

In 1835, Joseph Martin provided a description of City Point in his *Gazetteer of Virginia*. Evidently, the development of the newly incorporated town had not proved fruitful, as he dismissed the village as “a place of no trade, except in a small retail way.” The village consisted of 25 houses, three taverns, three groceries, a school, and a hospital. This was only slightly larger than the rough little waterfront cluster that Roane had bemoaned in 1787. On the other hand, Martin emphasized the commercial importance of the port and its potential for transforming City Point into a major town. He cited an anonymous source claiming,

*Not only is a large foreign shipping business done here, but the white sails of domestic commerce daily gladden the eye, as it passes and repasses this port, freighted in its progress upwards with the wealth and productions, and exports of every clime, while its return carries to every port of our happy Union, the produce of our soil and our mines.” Exclusive of the ordinary shipping, there are steam, freight, tow and passage boats, which make this a stopping place in their passage up and down the river.*

Natural advantages along with infrastructure developed over the previous few years made this an important port. There were four or five wharves, “projecting a short distance into the river, within 30 yards of which is a sufficient depth of water to swim the largest ship that ever floated.” According to projections of the edge of the wharf relative to the shipping channel, substantial vessels could even dock right alongside the wharves.

While City Point offered a fine harbor and adequate port facilities, an efficient connection to Southside Virginia’s commercial hub of Petersburg was sorely lacking. By water, the journey had been reliable at times for vessels up to 150 tons. This was only possible due to improvements by the Lower Appomattox Company. However, the repeated formation of sand bars following the spring floods called “freshets” offset the progress on straightening and deepening the channel (Lutz 1957:27-29). By land, muddy, rutted roads severely hampered the alternative of wagon transport. Some merchants lamented that the movement of goods from City Point to Petersburg took longer than their journey from New York to City Point. One complained that the route between the two localities “may confidently be pronounced the most uncomfortable and fatiguing to any traveler than any other...between Petersburg and Boston.”

To address these transportation problems, local investors petitioned the House of Delegates to form the City Point Railroad. Only ten years after the opening of the nation’s first steam-driven railroad in New York in 1826, the railroad received its charter to build and operate a 9-mi. line between Petersburg and City Point. By January 1837, the stock offers had attracted the requisite amount of private investors for the Board of Public Works to buy an interest of 600 shares. In 1836, Chief Engineer John Couty surveyed the line and prepared a thorough planning report. Over the course of the next year and a half construction proceeded and the company purchased two locomotives, 28 four-wheel freight cars, one eight-wheel car, and two four-wheel passenger cars.

On September 7, 1838, the railroad carried its first wagons of passengers from Petersburg to City Point, and the first freight cars would follow a few days later (*Times-Register* 1938). Instead of

slow journeys by horse-drawn vehicles under unpredictable conditions, passengers and shippers of freight could now count on a train trip that took only one hour.

To take full advantage of its commercial potential, the City Point Railroad did not just invest in locomotives, cars, and laying of track. It also substantially improved the port facilities along the James River waterfront. According to a report for 1838, the company's directors envisioned a new wharf that could "admit vessels of the largest class alongside that reach City Point, together with suitable cranes for effecting the transition of produce and goods between the cars on the road and the vessels."

Couty's survey of the railroad and wharf development provides a far more comprehensive view of the entire City Point peninsula than any previous depictions. The "map and profile of the City Point Railroad" lays out the route and grades of the entire 9-mi. line from Petersburg to City Point. At the port terminus, Couty chose to depict in detail not just the tracks, depot, and company wharf, but also showed footprints of buildings and wharves along the entire waterfront, as well as the river shorelines, topography, streets, lots, selected vegetation, and buildings on the high ground of the village (Figure 10).