

The Fried Chicken Ladies of Gordonsville

From Orange County historian Frank Walker:

“One particular facet of Gordonsville’s post Civil War rail-based economy involved an enterprising group of women in the town’s black community. The core of that community was Brown Town, one of the county’s freemen’s villages which a Brown family was instrumental in establishing. With so many passenger trains stopping in Gordonsville, the ladies saw a demand for some sort of food business that could offer passengers something to eat as long as it was instantly available right at the station.

“Before long, the ladies were meeting trains with trays of items such as fried chicken, pies and coffee. A tray would be held up to the passenger’s window, the food selection made, and money in payment put on the tray. America was being exposed to fast food service in action at Gordonsville, involving folks whose grandchildren would later claim that fast food was an invention of their day. A few men and children also helped with the work, but the remembered symbol of the enterprise remains the ‘Fried Chicken Lady’.

“The food service worked beautifully, and rail passengers began to look forward to the Gordonsville stop, describing the community variously as ‘the fried chicken capital of the world,’ or ‘the chicken wing capital of the universe’, or some other such high compliment. The business finally tapered off during the depression years, then was briefly revived in the early years of WWII troop trains. Health Department regulations about food preparation and serving, the gradual move of railroads to cars with sealed windows, and some insist, the complaints of nearby hotel and restaurant owners to the town leaders, finally put the Gordonsville Fried Chicken Ladies out of business for good. But it is a time worth remembering. In the summer of 2002, a tourist information panel recalling the work of the Ladies was dedicated during a Gordonsville African-American street festival. It stands in the yard of the Exchange Hotel Museum, overlooking the railroad tracks where the Fried Chicken Ladies earned their place in Orange County’s History. “¹

The Tourist Information Panel

The tourist information panel erected in memory of the Gordonsville Fried Chicken Ladies still currently stands in the yard of the Gordonsville Exchange Hotel Museum. Even though the photos are a bit weathered since the summer of 2002 when they were first placed, they continue to give testimony to the entrepreneurship of Gordonsville’s women in the “Fried Chicken Capital of the World” of the 1800s.

¹ Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 208-9.

A view of the information panel entitled *Gordonsville's Legendary Chicken Vendors*:

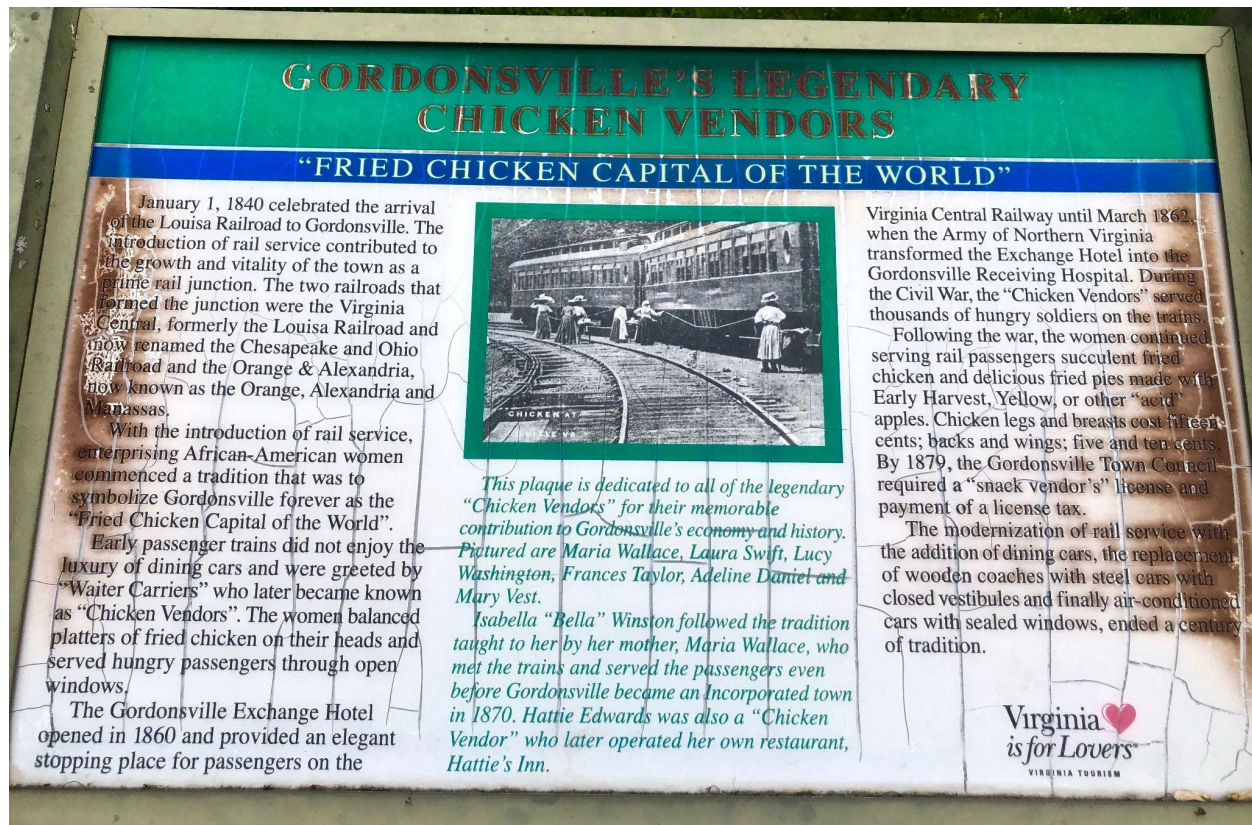


Photo Courtesy of Linda Carlton

The Inscription (in black lettering) reads as follows:

"January 1, 1840 celebrated the arrival of the Louisa Railroad to Gordonsville. The introduction of rail service contributed to the growth and vitality of the town as a prime rail junction. The two railroads that formed the junction were the Virginia Central, formerly the Louisa Railroad and now renamed the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad and the Orange & Alexandria now known as the Orange, Alexandria, and Manassas.

"With the introduction of rail service, enterprising African-American women commenced a tradition that was to symbolize Gordonsville forever as the 'Fried Chicken Capital of the World.'

"Early passenger trains did not enjoy the luxury of dining cars and were greeted by 'Waiter Carriers' who later became known as 'Chicken Vendors'. The women balanced platters of fried chicken on their heads and served hungry passengers through open windows.

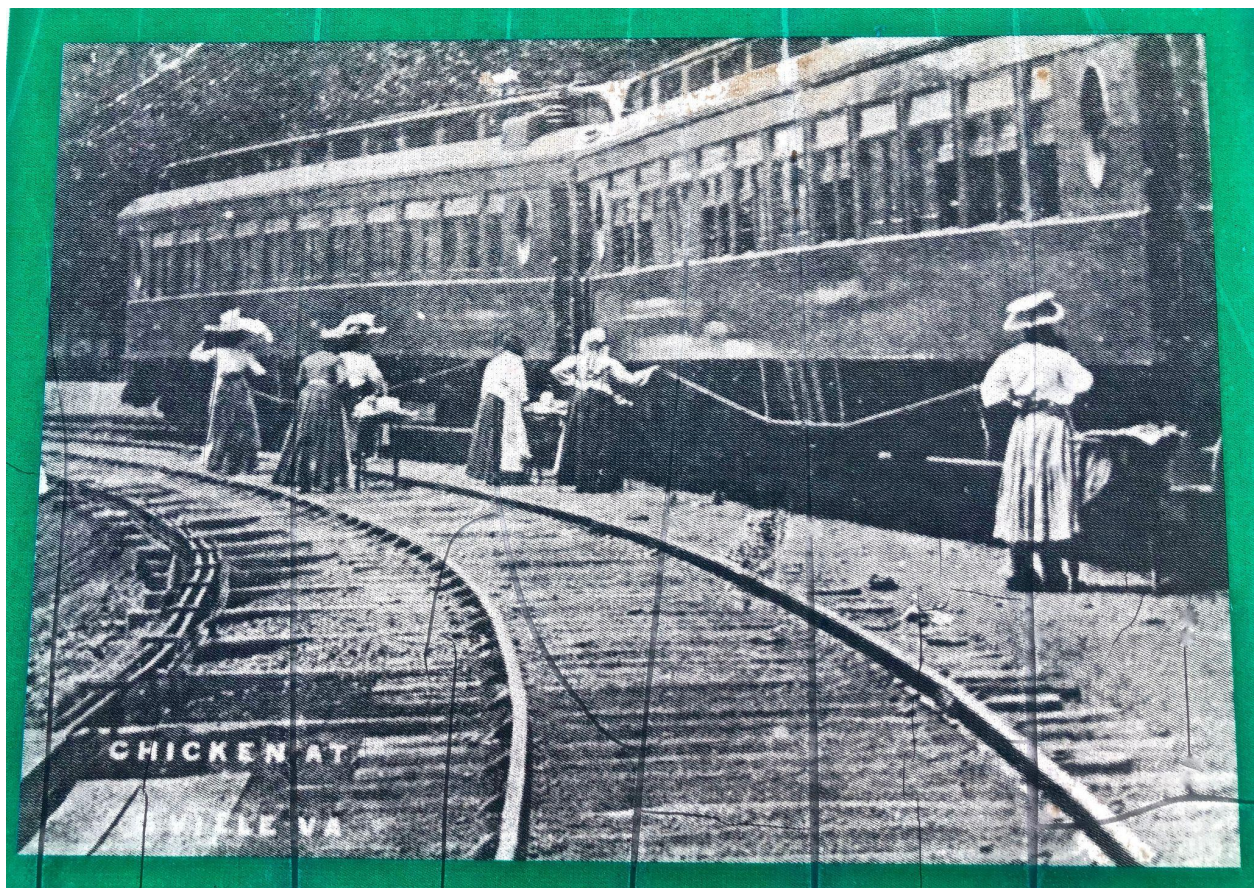
"The Gordonsville Exchange Hotel opened in 1860 and provided an elegant stopping place for passengers on the Virginia Central Railway until March 18, 1862, when the Army of Northern

Virginia transformed the Exchange Hotel into the Gordonsville Receiving Hospital. During the Civil War, the 'Chicken Vendors' served thousands of hungry soldiers on the trains.

"Following the war, the women continued serving rail passengers succulent fried chicken and fried pies made with Early Harvest, yellow or other "acid" apples. Chicken legs and breasts cost fifteen cents; backs and wings five and ten cents. By 1879, the Gordonsville Town Council required a 'snack vendor's' license and payment of a license tax.

"The modernization of rail service with the addition of dining cars, the replacement of wooden coaches with steel cars with closed vestibules and finally air-conditioned cars with sealed windows, ended a century of tradition."

A photo from the information panel entitled "Gordonsville's Legendary Chicken Vendors" is below: :



Photographer and origin of the picture on the information panel are unknown.

The inscription (in green on the panel) specifically concerning the women reads:

“This plaque is dedicated to all of the legendary ‘Chicken Vendors’ for their memorable contribution to Gordonsville’s economy and history. Pictured are Maria Wallace, Laura Swift, Lucy Washington, Frances Taylor, Adeliine Daniel and Mary Vest.

“Isabella ‘Bella’ Winston followed the tradition taught to her by her mother, Maria Wallace, who met the trains and served the passengers even before Gordonsville became an Incorporated town in 1870. Hattie Edwards was also a ‘Chicken Vendor’ who later operated her own restaurant, Hattie’s Inn.”