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SOUTHERN RAILWAY

“Southern Serves the South”

⤴ **AWAITING THE CALL** — Judging from the shadows on this sunny day in 1957, it’s around noontime at Birmingham Terminal as FP7A #6134 and a sister B-unit await their next assignment. The units most likely arrived this morning with #17, the *Birmingham Special*, and will head up #18 later today on a return trip to Chattanooga. (Howard Robins, Paul Faulk collection)

Of the eight major railroads serving Birmingham during the “last golden era,” two lines in particular shared a long history with the Magic City, dating back to its very beginning. Birmingham was established near the junction of the predecessor lines of Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company (“L&N”) and Southern Railway (“Southern”). Indeed, both L&N and Southern shared such a symbiotic relationship with Birmingham, that one could argue neither could have existed without the other.

L&N’s contribution to the development of Birmingham’s iron industry in the late 19th century is well known. With its vast network of mineral lines tapping into the area’s extensive coal and iron ore deposits, L&N outpaced Southern in terms of industrial mileage. Both railroads were unmatched for the amount of locally produced raw materials and manufactured goods they transported to and from the Birmingham District.

As for overall impact on the local rail scene, Southern arguably could claim an advantage owing to its multiple lines and extensive facilities. Southern was always a favorite with railroad buffs, and as the images in this chapter will attest, the years following World War II offered an interesting and colorful variety of trains and locomotives for railfan photographers.

If “past is prologue,” a brief account of Southern’s early origins will be helpful to an understanding of the road’s later development. As mentioned, Southern grew with Birmingham from humble beginnings. The road’s first predecessor line through Birmingham arrived in 1870 as the Alabama and Chattanooga Railway (“A&C”). Formed from the combined Northeast and Southwest Alabama Railroad and Wills Valley Railroad, the 295-mile route connected Chattanooga, Tennessee with Meridian, Mississippi. As it passed through the future site of Birmingham, it crossed South and North Alabama Railroad (an L&N predecessor) at a location that came to be known as 14th Street, which today remains the busiest rail junction in the Birmingham District.

During that tumultuous era of economic expansion, many rail lines were built only to fail, and before the year was out, the State of Alabama took control of A&C after the company defaulted on the interest payments due on its construction bonds. Following years of litigation, the road finally emerged in 1877 as Alabama Great Southern Railroad (“AGS”) under new ownership of Emile Erlanger & Company, an English banking concern. Under thoroughly British influence, AGS became the centerpiece of the famed “Queen & Crescent Route” between Cincinnati and New Orleans.