

George H. Nettleton

Railroad Baron
1831-1896

by Daniel Coleman

At the peak of his career, George Nettleton lived in a West Bluffs mansion overlooking the Kansas City Stock Yards and Union Depot, both of which he managed in addition to the 800 miles of railroad track and 2,000 employees under his command. Nettleton was as close to a railroad baron as Kansas City could boast in the late 1800s, with the exception that he was not an owner of the various lines he controlled. Indeed, he had worked his way up in the railroad business from an entry-level, \$1 per day axe-man position from which a promotion, he was told when he started the job, depended solely upon one's "ability to make yourself useful."

George H. Nettleton was born November 13, 1831, in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, located just northwest of Springfield. His father, Alpheus Nettleton, served in the Massachusetts state legislature and was a local state militia and Congregational church leader. The youthful George, playing in the woods and river on the outskirts of his hometown, may not have known how much of the area belonged to the family of his own mother, Deborah Belcher Nettleton, whose father had owned the forested tract upon which Chicopee Falls was platted and built the town's foundry. George left Massachusetts to study civil engineering and mathematics at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, but his family struggled to afford the school, and he returned after just one year.

At the time of Nettleton's young adulthood, a direct rail route from the eastern seaboard to the Mississippi River was yet to be completed, and travelers made the weeks-long journey via a series of rail, steamship, and stagecoach transfers. Nettleton dreamed of joining in the important work of building a modern, transcontinental rail system, and to this end he took a position as a laborer with the New Haven & New London Railroad. From axe-man to rodman, draughtsman to leveler, Nettleton worked his way up, and caught the attention of the man who had hired him, Chief Engineer Josiah Hunt. Upon completion of the New Haven and New London line, Hunt headed west to work on the Terra Haute & Alton Railroad, with Nettleton as one of his hand-picked division engineers.

The 1850s saw Nettleton's career as an engineer advancing steadily along with the miles of track laid by the various railroads for which he worked. After completing his section of the Terra Haute & Alton line, Nettleton was hired as a division engineer for the Great Western Railway of Illinois (later part of the Wabash Railroad). He served for a time as an assistant, then general superintendent of the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad. The Hannibal Bridge opened under Nettleton's watch in 1869. Nettleton was also instrumental in the laying of one of the earliest rail lines in the Kansas City area when he oversaw completion of the Cameron to Kansas City road.

In 1872, Nettleton became the general superintendent of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad, and from his headquarters in Topeka, Kansas, supervised the line's extension as far as the state's western border. He moved to Kansas City in 1874 and turned his attention toward developing the growing transportation center his railroad endeavors had helped to create. He organized and managed the Kansas City Stockyards, and, at the helm of the Union Depot Company, administered the city's first major railroad station and yards in the West Bottoms. Nettleton was an important link to eastern capitalists who backed Kansas City business ventures. He helped incorporate the First National Bank of Kansas City and served as president of the Fort Scott & Memphis Railway.

Nettleton married twice: he met his first wife, Sarah Taylor, in Chicopee Falls. She died a year and a half after their marriage in 1858, and he married his second wife, Julia Augusta Hearne, in 1862. In the early 1890s, they built a 12-room, brick mansion on the West Bluffs at 7th Street overlooking Nettleton's industrial domain, but he died only a few years later at age 64, on March 26, 1896. In 1900, Julia Nettleton donated the structure to be used as a home for elderly women, and although these occupants moved to new quarters in 1917, the George H. Nettleton Home served as a living monument to its namesake throughout the twentieth century.

Sources

Conard, Howard Louis. *Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri*. New York, Louisville: The Southern History Co., 1901.

"Mrs. Julia Nettleton Dead." *The Kansas City Star*, 22 June 1923.

Sandy, Wilda. *Here Lies Kansas City*. Kansas City, MO: Bennett Schneider, 1984.

United States Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Eminent and Self-Made Men, Missouri Volume. New York, Chicago: United States Biographical Pub. Co., 1878.

© 2008