

Oneonta Coast-to-Coast

by

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Introduction

In an earlier paper, “From the Roundhouse to the Moon”, I traced the careers of Oneonta entrepreneurs towards regional or national achievement. In the case of Collis P. Huntington, we left off his story at the point in 1869 where his Central Pacific Railway, built east from Sacramento, united with the Union Pacific, built west from Council Bluffs, Iowa, at Promontory Point, Utah. To have created part of the first transcontinental railroad (which it became by connection to existing, individual railroad lines to the East Coast) would be a career capper for any man. But Huntington’s career as a railroad builder and industrial leader continued until his death in 1900. The purpose of this paper is to provide additional evidence of C.P.’s ties to Oneonta spread on the national platforms which he built.

C.P.’s first accomplishment was to consolidate and add to the Central Pacific Railway (CPRR) and its successor the Southern Pacific (SP) until it dominated the State of California and the American Southwest as it passed through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana to New Orleans. Fairly or unfairly, Frank Norris’s muckraking novel The Octopus attempted to characterize the hold of the SP on California. C.P. controlled the SP empire until his death, after which it was sold to the E.H. Harriman interests.¹

His second was to establish an eastern railroad in central Virginia linking tidewater at Newport News, Virginia with Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky, and Memphis, Tennessee. In this effort, Huntington employed many former Oneonta friends and relatives. Eventually extension of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad

to New Orleans occurred. Thus, while he controlled the SP and C & O, C.P. could embark on a train in San Francisco on the West Coast and travel east through New Orleans to Newport News on his own rails. He often did so in his two-car personal railway carriages called, appropriately, *Oneonta 1 and 2*. It will be shown that C.P. frequently employed Oneonta friends and relatives to build, manage, and extend the towns and infrastructure over which the C & O passed.

His third was to establish Newport News Shipyard, a national asset which produces naval warships and found the city of Newport News, Virginia where it is located.

The last great accomplishment was his generosity to charitable organizations. A staunch abolitionist before the Civil War, he donated generously to the Hampton Institute, Virginia (at the time an all-black school). Many paintings were contributed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York where Huntington and his wife resided after 1863. Other examples will follow.

Southern Pacific through Southern California and Beyond to New Orleans

The further growth of the original Central Pacific into the California-straddling Southern Pacific Railroad and its eventual convergence on New Orleans is a fascinating story which exceeds the scope of this work.² The important fact here is that the Sunset Line from California to New Orleans began operating on February 5, 1883.³

The Eastern Road

In constructing the C & O between Newport News, Virginia, and New Orleans, Louisiana, Huntington pieced together many individual segments into a cohesive whole which made use of the nearby resources. For example, he needed to locate a railroad terminal on the Ohio River to provide access to cargo boats which traveled to Cincinnati. He picked an area with a four-mile frontage on the Ohio near forests, coal mines iron sources, oil, and natural gas. To procure the needed land he sent for the highly competent Col. Delos W. Emmons of Oneonta, who was married to a sister of Mrs. Huntington.⁴ Soon, Emmons purchased nearly 5000 acres which, when land for the railroad facilities was sectioned off, left

space having wide street blocks large enough for businesses and houses.⁵ The town was named Huntington, West Virginia in May 1871. A precursor of American Car and Foundry, the Ensign Manufacturing Co. was incorporated by Messrs. Huntington, Emmons, and others in November 1872. It output 60,000 railway car wheels per annum. Bradley Waters Foster, married to C.P.'s niece from Oneonta, began a hardware store and became a commercial leader of Huntington.⁶ So it is clear that Oneontans were key figures in establishing this new West Virginia community on the C & O. As of 1954, the city of Huntington had grown to 85000 residents manufacturing goods worth \$50,000,000 per year. What is equally amazing is that Huntington's work on the C & O was done in parallel with that on the Southern Pacific. The final piece linking the C & O at Memphis to New Orleans was the Louisville, New Orleans, and Texas railroad.⁷

With the link of his western (SP) and eastern (C & O) railroads at New Orleans, C.P. Huntington was able to travel from coast-to-coast on his private cars Oneonta 1 and 2. The first was like a rolling mansion having a drawing room, parlor, library, and family quarters.⁸ The second contained a kitchen, wine cellar, storehouse, refrigerator, and servants. If desired, C.P. could live 6 months on his cars at maximum quality of life.

Back to the East Coast

The eastern terminus of the C & O was Hampton Roads, Virginia where C.P. founded the city of Newport News. As a destination for West Virginia coal to be exported on seagoing ships, he discovered the constant need for their repair and upkeep. He founded what became the Newport News Shipyard, employing 4000 workers at his death and on track to build capital ships for the U.S. Navy in both world wars.⁹ Today this shipyard is called Huntington-Ingalls Industries and is the only yard which produces nuclear aircraft carriers for our fleet.

Gifts to the World

C. P.'s gifts to the world, while alive and by his estate, were always designed to promote human welfare by enabling learning. After founding the city of Newport News, he gave a several lots on which to build schools, churches, and the

courthouse.¹⁰ He also founded the museum known as Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina containing about 300 sculptures by American artists.¹¹ After he passed, his former home at Fifth Avenue and 89th Street in Manhattan was given to the National Academy of Design.¹² (New York City was Huntington's home base for the last thirty years of his life).



The Huntington Library at the Hampton Institute was a gift of his wife and son and was dedicated by Booker T. Washington on April 28, 1903 who said:

His loved ones have the rare privilege and satisfaction of knowing that in turning some of the results of his historic struggle into useful occupations, into books, into poetry, and religion, into higher, beautiful and useful living, they are doing what he would have done, and there could be no more fitting memorial.¹³

In California, his heirs contributed to the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery at San Marino, the Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, and the Huntington Park for Children in San Francisco.¹⁴ H. E. Huntington, Collis' nephew from Oneonta, had developed real estate on a base of electric interurban railroads in

the Los Angeles Basin.¹⁵ The street sign above from Pasadena, CA reflects his influence.

C.P. had a camp called Pine Knot on Raquette Lake in the Adirondacks which he accessed by a small steamboat called *Oneonta*.¹⁶ After his death, Pine Knot was donated to SUNY Cortland, which uses it to the current day for outdoor training.

Conclusion

Collis Huntington spread the name of Oneonta nationwide literally by naming his personal but public artifacts after his home town, and by employing its citizens in his cross-country railway construction, and figuratively by enabling through his charity the development of educational opportunities for people of all ages and races. His spirit and that of Oneonta continue to build progress for the common man through the breadth and depth of his industrial and philanthropic goals.

¹ Zendle, Howard, "From the Roundhouse to the Moon", p. 9 (available on www.tomdef.com/Howard).

² See the article "Seventy Five Years of Progress: A Historical Sketch of the Southern Pacific 1869-1944 (with Historical Map of Southern Pacific Rail Lines)" by Eric Heath at www.cpr.org/Museum/SP_1869-1944/#Enlarge/.

³ Heath, in the section on Texas and Louisiana Lines.

⁴ Evans, Cerinda W., Collis Potter Huntington Vol. 2, (Newport News, 1954). p. 524.

⁵ Evans V2, p. 526.

⁶ Evans V2, p. 527.

⁷ Lavender, David, The Great Persuader(Boulder,1998) p. 357.

⁸ Obituary, C.P. Huntington, New York Times, Aug 15, 1900, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁰ Evans V2, p. 668.

¹¹ Evans V2, p. 671.

¹² Evans V2, p. 671.

¹³ Evans V2, p. 669.

¹⁴ Evans V2, p. 669.

¹⁵ Zendle, p. 9.

¹⁶ Obituary, p. 1.