches behind, he piloted the Belle until it passed out of existence. A second crew was composed of Engineer J.H. Rogers, Flagman H.T. Loehr, and Conductor F. Baxter.

## A History of Atlanta - Appendix H



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