

Railroads in Hamlet

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Hamlet. By definition, a hamlet is a small, desolate town, with less people than a village. In 1931, the town of Hamlet, North Carolina did not fit this description. It in fact was a bustling town full of varied industry and agricultural projects, as depicted in a newspaper article from the Raleigh News and Observer in 1931. In this article, Hamlet is described as being anything but a small, desolate town, showing its importance mainly being in the railroad industry. Though the descriptions in the article, it is easy to see what an important place Hamlet was in 1931 for the Railroad industry.

In the 1920's, the country was experiencing "the most explosive decade of the century," or, as it has been called, "The Roaring Twenties" (Wang). Everything great was happening for the country in everything from music to politics and fashion to the stock market. That was until one 'Black Thursday' on October 24, 1929 when the stock market crashed (Wang). This started what is now commonly known as The Great Depression. Jobs were lost, people starting starving, suicide was attempted, and the country just started coming to a halt with people being too worn out and depressed to do much of anything. The country stayed this way for almost ten years. It would not be until many years later that Franklin Roosevelt would put in place the New Deal and turn the country back around (Wang). But, through all the stresses and hard times the country was facing, Hamlet seemed to prosper, growing in population size and industrial importance (Hamlet).

In 1900, 4000 miles of railroads crossed over North Carolina in many directions (Trelease 32). The expansion of the railroad system did so much for North Carolina. It provided

means for long distance traveling, allowed farmers to produce crops to sell, not just for their family's use, allowed for the growth of new industries, and expanding already established ones (Trelease 32). Also, railroads helped increase the size of small towns, bringing new people for employment reasons as well as others. As the popularity of the railroads grew, so did one little town that would later become known as "The Hub of the Eastern Seaboard" (Shelton-Roberts).

In the middle of all this growth and development was Hamlet. Built in 1900, the Hamlet Seaboard Station was a major stopping point of five major rail lines (Shelton-Roberts). As the industry grew, and more rail lines were laid, the town of Hamlet grew also and it became increasingly important to the railroads. As the years passed, the station and the town became known everywhere for being the most important part of the rail lines (Shelton-Roberts). Even into The Great Depression, the town and its industry flourished.

In December 1931, an article was published in the News and Observer describing what an important place Hamlet was, and telling about all the industries that were flourishing there. Although there were many points mentioned in this article, the one that is discussed the most was the topic of the railroad industry. Hamlet was called the "'Pivot Point' of the Carolinas because it is located in the exact center of the two Carolinas" (Hamlet). It was also the point at which eight major branches of railway crossed (Hamlet). The author of the article specifically states, "Hamlet is recognized as a very important railway center" (Hamlet). And that it was. Twenty trains carrying passengers ran through Hamlet a day, and there was also a Re-icing Station, a Transfer Station, a Seaboard Division Headquarters Station, a Railway Material Yard, and a Classification Yard with "modern flood lighting system which enable[d] work to be done at night" (Hamlet). Even not knowing the purpose of all these stations, the fact that they are listed in the article shows that they were an important part of the Hamlet Seaboard Station. The article

goes on to tell all the rail lines that connect with Hamlet and cities that all the rail lines pass through. Some of the places that the rail line ran to were “Richmond, to Wilmington, to Charleston, to Columbia, to Rutherfordton” (Hamlet).

One interesting point that is listed in the article was that “approximately 1,000 [railroad] employees are living in Hamlet, many of whom own their own homes at this point” (Hamlet). For this town to supposedly be “small and desolate,” this seems like a lot when you think of the time period and that this is only one industry’s workforce from one town. Another key interesting point was that per month, the town’s population of railroads workers received \$75,000 in wages. That is \$75 a month, and although that seems like nothing now, that was a lot back then. When considering that during this time the Depression was almost at its worse, the fact the people got paid \$75 per month and that many even owned their own houses is amazing. These facts just go to show what a big industry like railroads was doing to help Hamlet at this desperate time.

So why would a reporter from the News and Observer want to write an article about Hamlet during the Depression? Perhaps the author was from Hamlet and was just bragging about his town and how much business was going on there. He may have just wanted to report the information to others to show that Hamlet was flourishing, while other cities were not doing so well. On the other hand, another idea the author may have had in mind was to boost people morale during such a depressing time by showing them that their country, and their state, had not completely fallen to shambles during the Great Depression. There was still business to be conducted and some of it was taking place in North Carolina. This may have given some people hope for a better future.

I believe this article is very important to North Carolina for many reasons. For one, it just gives great, accurate history of what was happening in Hamlet during the Great Depression. As a resident of Richmond County where Hamlet is located, I'll be the first to say that Hamlet is not as busy as it used to be, with railroads or much of anything else for that matter. But, this town was not always like that. This article depicts how life was then for people in Hamlet. Also, this article shows people that things will not always stay the same. It shows how things can change over a period of time. Now, Hamlet is a rather small town. The trains still come through the town, but not like they used to. The old Seaboard Station is still standing, but has now been changed into a restaurant. Every year hundreds of people gather at the Seaboard Festival in honor of the town's railroad history to buy homemade crafts and food from various vendors. The state had also decided to make the station into a museum to show the town rich railroad history. Besides that, not much of anything goes on with railroads in the town, whose main industry now is textiles.

Another important thing that we can get out of this article is a great lesson to live by. No matter the stakes against you and no matter how bad the situation seems, things can still be good, and there is always a way to get by. During the time in which this article was written, the country was economically the worst it has ever been. But, even through this situation Hamlet, a little town in southern North Carolina flourished and established a name for its self. This shows people that they should never give up when faced with an aversive situation.

Through this article on the industries in Hamlet, North Carolina in 1931, it is easy to paint a clear picture of what the Seaboard Station would have looked like back then. Also, a great history of Hamlet is given. This article clears up some misconception of the doom and gloom lifestyles that are always associated with the Great Depression. Lastly, this article teaches

the lesson of never giving up even when the odds are against you. If you close your eyes and listen, you can almost see the train coming and hear the whistles blowing.

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