The Louisville & Nashville Railroad began by linking its namesake cities, and eventually grew to reach New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, and Atlanta. But Kentucky’s largest city was L&N’s home, heart, and headquarters, and the Bluegrass State’s top natural resource—coal—sustained the carrier that came to call itself “the Old Reliable.”

In the railroad’s official company history, published in 1943, the first chapter was titled “An Acorn is Planted.” Without question, the tree which became the L&N was rooted at the very spot in Louisville where the beautiful marble Romanesque Union Station, and its six-track trainshed, would open in 1891. Here was the L&N’s first passenger and freight station, built in 1858, a year before the first through train would operate to Nashville. Most of that structure lasted well over a century.

A major system shop at 10th and Kentucky—the old Kentucky Locomotive Works (which built 75 engines from scratch)—lasted until 1960, when South Louisville Shops opened. Some of the old KLW structures were still around decades later for storage of L&N company records and other uses.

One of the most imposing landmarks pictured is the 11-story L&N general office building (GOB), a slender structure facing Broadway, built in 1902 and doubled in size in 1930. It was thought to be the largest office building in the United States occupied by a single railroad company.

The stub-end Union Station handled passenger trains of L&N, Monon, Pennsylvania, and, beginning in 1963, Chesapeake & Ohio. (Central Station, on the Ohio River, handled trains of Baltimore & Ohio, Illinois Central, New York Central, Southern, and—until it closed in ’63—C&O.) Support facilities at Union Station included plenty of auxiliary coach yards to handle the annual 350 to 400 extra sleeping and office cars that would visit Union Station for Derby Day. Servicing facilities for passenger diesels were more spartan than the 15-stall 10th Street roundhouse that stood until 1937, but the term “roundhouse” survived for the small crew shack for passenger trains nearby.

The station remained in service until 1976, and was acquired by the city’s transit authority and restored in 1980. The GOB was sold to the state in 1984 for offices, but the large neon “L&N” sign high on the building’s east side is still illuminated at night—a fitting tribute to a Kentucky-based company that loomed large in Louisville’s history.

—Ron Flahary

Three key locations on the Old Reliable

The Louisville & Nashville Railroad began by linking its namesake cities, and eventually grew to reach New Orleans, Memphis, St. Louis, and Atlanta. But Kentucky’s largest city was L&N’s home, heart, and headquarters, and the Bluegrass State’s top natural resource—coal—sustained the carrier that came to call itself “the Old Reliable.”
Opened in 1905, L&N’s 50-acre shop complex 3 miles south of the General Office Building was for years Kentucky’s largest single manufacturing plant. The site was the junction of the main line with the double-track “Railway Transfer” freight line for trains to and from Cincinnati. “The Transfer” was so-called because it linked L&N’s original line with the Louisville, Cincinnati & Lexington “Short Line” that entered the city at East Louisville.

By 1915, South Louisville shop had built, from scratch, 282 steam locomotives, 184 passenger cars, and 14,209 freight cars, but a bitter 1922 labor strike brought an end to L&N home-built locomotives.

This view from the early 1940s looks northwest. Surrounding the main erecting shop are ancillary buildings covering every imaginable support function required by the construction or rebuilding of all equipment. On the “slip track,” engines were outfitted with a temporary apparatus that oiled the rails, allowing shop men to watch running gear thrash at high speed while the engine was barely moving.

South Louisville served L&N as its principal shop until successor CSX began phasing out operations in 1987. All work ceased in 1992, and the structures that oiled the rails, allowing shop men to watch running gear thrash at high speed while the engine was barely moving. South Louisville served L&N as its principal shop until successor CSX began phasing out operations in 1987. All work ceased in 1992, and the structures were razed two years later. Today, the University of Louisville’s football stadium stands on the site which was the mechanical heart of the Old Reliable in its prime.

1. Floyd Street Tower, L&N/SR (from Danville) crossing
2. L&N pattern shop
3. Foundry
4. Car shops
5. Blacksmith shop
6. 40-stall erecting shop, with transfer table
7. Tender and coach shop
8. Offices, Mechanical Dept., Building No. 1
9. Power plant
10. Freight car shop
11. “Slip track,” locomotive testing area
12. Ice dock
13. South Louisville North Yard
14. Employee pedestrian bridge (end of Central Ave.)
15. L&N main line to Union Station, south to Nashville
16. Fourth St. interlocking (L&N-Southern crossing)
17. Railway Transfer, double track, to/from Cincinnati
18. Scrap yard
19. Yard office, North Yard
20. 25-stall roundhouse, 85-foot turntable
21. Old Kentucky Wagon Works
22. Floyd St. (upper), Park Blvd. (lower)
Corbin, Ky., operational watershed

Corbin, a city of 7700, was—and remains—an operational watershed for L&N and successor CSX. When this photo was taken in 1945, it was the quintessential smoky railroad town, the launching pad for L&N’s heavy-haul, double-track corridor north to Cincinnati. L&N’s top steam power, 20 Baldwin M-1 class “Big Emma” 2-8-4s, were in service, and Lima would deliver the final 22 four years later. Four M-1s, identified by their large sand domes, are in this photo. South of Corbin, L&N was single-track, 2-8-2 and 4-8-2 territory.

L&N first entered Lynn Camp, as Corbin was originally called, in 1882, and began through service to Knoxville in 1883. Corbin would become a major bituminous coal hub and division point when the Cumberland Valley Division (which built eastward in 1886) reached a Norfolk & Western connection at Norton, Va., in 1891. After the CV got more coal feeder lines and L&N reached Atlanta (in 1905), Corbin got more yard tracks and a bigger roundhouse, backshop, and servicing facilities in 1921. Beginning in the Depression, Corbin was the only L&N locomotive shop besides South Louisville to do heavy class repairs. CV Division offices moved from Middlesboro to Corbin in 1948.

Corbin’s East Yard handled merchandise traffic, its West Yard, coal off the CV. While some functions would change, Corbin remains a traffic and maintenance hub for CSX, and both yards still function in the same manner; although the original shop and servicing areas were replaced by modern facilities south of the steam sites.

1. Backshop, 7 stalls
2. Roundhouse, 26 stalls, 100-foot turntable
3. North yard office, East Yard
4. East Yard
5. Cinder hoist and cinder pit
6. Mechanical Dept. offices
7. “RIP” (repair-in-place) car-repair tracks
8. Wrecker outfits (two)
9. Coaling station, with sand facility
10. Engine ready tracks, northbound (Cincinnati, CV, and Louisville Divisions)
11. Car clean-out tracks
12. West Yard
13. Engine ready tracks, southbound (K&A Division)
14. U.S. 25
15. Main line to Corbin depot, eventually Cincinnati
16. K&A Division to Knoxville, Tenn., and Atlanta, Ga.
17. Future (1956) U.S. Steel coal preparation plant
18. To “High Line,” for points north and east