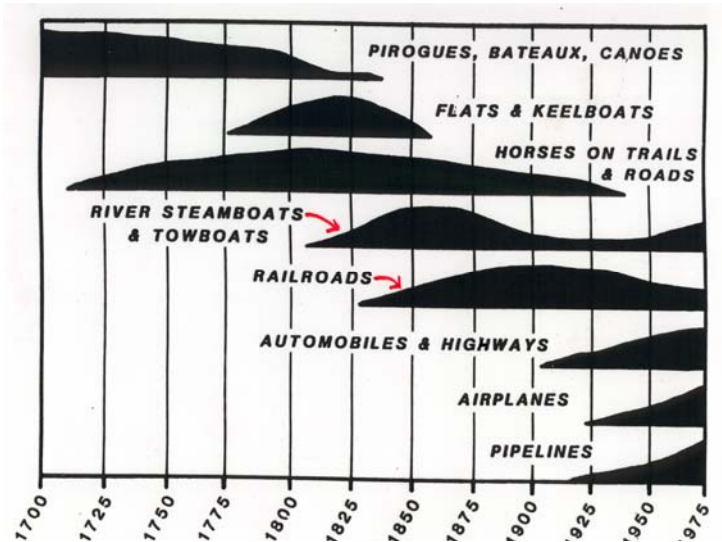


The route of the M&O completed before the Civil War (Doster and Weaver 1987).

The Mobile and Ohio Railroad (M&O)

The Mobile and Ohio Railroad was chartered in 1848. Although it is not the oldest railroad in Alabama (that distinction goes to the Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad that by-passed Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River), it has many "firsts" associated with it. Along with the Illinois Central, the M&O was the first railroad to receive a federal land grant to help finance the road. These land grants consisted of the right-of-way, plus alternate sections (one mile square) of unsold federal land 6 miles out along each side of the track. If the land within 6 miles was not available, the railroad could go as far as 9 miles out on either side of the track to get their sections. This land could then be sold to provide funds for the railroad.

The M&O was designed to connect Mobile with Cairo, Illinois, where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi River. That linkage would give Mobile a competitive trading advantage over the rival city of New Orleans. If one considers the Mississippi's meanders versus the railroad's relatively straight course, it is easy to visualize the advantage. Construction began in 1850 and by 1861 the line was open as far as Columbus, KY. Steamboats connected Columbus to Cairo on the other side of the Ohio River. In this way, the M&O joined the Illinois Central to form the longest railroad in the world. A string of towns grew up along the railroad, largely associated with shipping of cotton. The railroad was a dependable, year-round, and relatively fast carrier. Although rates were higher than shipping by river, the advantages made the railroad a superior competitor, especially for inland areas. The figure to the right shows changing transportation modes through time. Towns tended to thrive along the route that dominated that time period (Kniffen and Hilliard 1988).



At the beginning of the Civil War, the M&O was in good condition, both physically and financially. During the war, the M&O served as both transport and target for Union and Confederate forces. The railroad moved troops and supplies, and both armies destroyed track to keep the other side from using it. The Confederate government owed the M&O an estimated \$5 million for services rendered by the end of the war, none of which was paid. However, the road was rebuilt, and, by 1870, over 400 workers were employed at the Whistler, Alabama, shops of the M&O. Funds were so limited, however, that by 1875, the M&O went into receivership. By the mid-1880s, the receivers extended the line to St. Louis. In 1885, the M&O became the first railroad to change to standard gauge tracks. Increases in freight put the railroad on more solid financial ground and many extensions to the road occurred during this time including the Bay Shore Railroad from Mobile to Bayou La Batre. Despite its progress, the M&O never caught up with its competitors, the Illinois Central and the Louisville and Nashville.

In 1901, the Southern Railroad acquired controlling stock in the M&O and the roads essentially merged (unofficially). During this time, the railroad profitably hauled large amounts of timber cut from the southern forests. This arrangement was beneficial to the M&O until the Depression began in 1930. By this time, the southern forests were cut over. The railroad faced increasing competition from trucks, private automobiles, and airplanes for freight and passengers.

Railroads were "nationalized" during WWI, and the M&O was an important north-south carrier during this time. Its route essentially paralleled that of the Gulf, Mobile and Northern (GM&N), so the government used and maintained the M&O but let the GM&N deteriorate. At the end of the war, the M&O was in good physical condition, while the GM&N was in poor condition. However, the GM&N had excellent management and emerged from the depression in good financial shape. In 1932, the M&O again went into receivership. By 1938, the Southern was ready to sell its controlling stock and the GM&N purchased the M&O in 1940 to yield the GM&O that Mobilians remember. The M&O's merger with the GM&N was the first merger of parallel lines.

Towns along the Track

The Mobile and Ohio Railroad opened the 30 miles of track between Mobile and Citronelle in 1852. The railroad followed Chickasaw Creek. By staying close to the creek, the railroad avoided steep grades associated with the hilly terrain north of Mobile. Stations along the track between Mobile and Citronelle were Toulminville, Whistler, Eight Mile, Kushla, Mauvilla, Oak Grove, Bell Air, Chunchula, Beaver Meadow, Langdon, and Sidney. Some of these are no more than a church or a name on a road sign on the modern landscape. Even the railroad track itself is gone. All that remains is the old roadbed, clearly visible in some places and lost in the woods in others.

Our tour begins at the old GM&O building in Mobile. Known originally as the Gulf Terminal Building (or Union Terminal), it was built in 1905 and was shared by the Southern Railroad and the M&O. The GM&O moved here after its merger with the M&O. The Illinois Central merged with the GM&O in 1972, and the station became a freight station and office building for the Illinois Central Gulf. The City of Mobile purchased the abandoned building and is renovating it for a transportation hub and office space.

The first stop on the track was Toulminville, named for the Toulmin family. The creole plantation house on USA's campus belonged to the Toulmins and was moved to USA from Toulminville. The name of the Toulminville station was changed to Prichard in 1860 in honor of the influential Prichard family. Under Cleveland Prichard's leadership, the area shipped vegetables to northern cities by the trainload! Cleveland Prichard invented the first refrigerated car, and a master mechanic built it in the M&O's Whistler shops.

While Prichard became a prosperous truck farming community, Whistler grew up around the railroad itself. The Whistler shops were built in 1851. During the Civil War, over 700 men worked there to make mountings for Confederate artillery. The shops remained in use by the railroad until 1944. They made railroad cars and rebuilt locomotives. It is one of three pre-Civil War railroad shops in the southeast that still stand. The other two have been restored. The visible ruins were used as a turpentine mill and a warehouse for a chemical company. Unfortunately, contaminated soil on the site has stopped efforts at restoration. The Whistler Historic District includes many homes built from 1850-1900. In 1860, the census shows Whistler as the second largest town in Mobile County (Mobile was #1). Whistler and Eight Mile have both been annexed into the City of Prichard.

Highway 45 north to Citronelle is west of the old M&O line. Along most of our route, the highway and the railroad are less than 1 mile apart. Watch for the names of the towns along the track as we drive to Citronelle.

Citronelle itself thrived as a resort town. The pine scented air and the spring water had a reputation for healing. Several large hotels served the needs of guests from all over the world. You could take a ship to Mobile and then the railroad to Citronelle. Citronelle has a large concentration of homes built between 1850 and 1900.

We will have lunch at the Iron Skillet, a local restaurant (get southern food, that's their specialty). Glenn Vernon and Alma Johnson of the Citronelle historical group will lead our tour of Citronelle and the railroad museum.

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Lemly, J.H. 1953. The Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio: A Railroad That Had to Expand or Expire. Richard D. Irwin, Inc., Homewood, Illinois.

The Bay Shore Railroad. Visit <http://bayshorehs.tripod.com>

Assorted Mobile Register articles from the vertical files of the Mobile Public Library's Local History and Genealogy Section at 704 Government Street, Mobile, Alabama.

Commercial and Religious Buildings (Mobile & Whistler)



Gulf, Mobile and Ohio Terminal



Whistler M&O Machine Shop



Jernigan's Hardware Store, 1873



St. Bridget's Catholic Church (1874). Casey Jones baptized here.

Whistler & Eight Mile Folk Houses



Whistler United Methodist Church (1886)



Creole cottage, Gulf coast type.



Modern folk home ☺



"Shotgun Wedding"
Gable front, common in southern cities, fits narrow lot.

Whistler & Eight Mile Folk Victorian

Folk Victorian style spread by railroads. Common up until about 1910, then replaced by Craftsman style.



Queen Anne: turned spindles



Gothic Revival (Window and scrollwork)



Others "Along the Track"



"I" house with gable and Victorian trim (Folk Victorian)



Italianate (roof brackets), Greek Revival (2 story columns)
Gulf Coast, Key West style, 3 bay



Midwest influence (square, 2 story), Georgian, central hallway.
Pyramid roof less expensive to build



Italian Renaissance (1890-1935)