

The Cordova Branch Era

The Paducah & Memphis was built by two relatively late companies - the Paducah, Tennessee & Alabama Railway, and the Tennessee Midland Railroad. Around 1890, the PT&A began building southward from Paducah, Kentucky toward the Tennessee state line, with the eventual goal of reaching Florence, Alabama. The line reached Lexington (Midland City), TN, 119 miles from Paducah, in 1892 for a connection with its subsidiary, the TMR, which had been in operation westward of Memphis since 1889. TMR was called this the Memphis Branch. The TMR had earlier built from Memphis in the direction of Nashville, reaching Perryville, TN, on the west bank of the Tennessee River. The line between Lexington & Perryville was called Pea Vine also known as Perryville Branch. The duo went bankrupt in 1893, and was sold at auction to the Louisville & Nashville Railroad. In 1896 the L&N in turn leased the entire line from Paducah to Memphis to its subsidiary, the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway. Thus the lines became the 254-mile P&M Division of the NC&STL, crossing the NC's Nashville Division at Hollow Rock Junction (Bruceton), TN. The track below Bruceton became part of the NC&STL Railway between Nashville and Memphis via Jackson (the largest town between Nashville and Memphis) and Dexter (later Cordova), while the northern line to Paducah, a branch of the NC&STL Railway.



South half of Paducah & Memphis Division and Perryville Branch Map

The bold line from Memphis to Hollow Rock Jc. via Jackson is a main line.

Calhoun Street Station built in the late 1880's located at Calhoun Street and Main Street before the current Central Station that was erected in 1914. Research suggests that this Calhoun St. station was also used by four railroads, NC&STL, L&N, Southern and Kansas City, Ft. Scott & Memphis (later Frisco) may have been referred to as "Union Station". Memphis Union Station Company was chartered in Tennessee on September 25, 1909, for the purpose of operating union station. Construction of the facility began in April 1910 and the new station opened for service on April 1, 1912. NC&STL moved from CSS to MUS. The architectural design of the MUS was a source of pride for Memphis, and the main building was the largest stone structure about 31,000 heated square feet in Memphis. MUS was a jointly owned passenger terminal serving five railroads: NC&STL, L&N, Missouri Pacific, SSW (Cotton Belt) and Southern. Station tracks were of a stub-end design, meaning that all trains backed into Union Station. Additional track were available for storage and servicing of passenger cars and a roundhouse and turntable allowed locomotive servicing to be accomplished on site. The station was located in south side of East Calhoun Street, between South Second Street and South Third Street in Memphis downtown (see "Memphis Misconceptions" article in the NC&STL Preservation Society, Inc. Dixie Line newsletter issued November, 2004, page 6 for extra information).

By the 1920's, the Nashville to Bruceton to Memphis mainline passenger and freight corridor had become dominant, terminating at Memphis Union Station.

Six Pullman heavyweight cars were stripped to the frame and then completely rebuilt with modern 6-wheel, roller-bearing trucks, air conditioning, and modern "Art Deco" interior styling. The result was the streamliner "City of Memphis", powered by the fast old 1913 Baldwin class 4-6-2 #535 with it's 72-inch drivers, modernized and re-built with new cast frame and cylinders, large capacity 6-wheel truck tender, and streamlined shroud. This was the first streamliner built in a southern railroad's own shops, and the job was completed at a fraction of the cost compared with the traditional out shop sources. No. 535 was the only one painted blue and gray. This handsome-body streamliner was known as "Marie."



Left: Streamlined pacific #535 was the normally assigned power for this train from the inauguration in 1947 until circa early 1949. This picture was taken in Memphis in June 31, 1948. Michael Condren Collection.

For the next ten years or so, beginning May 17, 1947, the "City of Memphis" in its various versions made the 5 hour and 5 minute run from Memphis to Nashville via Cordova, Jackson and Bruceton, a 55 minute turnaround in Nashville, then back to Memphis in 5 hours and 35 minutes.



Late in 1949, a "J -3" class 4-8-4 #580 and six Pullman heavyweight cars head the eastbound "City of Memphis" out of Union Station at Memphis. Michael Condren Collection.



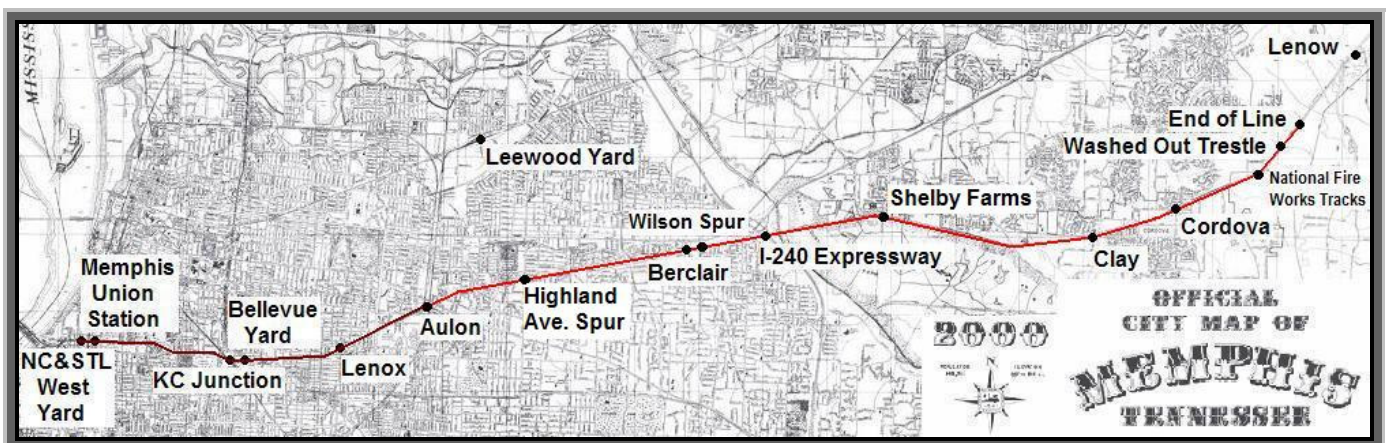
This view from the early 1950's shows NC&STL's City of Memphis GP-7 #754 eastbound at Aulon Junction heading for Cordova and farther, approaching the Poplar Avenue grade crossing (this was before Poplar was elevated above all the railroad tracks here). When NC&STL converted the City of Memphis from steam to diesel power EMD GP-7s were assigned. David Johnston Collection.

By the early 1950's, the streamlined 4-6-2 was long gone, replaced first by J3 4-8-4's (from "mid" 1949 until delivery of steam generator equipped Geeps in 1951, the train was handled by various J-3 class 4-8-4s. J-3 #580 seems to have been the locomotive most often photographed in this service)

and finally by a GP-7 diesel, and all cars with the exception of the Railway Post Office and one coach were gone as well (even the "City of Memphis" name was gone), but the daylight service between Memphis and Nashville continued into the years following the NC&STL's takeover by L&N in August 30, 1957.

The NC&STL main line was controlled by the train order since it was obtained from Tennessee Midland until installation of the new centralized traffic control in last August 1954. One of three dispatchers handled the trains in Bruceton for Nashville and Memphis a total of 228 miles. The passenger trains traveled at a speed of 60 mph, mixed freight trains up to 50 mph and military trains up to 40 mph on the main line. The line had about 12 trains per day (4 passenger trains, 6 mixed freight trains and 2 local trains), maybe up to 80 cars per train (averaged 35 cars), even the 4-8-4's had only 25. Most all the freight trains were short. John Arnold, one of my friends who is a member of NCPS society, of Somerville can remember riding in the City of Memphis train speeding across fast cross the Wolf River bridge and past the Cordova Depot from Memphis.

The last day of Memphis Union Station was March 31, 1964. After World War II passenger trains declined, FP-7 #615, in L&N's new gray and yellow color scheme, was hooked up in front of train no. 108's seven head-end cars and single coach including the passenger train still carrying a heavy volume of mail and express on its leisurely overnight trip from Memphis at 10:30 pm by Cordova to Somerville, Jackson, Nashville, Chattanooga and southeastern points. The day before its last trip, MUS was closed. It caused the main line to become less numerous. On January 11, 1966, the L&N applied to the Interstate Commerce Commission for permission to abandon the line. A large portion of the P&M has been abandoned due to duplicating lines both on the L&N system and the Illinois Central. In fact, the abandonment of the 61.86-mile P&M track in 1967 from Burkitt (west of Jackson) to Cordova was the one of the first major through-line abandonment by the L&N. In 1968 the tracks were removed. The 61.0-mile tracks between Burkitt, Jackson, Lexington and Bruceton stayed. They called this the Jackson Branch (see first map on page 5). The NC&STL Memphis West Yard, between Central Station and MUS, has been scrapped. The MUS property was sold to the United States Postal Service (Memphis main post office) for construction of a new mail sorting facility, and the station itself and buildings were demolished by February 1969. All coal chute, water tank, sand house, power house, engine house, freight houses, depot, platforms, tower, signal bridges and yards are gone. Today two old concrete retaining walls of the railroad overpass abutments on the south side of East Carolina Street can still be seen.



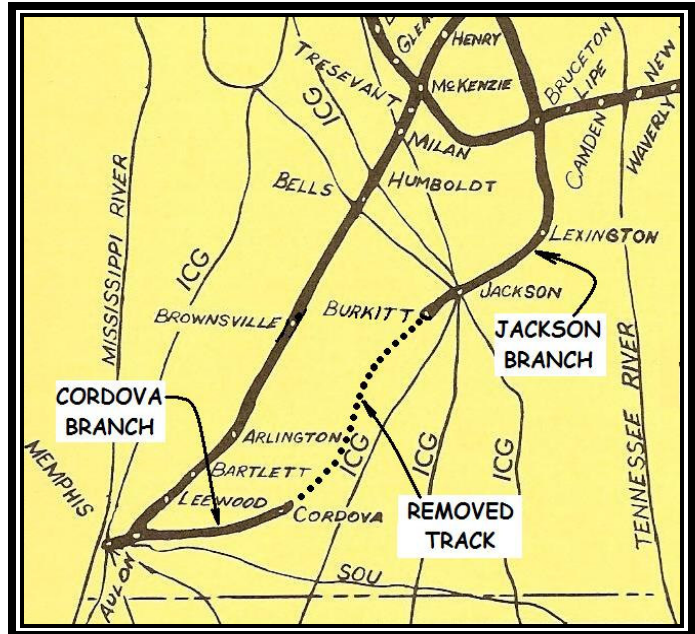
Map of Central Memphis & Cordova Branch of the CSXT

in the westernmost trackage of the NC&STL Railway System.

Purple line is today intermodal railroad. Red line is the Cordova Branch track to be removed.

After the track was removed from northeast of Cordova going east, the 13.34-mile track between Aulon and Cordova remained undisturbed to become a spur line called *Cordova Branch*. It was about the same time that part of the entire Cordova Branch track had been realigned southward for new Sam Cooper Blvd. (I-40) between west of NC&STL Berclair Station and west of the Wolf River iron trestle where I-240 Expressway overpass is present. The very small covered sitting area with the name markers painted yellow with green trim at Berclair shelter on each end at Perkins Road has disappeared. This branch allowed the train to travel up to 40 mph. Approximately 20 mixed freight trains per day and 4 to 6 trains per week served for about 11 shippers, delivering electric power supply material, brick & block, lumber & wood products, cement / concrete / aggregate, bread & pastry flour and munitions. This branch had three both-end switch sidings to use at Highland Avenue Spur, Berclair & Clay Stations. There was over a mile long main siding between Clay & Cordova. It was one of few longest sidings between Memphis & Jackson. The siding reduced about 38 cars limit (based on 55 feet per car) from Cordova to Clay west of Germantown Parkway by the time the main line pulled up to Burkitt. The Cordova Station may have three tracks. Both former passenger stations of Aulon & Cordova are currently in existence. The schedule (right) may be last printed for L&N, Nashville Division, employee time-table took effect on October 28, 1973 because no time schedule were used anymore.

Cordova & Jackson Branches Map
L&N Railroad Company, Nashville Division,
Time Table No. 9, December 14, 1975



CORDOVA BRANCH			
SOUTHWARD		NORTHWARD	
	Distance from Louisville	TIME-TABLE No. 8 Takes effect Sunday October 28, 1973 at 12:01 a.m. Central Standard Time	Car Capacity of Sidings based on 55 feet per car
		STATIONS	
	414.57	AULON 6.88	
	421.45	SHELBY FARMS 4.40	30
	425.85	CORDOVA 2.10	36
	427.95	END OF LINE	

In August 1977, when I was 10 years old my family moved from Jacksonville, Florida to Memphis, after my father, George B. Fleet, retired from the Navy. Both my parents' families were residing in TN. I saw there were still L&N trains on the former NC&STL main line. My parent's house where I resided since a kid is about 3 miles from the Cordova Branch. I rode across this track two times or more everyday on my way to school. I kept my eye on one L&N locomotive engine hauling several mixed freight cars and a red caboose. It traveled approximately 40 mph near Berclair Station heading for Cordova and returning back to Memphis two to three times per week. My family frequently traveled from our home in Memphis to Whiteville and Bolivar via Oakland and Somerville (all in TN) to visit my grandparents. I remember riding on the two-lane Highway 64 overpass across the railway bed between Oakland and Warren (west of Somerville). I asked my mother, "Why is there nothing under us?" She answered, "That was where the railroad track was laid."

When my mother was young in the 40s and 50s, she rode the City of Memphis passenger car from Whiteville Station to Lenox Station (near Aulon Tower) many times. I become curious to see the abandoned railroad track along Hwy 64. Everything was removed about the same year as I was born (1967). Between 1995 and 2000 Tennessee Department Of Transportation widened Highway 64 to four lanes. Part of the old NC&STL right-of-way was covered and could not be seen anymore.

The track used to run right behind the old Hart's Bakery built in the early 1950's at Summer Avenue and Mendenhall Road where NC&STL Wilson Spur is located. The bakery used to get a lot of flour in one to three 70-ton covered hoppers on their spur. The Wilson Spur area used to always smell great when the bakery was in operation. As I rode in the school bus around the 1980's I would get hungry smelling the bread. I was able to see many green & red switch stands. I saw the powered yellow light block signal at High Point Terrace less than a mile in the distance where I rode on the North Graham Road grade crossing. Sometime in late 1984, an ex-L&N GP38-2 #4102 pulled Memphis Transportation Museum's GP-7 #1586 (ex-Burlington Northern) & MTM passenger cars and parked on the Cordova siding for several weeks. MTM was a transportation company. They had many types of equipment not just trains. Over the years they have had airplanes, cars, buses, and trains.

About 1995 my last remembrance of the train movement on the former NC&STL main line was one painted Seaboard System MP15T switcher pulling about 10 cars without any caboose. It moved very slow (5 mph) by me at Mullins Station going east. It was headed for Clay Station where it is double tracks and near Cordova Station. Later four shippers averaged 10 mixed cars per train for 3 to 4 trains per week. The branch has only one both-end switch siding at the Clay Station where right now a mystery coach is sitting alone.

In November 1999, my Memphis railfan friend, Joseph Yarbrough, of Memphis was a conductor with his locomotive engineer, Dalton McClain (retired circa 2000) in CSX GP40-2 #6011 working on CSXT local LM794. Local LM794 worked the Cordova Branch one day a week and worked north out of Memphis the other 4 days. They were moving westbound toward Memphis (enroute Leewood Yard), the track curves to the left approximately 100-150 feet southwest of Macon Road at Lenow Road. They came to Cordova with the short hood leading. After switching out the cars and dropping them by at Edmund Materials, they ran long hood forward [at approximately 8-10 mph] on their return trip to Leewood. Upon rounding the slight curve to the left, Joseph looked out of the cab towards the back of the train. Dalton was restricted from seeing ahead due to the long hood of the locomotive and to the rear due to the curve. Joseph noted an unusual amount of dust and flying rocks. Four of the five cars had derailed. He yelled at Dalton to stop! Dalton had his hearing aid turned down to the lowest setting because he had just sounded the whistle for Macon Road. Joseph immediately got up and turned around and pulled the conductor's emergency brake valve bringing their train to an abrupt stop. One car leaned precariously to the south. The locomotive and the car next to it were the only ones to stay on the rails. The cause of the derailment was 'wide gauge' and a variety of track geometry defects. No one was injured. A permanent speed limit decrease from 25 mph to 10 mph had been placed into effect a few months prior on the entire Cordova Branch. Due to deteriorating bridge and track conditions, CSX Transportation decided to place a 10 mph permanent speed restriction in effect, rather than spend the money necessary to maintain a 25 mph speed limit. I was not aware there was any train wrecks or derailments reported earlier than 1999 on this line.

In March 2001, Joseph was promoted to locomotive engineer. Assigned CSX GP38-2 #2571, they departed Leewood Yard to work the Cordova Branch. He made a trip on the Cordova Branch. He said, "we (his crew) did not take any cars to Cordova because we were cleaning up the Branch prior to

discontinuance of service.” They pulled 5 cars from Edmunds Materials. They pulled one bulkhead flat car from Whittington Lumber Co. They returned to Leewood Yard with 6 cars. It was the end of an era. The former CSXT Cordova Branch (and former NC&STL main line) was later severed from the rest of the CSXT rail network, leaving only ghosts from the past to resume the trip.

On March 2001, I heard that the Cordova Branch was out of service. Here is the summary description of how the closing happened. On August 24, 2001, CSX filed with the Surface Transportation Board a petition for exemption to abandon a line of railroad known as the mid-town Memphis to Cordova Branch. STB reported December 12, 2001 stated that the traffic of these shippers had been declining, from 589 cars in 1999, to 472 cars in 2000, and 44 cars for the first 2 months of 2001. As traffic declined, CSX states that its losses have grown. CSX claims that it is not economical to continue to operate the line, and that traffic on the line does not cover the cost of operation. It must operate over seven bridges on the line, all of which are in need of substantial repair. The condition of the first two bridges (one of them crosses the 120 linear feet Cypress Creek creosote pine timber trestle bridge was built in 1921 has sustained major fire damage as a result of arson) causing CSX to impose an embargo of the line to avoid unsafe operations. The line remains embargoed. Since the subsequent discontinuance over the line, you may see what happened with materials being dumped, overgrown pastures, fallen trees and mystery stuff along the abandoned railroad right-of-way. I took the pictures below.

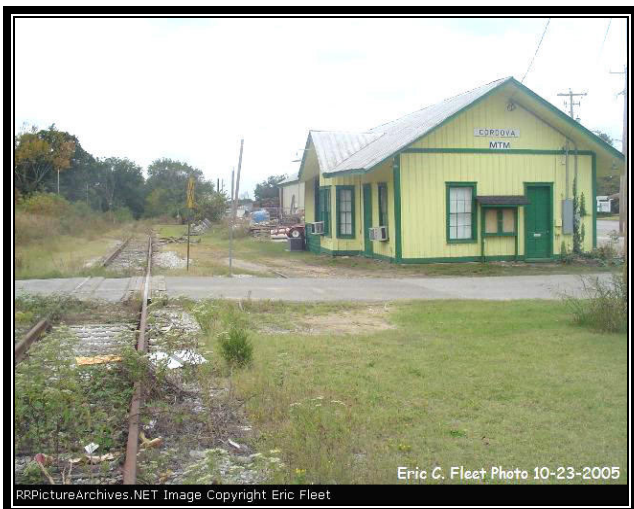


Left: This is the beginning of the Cordova Branch, the westernmost trackage of the NC&STL Railway system. The track to the right looking east by Aulon Interlocking Tower (milepost ONI 224.1) built 1908 used the electric interlocking plant at crossing of NC&STL, L&N, Illinois Central and Union Railway. Working in eight-hour shifts, the crews directed the passing of from 75 to 100 trains a day until the 1960's. The tower was a two-story structure totaling about 800 heated square feet. The track to the left goes to Canadian National Illinois Central double tracks and going north toward CSX Leewood Yard. The switch was removed in the mid-2005. The diamond tracks near the Poplar Avenue overpass were also

removed about that time. Today the tower is derelict and still using the electric system for CSX & Union Pacific Railroads with the heavy painted graffiti on all brick siding. Right, previous page: The densely growing kudzu is climbing on the ladder of a P-type US&S mainline block signal with control box. The overgrown trees are standing around them blocking the no longer used NC&STL main line. The signal power has been removed since the Cordova Branch track shut down. It is about 1-1/2 miles to Aulon Junction. This view is High Point Terrace looking west (milepost ONI 222.1).



There were two maintenance of way camp cars, one piggyback type flat car and the other a converted box car (loaded with signal equipment) coupled to this passenger car which has been scrapped from this siding at Clay Station (milepost ONI 214.0). This coach was a 54-seat coach, ex-Amtrak #5442, ex-RF&P #812. MTM didn't have a place to put it, so it authorized CSX to sell the car for scrap several years ago. Rather than haul the car off the line, the railroad hired a scrapper to cut it up on site but it never has been a success. Today it is sitting alone and is now strewn on the ballast west of Germantown Parkway, one of the Shelby County's busiest roads.



This picture is the freshly painted Cordova Depot. The grass and dirt cover the short track siding (right side of this old track) used for small industry. The long main siding was started from this point (left side now gone) continued to Clay Station. The original Cordova Station (milepost ONI 212.8) was an ex-public library. Note the letters read "MTM" under "Cordova" on the siding. MTM leased to CSX for a number of years until about 2001, it decided to sell the property. Without notice to MTM it was sold to a private business. MTM would have liked the opportunity to purchase it, but that did not happen.



The ground under the northeast end of the trestle is washed out about 1,800 feet to the end of line. The storm sewer flows to Grays Creek Drainage Canal from this collapsed trestle. Its location (milepost ONI 211.0) is the worst bridge on the Cordova Branch of the CSXT.



Above: This is the end of the Cordova Branch line. It is ex-NC&STL main line and has been abandoned beyond this point (milepost ONI 210.66) toward Lenow & Eads Stations in Shelby County. It was disconnected in 1968. The track to the left goes to Tennessee Valley Authority and Memphis Light, Gas & Water Division power substation. Photo taken by Mike Durff in the early 1980's. Right: In October 2007 the crew posted the warning signs on both sides of every railroad grade crossing along the entire Cordova Branch right-for-way. This view is seen from North Graham Street (milepost ONI 221.6) looking east toward Mullins Station (Shelby Farms) & Cordova.



Sadly, the busy NC&STL City of Memphis passenger, local and fast freight trains will not travel on this line anymore. The great smell of freshly baked bread is gone. Most colorful reflection switch stands are missing. A yellow light block signal is permanently out. The cross ties are so soft and moist they sink when stepped on. The wearing silver color on the top rails has lost its luster and become completely rusty. Everything on the line really looks bad. They are not the same as in past years and are sadly missed.

Individually, City & Regional Planning and Economics Research Associates were discussing how to use the light rail transit on the CSX corridors but they seem unsuccessful in negotiations. Around 2005, the Greater Memphis Greenline, Inc. proposed a 13-mile multi-use urban park/trail on a former CSX railroad right-of-way from the midtown Memphis to end of the Cordova Branch line in the suburbs of Shelby County. The Mission of GMG is to collaborate in a public-private partnership with local government in the development of the GMG and other unused railway right-of ways and easements in Memphis and Shelby County, to create a world-class recreational park/hiking-biking trail system. The president of the GMG is also a Memphis City Councilman. The only existing rails-to-trail project in the other Memphis area is the 1.7-mile Vollintine-Evergreen Greenline in Midtown. The V&E Community Association's Community Development Corp. bought the abandoned L&N track about 3 miles west of Leewood Yard from CSX in November 1996. The neighborhood took on the project as much to clean up the overgrown bed as to create a trail. GMG is trying to do this same thing on the Cordova Branch

Greenway. On October 2007, GMG declared that their negotiating team recently met with a senior representative of CSX, in preparation for a final sale at a fair price. CSX is clearing a swath in order to make room for their very large machine which pulls up their track. They have a senior arborist as a part of their crew, and they promise that they will take as few of the larger trees as they can. They are starting on the North side of Shelby Farms, and will work their way West. They hope it should take no more than three to six months to have the entire line cleared by Spring 2008.

From 1889, Tennessee Midland Railroad owned this line for 4 years until NC&STL successfully leased to L&N for 64 years. In 1957, L&N ownership controlled this line for 25 years when it merged to Seaboard System for 4 years, then merged to CSX now owning this Cordova Branch track for 22 years if the old line is removed in 2008. The total age of old main line itself will be 119 years old. NC&STL is one of those railroads serving two and half times longer than any another company. NC&STL is a powerful company to have kept this name so long!

I learned that in the late 1800's there were about nine railroads connecting into Memphis including Tennessee Midland Railroad obtained by NC&STL. It was that line in Memphis which became the first to be abandoned. It was in October 2005 that I got the idea to establish a website called "*Abandoned NC&STL Railway; Route Between Memphis, Jackson & Bruceton*". This website was dedicated to my parents; for their Christmas 2005 gift because they told me many stories about NC&STL.

I am interested in collecting more NC&STL histories, memories and pictures. This will allow me to improve my website and encourage others to develop an interest in learning more about the south half of Paducah & Memphis Division.

I have thought about a way to use the neat looking Cordova Depot. It was built in 1895 has 1,216 heated square feet, nice roof, good condition and the same painted color as in the early time. I think it would be a good idea to have a "*Cordova Railway Museum*" for the NC&STL Railway & Memphis Historical Railroad with an old train parked on a part of the original track between A Street and B Street as an exhibition. Probably, the historic landmark could be established with information of the history. This has taken place at Cowan Railroad Museum. It is very successful to the Town of Cowan and Franklin County Chamber of Commerce. This is likened to Jackson Depot and Railroad Museum which is on the National Register Of Historic Places. It recently celebrated the 100 years of the NC&STL Railway Depot (1907-2007). Remember, Shelby County & Memphis has the largest population in Tennessee and the Cordova Depot is in this county. They would need a large space for the parking on the property at the Cordova Depot for tours to come in. Because I enjoy being a computer-aided-drafting designer for a land developer, and because I love trains and historical preservation, the establishment of a "*Cordova Railway Museum*" would be my dream come true!

No more NC&STL Paducah & Memphis line but our memories of the great success of this train history is endlessness.

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 April 2008

EXCEPTION TO RULE 104 (d) DERAILS ON BRANCHES	
Train orders will not be required for operation on the following branches:	
Location	Name of Branch
Colesburg.....	Centreville Branch
Aulon.....	Cordova Branch