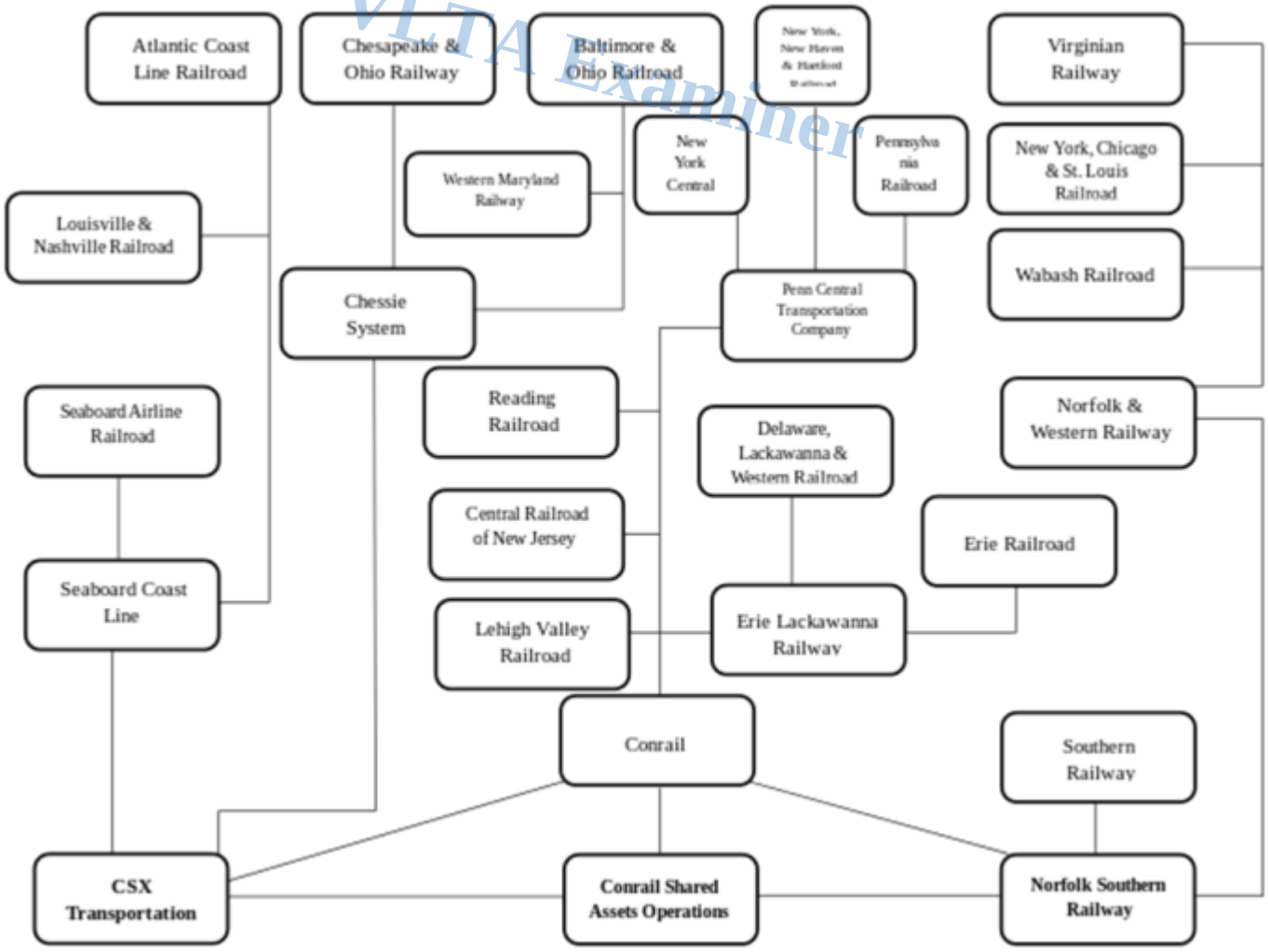
Finding Your Way

Description

A Railroad Family History

Genealogists find familiarity with title examination processes useful in establishing family relationships and histories. The same techniques are often helpful in tracing the history of corporate entities, except that the corporate records are not part of the land records unless and until notice of those particulars is entered in the land records. To aid in finding oneâ??s way through the myriad of short line railroads that make up todayâ??s major carriers, the following â??family treeâ?• is offered, followed by a few items of local interest.



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It may come as a surprise to learn â??Norfolk Southernâ?• is not a new name in the lexicon of railroading. Originally known as the Elizabeth City & Norfolk (1880), the line was renamed Norfolk Southern in 1883. As an aside, in 1900 this line acquired the Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Southern line, known primarily for a line between Norfolk and the Princess Anne Hotel at the Virginia Beach oceanfront, and the Chesapeake Transit Company, which operated a competing line that ran through Cape Henry. It was subsumed into the Southernâ??s subsidiary Carolina & Northwestern in 1974, which kept the name. In 1981, when the Norfolk & Western merged with the Southern, the subsidiary was re-renamed Carolina & Northwestern, and the Norfolk Southern name assigned to the parent holding company.

While the earliest ancestor of the Southern Railway was the South Carolina Canal & Rail Road (chartered 1827), another ancestor was the Richmond and Danville Railroad (chartered 1847) which joined the Southern family in 1894.

Ancestors for the Norfolk & Western line include The City Point Railroad (a 9-mile line running from Richmond to Petersburg established in 1838) and the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad (built 1853). The Norfolk & Petersburg merged in 1870 with the South Side Railroad and the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad to become the Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio Railroad. Reorganized in 1881, the line was renamed Norfolk and Western.

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In 1959, the N&W acquired a competitor, the Virginian Railway. The Virginian was built somewhat in secret, as the Chesapeake & Ohio and Norfolk & Western had not welcomed the thought of more competition, and arose, full-built, as the result of the 1907 merger of two small intra-state lines: Deepwater Railway (chartered in West Virginia, and purchased in 1902) and Tidewater Railway (chartered 1904).

CSX is the result of mergers. The Seaboard System Railroad merged with the Baltimore and Ohio, Chesapeake and Ohio, and Western Maryland Railroads (known as the Chessie System) in 1986. The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad (chartered 1834), already majority owned by CSX, was merged into CSX Transportation in 1991. Between 1898 and 1900, affiliate Richmond, Petersburg and Carolina supplied the last section of track necessary for the Seaboard to run from Atlanta to Richmond entirely on its own track.

The merchants of Tidewater were not about to let Richmond have all the glory. One of the Seaboardâ??s earliest predecessors was the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad (1833), later known as the Seaboard and Roanoke, which provided a southern route between the harbor and the western portions of the Commonwealth. In the 1880s, it became part of the Seaboard system.

The Chesapeake & Ohio can trace its origin to the Louisa Railroad (1836), renamed the Virginia Central Railroad around 1850, and the James River & Kanawha Canal Company (1785), some of whose assets were later known as the Richmond and Allegheny Railroad (1889).

Another Seaboard competitor acquired in 1967 was the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Among its predecessor lines can be found the Petersburg Railroad (1830) and the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad (1836). In 1889 they were combined into the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company of Virginia, which due to the favorable regulatory climate in Virginia acquired the (affiliated, yet independent) ACL operations in South Carolina and North Carolina by 1900. Also added to the mix was the Norfolk & Carolina Railroad, originally formed as the Chowan & Southern Railroad in 1889, which ran between

Suffolk and Tarboro, NC, and tied into the railroad lines that formerly crossed the Elizabeth River (by ferry, if memory serves) to Norfolk from Portsmouth. That nautical service no longer exists, but remnants of another do.

A personal railroad memory that has, actually, nothing to do with railroads. Many years ago my family travelled along the Eastern Shore, catching the ferry from Kiptopeke to Little Creek. (I have no personal memory of this trip, but do remember fondly a trip that included the Cape May, NJ, to Lewes, DE, ferry.) This was the southern terminus of a line owned by the New York, Pennsylvania and Norfolk Railroad, created in 1882 to link the Northeast via the Eastern Shore (bypassing congestion around Washington, DC â?? obviously gridlock in DC has a long history!) to Norfolk. The Pennsylvania Railroad (which controlled the NY, P & N) merged into the Penn Central, and later went bankrupt in 1970 (the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel opened in 1964) emerging as Conrail. Conrail sold some of that track to Northampton and Accomack Counties, which operated the Virginia & Maryland Railroad until 1981, when they transferred operations to the Eastern Shore Railroad. In 2005, the operator became the Bay Coast Railroad.

The rail cars transferred from Little Creek over the Norfolk and Portsmouth Belt Line Railroad. Chartered in 1896 as the Southeastern and Atlantic Railroad Company, it adopted its present name in 1898. Formed by eight rail companies (most of whom appear above), it is primarily in the business of interchanging rail cars between the connecting lines of the carriers and the marine terminals.

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Should you encounter an unfamiliar railroad name during your examination, I am pleased to report that railroaders (full size and model) love to write about their favorite lines and their histories. The railroad companies maintain historical information on their websites, many employees are members of â??alumniâ?• associations with websites, and Wikipedia (source of the family tree above) abounds with articles identifying predecessor and successor lines. That much information is sure to get the examiner back on the right track in the event the corporate chain is not readily evident from the land records. If interested in primary document research, Virginia Tech holds volumes of Norfolk & Western historical documents, including those of its predecessor entities.

Douglass Dewing, Esq.

Doug is a regular contributor to the VLTA *Examiner Monthly* and a treasured member of the Virginia land title community. Author of *A Virginia Title Examinerâ??s Manual* and countless articles on title insurance and title examination, Doug is the pre-eminent specialist in our field.

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Author
vltaexaminer

VLTA Examiner