

It is July 31, 1952, at Ashland, Kentucky, and for the last time Otho McFarland is giving his engineer the "high-ball" for Denton, Kentucky, the next depot down the line. No more will Otho's "All-a-board" ring out at the Ashland depot. Looking on from the doorway is Assistant Conductor R. E. Long of Ashland, who was in his 34th year with the C&O. Note that Otho wears a Kentucky Colonel's tie while Conductor Long wears a standard-issue tie. (C&O Ry. photo)



Captain Otho McFarland— A C&O Conductor

by Charles W. Bogart

In one of Erik Sansom's *Toy Truck Railroad* comic strips, Jeb and Casey argue over whether being employed by a railroad is just a job or a divine calling. I believe that "Captain" Otho McFarland would have agreed with Casey when he tells Jeb that "Working for the railroad is a mighty fine honor. One should get down on his knees every day and thank their lucky stars that they are privileged enough to work for such a noble institution."

Otho McFarland was born at Richmond, Kentucky, on May 9, 1876. He would later adopt the title of Captain as part of his name. It was not uncommon during the 19th century for railroad conductors to be addressed as "Captain"—just as the naval officer or mariner in charge of a ship was referred to as a captain, so the conductor in charge of his train was called "Captain."

Lexington, Kentucky, was served by four railroads in the 1890s. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad (L&N) had trackage from Louisville to Eastern Kentucky via Lexington, and from Lexington north to both Cincinnati, Ohio, and Maysville, Kentucky. The Cincinnati, New Orleans & Texas Pacific Railway (CNO&TP) had a route running south from Cincinnati through Lexington and on to Chattanooga, Tennessee. The Louisville Southern (LSRR) provided service between Louisville and Lexington on a route parallel to the L&N. Finally, the Chesapeake & Ohio had its line from Ashland to Lexington, with trackage rights on to Louisville, Kentucky.

In the late 19th century, child labor laws—where they existed—were poorly enforced. Times were tough and children were expected to start supporting themselves

and their families as soon as possible. At the age of 13, in 1889, Otho McFarland went to work for the L&N as a water boy at Lexington, Kentucky. The next year he switched employers and went to work for the LSRR. After only 60 days with the LSRR, the railroad became aware of the fact that Otho was only 14 years old and discharged him. Otho, however, quickly found employment with the City of Lexington as a lamp lighter. Street lighting in Lexington, at that time, was provided by lamps fueled by natural gas that had to be turned on and lit each night and then turned off in the morning.

At the age of 15, in 1891, Otho was hired on by the CNO&TP as a call boy, responsible for locating a train's crew, at their home or place of boarding, and informing them when they were due out next over the road. After one year with the CNO&TP

Otho returned to the L&N as a brakeman working off the extra board. He would continue to work off the L&N extra board until 1895, when he went back to work for the CNO&TP as a brakeman. Otho likely moved between these three railroads for employment as calls to work waxed or waned with seasonal and national demands for rail service.

In 1897 Otho left the CNO&TP for the C&O. On July 30, 1897, at the age of 21, Otho hired on to the C&O as a brakeman working off the extra board. The C&O was starting to penetrate the Big Sandy Valley at this time to serve the coal industry developing along the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River. As the C&O moved up the Big Sandy Valley it developed a large trade in the movement of coal, and these numerous coal runs led to a demand for more crews. Otho thus relocated to the C&O's Big Sandy Division as steady work was available there.

Being a diligent worker Otho applied for and was promoted to freight train conductor on October 4, 1904. He soon moved from working the extra board to working as a conductor on regular coal hauls out of the Big Sandy Valley to Russell, Kentucky. Otho would spend the next nine years working as a conductor on coal trains carrying the mineral wealth of Eastern Kentucky to the industrial Midwest. It was during this period in the Big Sandy Valley, in 1901, that Otho married Mattie, his sweetheart from Lexington.

Otho took another step upward on October 13, 1913, becoming a conductor on the local Big Sandy passenger trains. Among the trains Otho worked on were the Wayland-to-Beaver Creek run and the Pikeville-to-Elkhorn City run.

With the downturn of the economy in the early 1930s the C&O began cutting back on its passenger and freight service. This resulted in trainmen with seniority displacing those with less seniority. In order to continue working for the C&O, Otho had to move back to Lexington, where he found employment as a freight train conductor.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 the U.S. economy began to recover as orders for American goods began to pour into from Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. During 1940 and 1942 rail traffic began to grow by leaps and bounds. Names on the C&O extra boards decreased as the demand for regular crews increased. In the midst of this, Otho was able to bid for and win a job as assistant conductor on the "Martha Washington" in 1941.

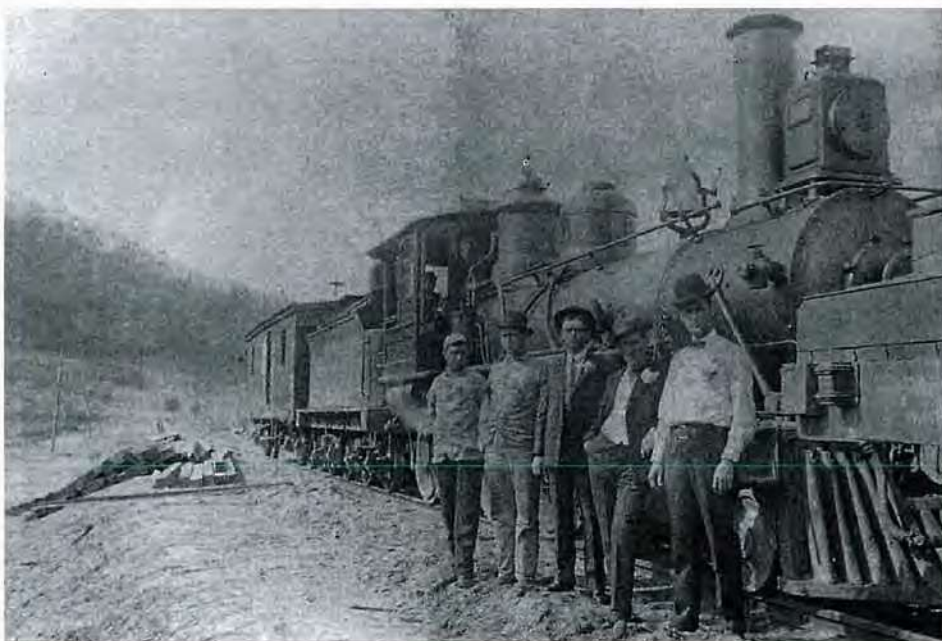
The "Martha Washington" was the nickname at the time for the Ashland-to-



above: Otho McFarland and a group of fellow freight conductors pose in 1899 somewhere in the Big Sandy Valley.

below: Otho poses, at far right, in front of Consolidation No. 538, built by Richmond in 1905. The engine was in work train service at Pikeville, Ky., on May 1, 1905.

bottom: Otho, at far right, poses with his train crew and a stationmaster and his assistant on the Big Sandy Division circa 1910. The fog in the scene is coal smoke from the stack settling on the ground, turning to black all it touches. No. 566 was a 2-8-0 Consolidation built by Richmond in 1906. (All via Charles Bogart)





above: Otho stands to the right outside of a train order office, circa 1935.

right: Otho, as conductor, has exercised his privilege of commandeering a set of seats to set up his office. Spread out in front of him are reports to be made and tickets to be turned in. The metal box just visible between the clipboard and the seat was used by Otho to carry his C&O-issued equipment. (Both via Charles Bogart)

Lexington (and Louisville extension) of the *George Washington*. In 1948, at the age of 72, Otho became conductor of the *George Washington* on its run from Lexington to Ashland and back. On July 31, 1952, at the age of 77—and after 55 years of service with the C&O—Otho retired from the railroad. His retirement was marked with considerable ceremony by the C&O at both Ashland and Lexington.

With his ticket punch and other equipment turned in to the C&O, Otho retired to his Shady Lane Farm in Fayette County, Kentucky, where he raised goats for milk. In 1962, at the age of 86, Otho died and was buried in Fayette County.

Otho's loyalty to the C&O was summed up in his closing remarks as he thanked fellow employees for the retirement gifts showered on him. Among the presentations was the proverbial gold watch. Upon receiving his watch, Otho commented that people living alongside the C&O's track did not need a watch—instead, "all they need is a C&O timetable. Then they just watch the trains go by and look at the timetable for the exact time of day." 





left: At the Lexington depot, Otho bids farewell to his train crew. From left to right are Riddel Horkill, the fireman; Otho; Squire Gallagher, the engineer; and R. E. Long, the assistant conductor. While the two conductors stand in traditional train-crew clothing neither the fireman's nor engineer's occupation is proclaimed by their clothes. (via Charles Bogart)

below: With his home in Lexington, Otho stayed at the Railroad YMCA at Russell, Kentucky, during his layovers in Ashland. The rooms were sparsely furnished, and the showers and lavatories were down the hall, but the food was good and the atmosphere conducive to sleeping. In this YMCA publicity shot, Otho is taking off his shoes in preparation for going to bed. Note the heavy shade over the window to block out sunlight for those sleeping during the day. Two issues of *Railroad* magazine sit on a shelf of the table in the lower left corner of the photo. (C&O Ry. photo)

