

Exchange Hotel & GFreight Depot

From Ann Miller's Antebellum Orange:

Exchange Hotel, ca. 1860



“The site of the Exchange Hotel was originally occupied by a tavern built to serve the Louisa Railroad, which reached Gordonsville in 1840. The sites of the tavern, depot and rail terminus were owned by Robert King of nearby Annadale, who sold the railroad the land for the depot and terminus and retained a half interest in the tavern land when he sold it to James Hunter in 1839. Richard Omohundro, a contractor for the railroad, was operating a tavern on the site soon afterward and later purchased the property from Hunter and King, finally acquiring full title in 1859.

“This earlier tavern burned in 1859. The present building, conceived as a more elegant stopping place than the tavern, was completed ca. 1860, possibly executed by Gordonsville master builder Benjamin Faulconer.

“During the Civil War, the Hotel was taken over by the military authorities to serve as the headquarters for the Gordonsville Receiving Hospital. One of the major hospitals of the Confederacy, the Receiving Hospital extended to a number of subsidiary buildings and camps in

the town and vicinity of Gordonsville. Over 23,000 wounded were admitted in less than one year; over 6,000 of them in one month's time.

"Omohundro sold the Hotel to Henry Jones in 1863--subject, of course, to the military occupation of the building. After the war, the Hotel was refurbished and served as a railroad hotel until the early 20th century. Later in the century it was converted into apartments, then stood derelict for a number of years. In the early 1970's, it was rescued from demolition by the Gordonsville historical society, Historic Gordonsville, Inc. and restored. Now appearing substantially as it did on the eve of the Civil War, the building serves as headquarters for Historic Gordonsville and as a community center, and contains exhibits on local history.

"Built in the Greek Revival style, the Exchange Hotel stands three stories high, with a low, overhanging hipped roof and interior chimneys. Each level is two rooms deep on either side of a central stairhall. The lowest story of the Hotel, which originally held the public and dining rooms, is of brick, while the upper stories, which held more elegantly appointed sitting rooms and bedrooms are of frame. The original Greek Revival woodwork survives or has been reproduced. The two-story front verandah, of frame supported on brick piers, is original. The outside stairs have recently been restored: these led directly from the verandah down to a brick walkway leading to the train tracks, allowing travellers direct access to their rooms without having to pass through the public area of the Hotel.

"The smaller masonry building just to the north of the Hotel is the old kitchen. A latticework passageway originally connected the kitchen to a side door of the Hotel."¹

Additional information from Historian Duff Green in an article from the *Orange County Review*:

"Exchange Hotel is Jewel of History"

"Whereas Old Gordon Inn holds the attention of historians interested in Gordonsville, the Exchange Hotel is the jewel of Historic Gordonsville Inc. The reason is simple.

"Only a monument and several photographs can be seen today of the tavern built and run by Nathaniel Gordon from 1794 to 1820, whereas the Exchange Hotel is live and well. The old inn, which gave Gordonsville its name, was demolished in 1947.

"The Exchange Hotel was not constructed until 1859 but in 1992, it remains in almost 'mint condition,' despite its 133 years of age.

¹ Ann Miller, *Antebellum Orange, The Pre-Civil War Homes, Public Buildings and Historic Sites of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Moss Publications, 1988), 50-51.

“The demise of Gordon’s tavern began in 1836 when the General Assembly of Virginia approved the charter for a proposed railroad to run from Richmond west to Louisa. There had been north and south railroads, but none were running inland.

“The business leaders of Richmond wished to tap the western markets toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. Their plan was first to go as far as Louisa Courthouse. This 54-mile line was completed in 1838. It was named the Louisa Railroad and the project was such a success that stock was immediately sold for an extension further west.

“The question was, should the line go due west to Charlottesville or northwest to Gordonsville? A meeting was called on July 20, 1838. Business interests in both Charlottesville and Gordonsville sent the most influential representatives of their communities.

“The gathering was duly reported in the *Richmond Enquirer*, a widely read newspaper of the day. Former Governor James Barbour of Orange County was the first to speak on behalf of the Gordonsville route.

“A rebuttal was given by U.S. Senator William Cabell Rives of Albemarle County who explained why he believed the railroad should go straight to Charlottesville.

“Then spoke Justice Philip Pendleton Barbour of Gordonsville, one of Orange County’s leading citizens who at the time was serving on the United States Supreme Court. He strongly advocated the Louisa to Gordonsville route.

“The final speaker was Thomas Walker Gilmer, the presiding Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, who advocated the Charlottesville plan. Many others spoke and there was much debate, but after a vote the large majority went in favor of Gordonsville.

“So the November 22, 1829 issue of the *Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser* ran the following notice: **The Louisa Rail Road. The subscribers of the New Stock which was raised to extend the Road from Louisa Court House to Gordonsville, are hereby notified that the last instalment is now due, and that unless payment of all that is due be made on or before the first day of December next, legal steps will be taken to coerce payments. Nathaniel Thompson, Treasurer.**

“In 1840 the Louisa Railroad had reached Gordonsville and there was promise of great things to come. The tracks were laid to a point about two-thirds of a mile south of the Old Gordon Inn and beside the dirt road leading to Louisa and Richmond.

“Richard F. Omohundro was a railroad contractor who knew a good thing when he saw it. In the summer of 1840 he made application to the County Court in Orange to operate a tavern near the depot that was being built near the end of the rail line.

“Omohundro wanted to make it coming and going. He also opened a stage stable nearby. Little mention during this period can be found on the activities of Old Gordon Inn. The new railroad grabbed all the news.

“In early 1839, Omohundro’s tavern caught fire and burned to the ground. By this time its owner was one of the most successful businessmen in town. He ran a stage stable, a tavern with an associated eating house and was active in the development of the Blue Ridge Turnpike, which ran from Gordonsville to the Shenandoah Valley by way of Sperryville.

“Omohundro immediately replaced the tavern with his magnificent Exchange Hotel. It was a showplace of the area when completed.

“The Louisa Railroad in 1850 had changed its name to the Virginia Central and ten years later, one Charles W. Turner described Omohundro’s new structure in a railroad advertisement. It read as follows:

“The Exchange Hotel in Gordonsville. It is an elegant stopping place. Ladies and their escorts stroll about the specious high-ceiling parlors and other public rooms, into the central hall, made notable by a broad staircase with a handsome balustrade, and out on the wide, columned veranda, extending across the front of the hotel, and supported by brick pillars above the ground floor. Steps lead up the veranda from the lawn which stretches to the railroad tracks.

“The Exchange Hotel was the center of Gordonsville’s social life and few suspected that within a few short years, it would be gone with the wind. Gordonsville became caught in the middle of a great strife.

“The community and its railroad to Richmond had been joined with the Orange and Alexandria Railroad in 1854. This junction became of vital importance to the Confederacy. It was the first war where railroads would play a major part.

“Beginning with the Battle of Cedar Mountain in Culpeper County, the Exchange Hotel was taken over by military authorities as one of a group of buildings known as the Gordonsville Receiving Hospital.

“The sick and wounded were placed on trains and sent to Gordonsville. According to H.H. Cunningham’s book, *Doctors in Gray*, the Receiving Hospital admitted more than 23,000 casualties in less than one year. Many who died were buried in the open fields behind the Exchange Hotel.

“There arose much uncertainty in the early years of the war. Perhaps it was this apprehension which caused Richard Omohundro to sell his fine hotel to Henry W. Jones, ‘subject to the military use and occupation of the Confederate States of America.’ The deed was recorded in Orange County Clerk’s Office on September 16, 1862.

"Little was written during the years immediately following the war, but between 1870 and 1880, the town began its reconstruction.

"Gordonsville's recovery, in a large measure, was due to its original founding--a strategic location. This time, however, it was the railroad junction. Nathaniel Gordon succeeded because of the famous crossroads.

"There were no dining cars in those years. Trains would stop in Gordonsville, passengers would disembark, and enjoy the dining rooms of the Exchange Hotel. This business became so successful that two other hotels were constructed several hundred yards north beside the tracks. They were the Magnolia House and the St. John's Hotel.

"Still, these facilities were unable to accommodate the great demand of passengers to be fed and it was then that the famous Gordonsville 'waiter carriers' began their trade.

"As one editor of the period wrote in 1871: **Gordonsville, the next station reached, and the junction of the Orange and Alexandria with the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroads, is an important point, though a small town in itself. Upon the arrival of our train, we were surrounded with a swarm of old and young...of both sexes, carrying large servers upon their heads, containing chicken, eggs, fried ham, pies, cakes, etc...**

"Thus Gordonsville became known as *The Fried Chicken Capital of the World*.

"A new specter appeared in the minds of Gordonsville businessmen in 1879, when plans were revealed to construct the Charlottesville and Rapidan Railroad. It would go west and run directly from Orange Courthouse to Charlottesville, bypassing Gordonsville.

"There were conflicting stories of how and why this occurred, but it was the beginning of the end for Richard Omohundro's Exchange Hotel.

"Much of Gordonsville's western area trade was lost to Somerset and Barboursville. Local hotels began to lose business and even the great land boom of 1890 ended in a bust.

"The three hotels continued to operate well into the 20th century but not with the vigor they once enjoyed. The St. John's Hotel was torn down, the Magnolia House was converted into a private residence, but the Exchange Hotel continued its struggle.

"It was a respected place, but fewer trains stopped and dining cars were added. The automobile was replacing passenger travel and it became full circle as far as Gordon Tavern was concerned. Had it become a *Holiday Inn*, it may have survived."²

² Green, Duff. "County Flashback: Exchange Hotel is Jewel of History." *Orange County Review*, February 13, 1992, 9.

The train depot helped spur the growth of many small businesses in Gordonsville, including that of the Exchange Hotel.

From Ann Miller: The Gordonsville Freight Depot Mid-19th c.

“In 1841, Robert King sold 2 acres to the Louisa Railroad Company for the terminus of the railroad line from Richmond and for a depot site. The original passenger depot and its 1904 replacement have both been demolished, but at least a portion of this freight depot...[appeared] to be early or original, dating from before the Civil War, and was probably built soon after the first passenger depot was constructed. The Louisa Railroad, as it grew, became the Virginia Central in the early 1850's and the Chesapeake & Ohio by the 1870's.

“This one-story frame structure, raised on piers to a height convenient to serve passing trains, has undergone many alterations over the years. The 1878 Grey map of Gordonsville shows the building as much larger than it is now. The now vanished section, which extended toward the Exchange Hotel, may have been the original passenger depot.”³



³Miller, 50-51.