

Seaboard Train Depot

Matthews, North Carolina

Prior to 1874 transportation in the Matthews area, known as Fullwood at the time, was on foot, by horse and stagecoach. That year, travel options leaped forward with the completion of a new section of the Carolina Central Railroad, later known as the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. This spur-line connected Fullwood with Wilmington to the east and Rutherfordton to the west.

When the first train, belched black smoke, rolled into Fullwood December 15, 1874, life in the sleepy little town changed forever. Now farmers, merchants, and citizens were connected to other areas of North Carolina and the United States. This made it possible for locally grown cotton to be shipped by rail, especially to markets in the north. Food, supplies and merchandise could be received by rail. Citizens could visit relative by train. The Carolina Central Railroad named the train stop Matthews. Fullwood was soon known as Matthews and on March 8, 1879, the town was incorporated as Matthews, North Carolina.

The official census taken in 1880, listed 191 residents. In 1884, *The Branson Business Directory* was published in Mecklenburg County, listing all the merchants and tradesmen in the county. Under the Matthews heading, eight merchants were listed. General stores served as economic and social centers in rural areas. A trip to town not only meant purchasing household and farm staples, but a chance to catch up on local news. The large number of general stores, over the years, is evidence of the part they played in Matthews history.

By the late 1880s, Matthews Train Depot was constructed. Up until that time, there was probably some sort of a shelter in place by the tracks. The Depot became a social as well as economic beehive. In the 1920s and 30s, as many as 13 passenger and freight trains, stopped daily. Passengers could board in Matthews and take the train east or west. Going east, if they rode "to the end of the line" after stopping in Monroe, they would disembark in Wilmington, NC. Connections made in Hamlet, NC could take passengers to Washington DC and on to New York or south to Florida. If they took the train west, changing trains in Charlotte, they could see the U.S.A. by rail. If the passengers decided to ride, without changing trains, "to the end of the line" going west, they would disembark in Rutherfordton, NC.

Cotton was the area's cash crop. The average cotton bale weighs approximately 500 pounds and is about 6 feet long by 3 feet wide by 2 feet thick. In the cotton ginning season, it was not unusual to see hundreds of cotton bales waiting at the depot to be loaded on freight trains, headed for Carolina textile mills. The railroad had become the lifeblood of the area and continued to be a major part of Matthews. However, it seems all things must come to an end. Passenger service ended in Matthews on November 17, 1958. The station remained in operation eight more years but on May 9, 1966, a sign was tacked on the wall of the Depot. It declared that the railroad had the "authority to discontinue Matthews as an agency station". The station closed shortly after and shippers made arrangements through Charlotte. Matthews Building Supply, on West Matthews Street, still gets some shipments by rail.

Standing idle for many years, the old train depot was eventually sold and it was relocated. It was home to several different businesses and part of the Depot Shopping Center. In February 1999, the Town of Matthews purchased the Depot. It was moved close to its original location parallel to tracks, restored and is now a focal point of Matthews Station Street. Today, the Matthews Chamber of Commerce

offices occupy the train depot offices. The original ticket window, where people purchased their fare, is still there. Also inside is a display of old Matthews photos and Seaboard Railroad artifacts. If it hadn't been for the train, Matthews would not have had the merchants or a way for local farmers to ship their cotton and other opportunity for Matthews to grow into a metropolitan locale.

Paula Lester, March 5, 2016