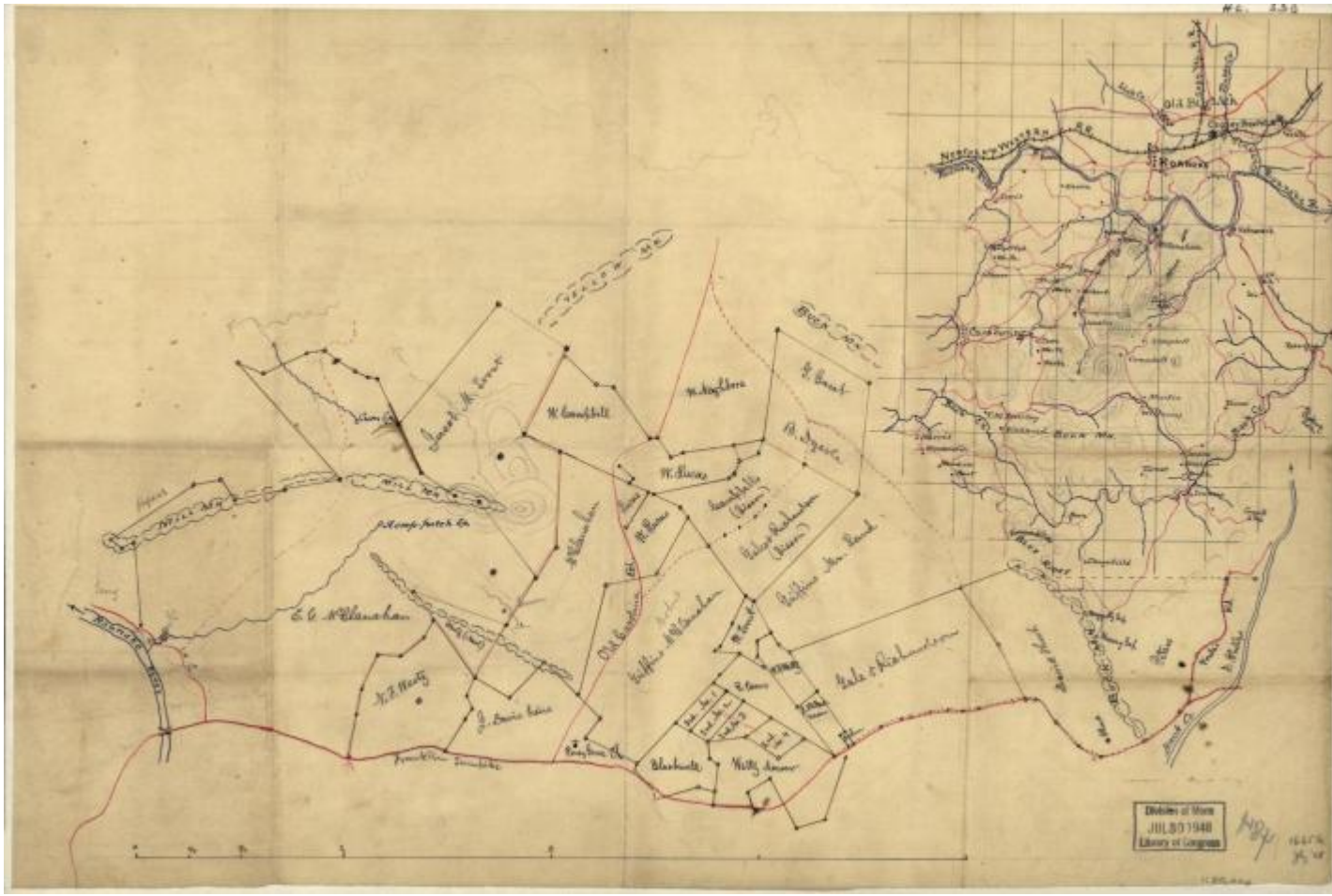
The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 1: From Big Lick to Roanoke

Description

Article by Katherine Hunnicutt

The moon hung low over the Virginia hills, casting long shadows across the path as Charles W. Thomas pressed onward, the weight of Big Lickâ??s future tucked securely against his chest. He had left the energetic and decisive voices of the Big Lick elites who had drafted the proposal; here in the quiet of the night, only the steady rhythm of hooves against the earth broke the silence. He felt a flicker of tentative hopeâ??that the ten-thousand-dollar subscription paper he carried was the lifeline their small town needed. The humid June air had long given up its heat as midnight came and went, but sweat still beaded on Charlesâ??s forehead as he stood near his rendezvous point at Mill Creek. He scanned the darkness for the familiar silhouette of John Moomaw. If the committee in Lexington accepted this offering, the silence of the landscape would soon be replaced by the roar of iron and steam. Moomaw finally appeared from the shadowy trail, leading his own horse by its bridle. The transfer of papers between himself and Moomaw was swift and solemn. Charles said a silent prayer over the endeavor as Moomaw threw his leg over his horse and galloped away toward Lexington.



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Figure 1 from Sketch map of the vicinity of Roanoke, Virginia (188-?). Retrieved from the Library of Congress. In the public domain.

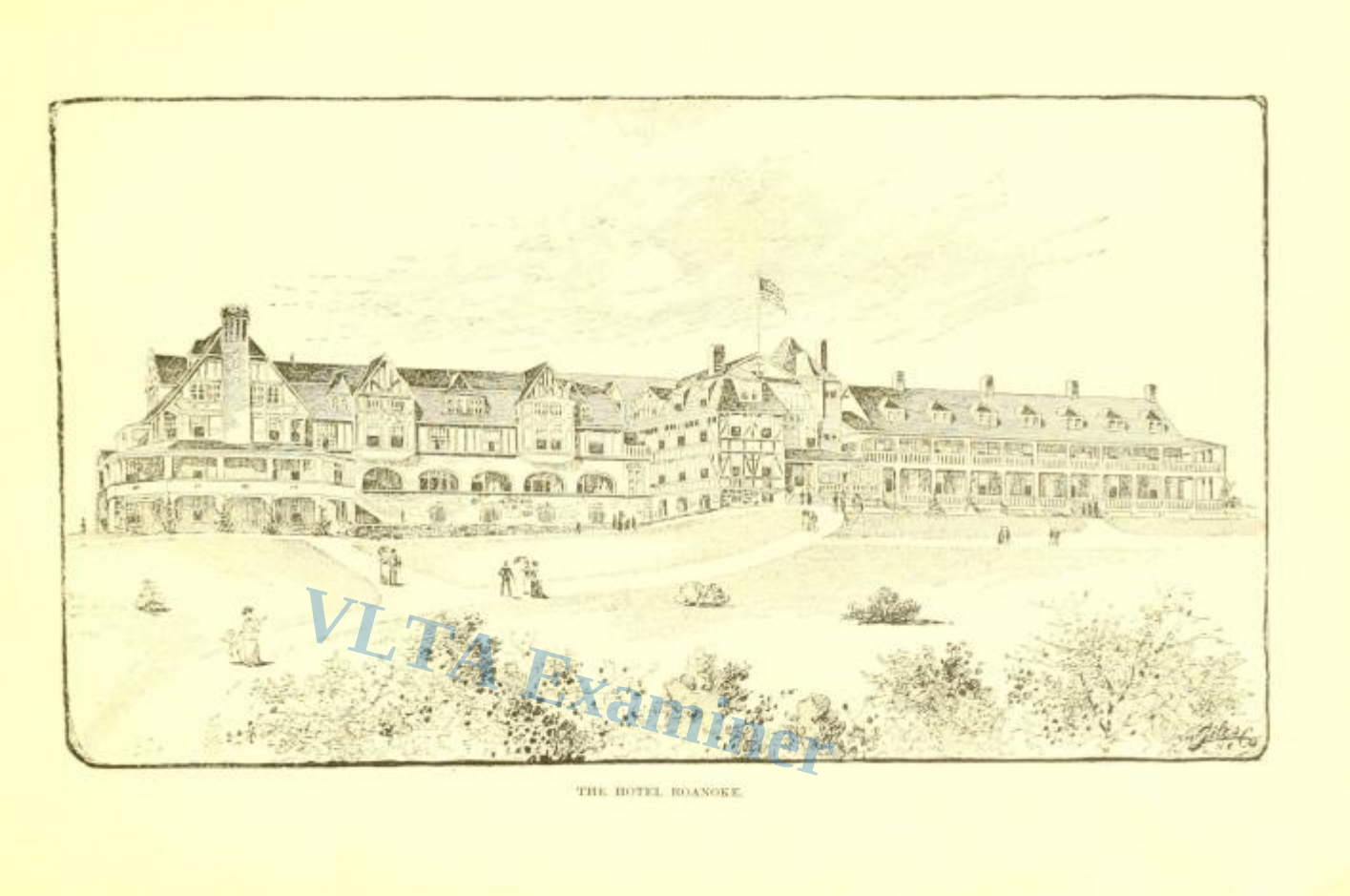
Though the private thoughts and prayers of Charles Thomas and John Moomaw are unknown, the weight of their â??midnight rideâ?? is undeniable. As Moomaw galloped toward Lexington, he bore the responsibility of a townspeople who had put his advice into action, risking so much to lure Norfolk and Western to Big Lick. Thanks to the history recorded in *Roanoke: Story of County and City* (1942), we know that in 1881, Moomaw suggested the little mountain town offer incentives to the railroad to turn its attention away from rival sites toward the ambitious village of Big Lick. This led to a high-stakes overnight relay: Thomas galloped from Big Lick to Buchanan to deliver the proposal to Moomaw, who then raced to Lexington to reach the railroad committee.

Even those unfamiliar with local history can guess what happened next. The subscription was accepted, the junction was awarded to Big Lick, Norfolk and Western established its headquarters there and Hotel Roanoke would hold the status of â??the pride and showplace of Roanokeâ?• from the moment its doors were open (Workers, 1942 & Striplin, 1981, p. 78). The futureâ??and even the nameâ??of Big Lick was forever changed (Workers, 1942).

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The Long History of Big Lick

Big Lick was never a stranger to travelers. Long before human footsteps marked this region, buffalo and deer frequented the territoryâ??s natural salt marshes. These large faunae then drew the Monahoac, Monacan, and Iroquois to hunt and migrate through the area, attracted by the valuable inland salt deposits at the site that would eventually become Big Lick (Workers, 1942). Before settlers called it Big Lick, however, this wilderness was referred to as Botetourt County, named after the royal governor of Virginia Norbone Berkeley, Baron of Botetourt (*Big Lick*, 2020). Big Lick naturally became a junction along the Great Trail (now US Route 11), which stretched from the Shenandoah Valley through the Roanoke River Gap and into North Carolina. This geographic advantage led to a cluster of dwellings and businesses that matured into a village. Growth accelerated through the mid-1800s, bolstered by the 1852 arrival of the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad depot. As shops and small factories multiplied, the town was officially chartered in 1874, with John Trout elected as its first mayor. By 1880, the town had its first newspaper, the *Big Lick News*, was published (Workers, 1942).



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Figure 2 from The City of Roanoke, Virginia, by F. H.. Taylor (1980). Retrieved from the Library of Congress. In the public domain.

Big Dreams for a Little Town

Not a town to accept the status quo, Big Lick acted quickly in 1881 when rumors spread that the Shenandoah Valley Railroad and Norfolk and Western Railroad (N&W) were seeking a junction point. Spurred by an ambitious proposal from John C. Moomawâ??a local land owner and right-of-way agentâ??the townâ??s â??movers and shakersâ?• quickly organized a meeting at Rorer Hall to prepare a formal invitation to the railroad. Despite the odds, about two dozen enterprising citizens pledged a $10,000 cash bonus and offered a terminal site to secure the junction over rival locations like Salem or Lynchburg. Only seven years after its first official charter, the community of Big Lick was making waves.

Local lore often centers on Moomawâ??s dramatic â??midnight ride,â?• and for good reason: it was only slightly less cinematic than legend made it out to be. After the meeting, Charles W. Thomas slipped out of town after dark, galloping to a bridge near Buchanan to meet Moomaw at 1:00 AM. Moomaw, who had been waiting there after completing business nearby, took the subscription papers and continued the all-night ride to Lexington. He arrived later that morning to present the proposal to the railroad committee who was already in session. Upon seeing the offer, Colonel U. L. Boyce exclaimed, â??Gentlemen, this brings the road to Big Lick! This progressive spirit cannot be deniedâ?• (Workers, 1942, p. 191).

The explosion of activity and growth following Moomawâ??s midnight ride earned Big Lick the nickname of â??Magic Cityâ?•. In 1882, the town changed its name to Roanoke, which came from the

Indian word Rawenoke, a shell that was used for money. That same year, the railroad company began construction on Hotel Roanoke, a glorious Queen Anne style building in Henry Troutâ??s wheat field which sat atop a hill overlooking the railroad junction. By 1883, the population had boomed from 700 to 5,000, officially qualifying it for a city charter. For a hundred years, Norfolk and Western called Roanoke home of their headquarters. The N&W soon moved its general offices and headquarters from Lynchburg to Roanoke, solidifying Roanokeâ??s place as the railwayâ??s beating heart for the next century (Workers, 1942).



Figure 3 Crowd giving enthusiastic greeting to President McKinley and party at Roanoke, Va., ca. 1901. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. In the public domain.

The Enduring Legacy of the Junction

For a century, Norfolk and Western called Roanoke home, establishing the city as the core of its railway empire. While the 1982 merger with Southern Railway (and becoming Norfolk Southern) eventually

moved their headquarters to Norfolk, Virginia, the iron pulse of the city has never faded (Berrier, 2022). The dream Moomaw, Thomas and the citizens of Big Lick fought for in 1881 continues on with the modern freight trains that pump through Roanoke today. And the Grand Old Lady still watches over the tracks from its perch in Troutâ??s wheat field.

Today, the spirit of the â??Midnight Rideâ?• lives on for historians and enthusiasts alike. All over the world, people can view the comings and goings of this historic junction 24/7 with the Hotel Roanokeâ??s Live Rail Cam on Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/@roanokerailcam7540).

In our next installment, â??*The History of Hotel Roanoke, Part 2: The Grand Old Lady on the Hill*,â?• we will explore how she evolved through fire, world wars, new ownership and multiple renovations to become a timeless icon of hospitality in Roanoke, Virginia.

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Katherine Hunnicutt is a Title Underwriter and Examiner for Community Title Network with a heavy focus on CRE and Builder Services. She joined the title industry in 2016 and holds degrees in English and Secondary Education. Having traveled the world as both a military child and spouse, Katherine finally settled in Virginia in 2020â??which she lovingly refers to as â??Godâ??s Country.â?• Her passion lies in finding creative ways to educate through literature and storytelling.

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