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# The Sentinel



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## Metropolitan Branch Turns 150

# President's Report to Members

## Fellow Members,

Happy New Year! It is good to put a successful 2022 with few health issues behind us. So now we move on to a better year. The fourth quarter for the society was eventful: hosting the Chesapeake Division of the NMRA annual business meeting, having our annual model train flea market, and for the first time, we had a model train display in the Denton Auditorium on December 10th and 11th. The Flea market earned the society almost \$500, but its main purpose is to get modelers together and share and exchange items. Many thanks go to Grant Berry, Brian Rochon, Mike Williams, Craig Close, and Joe Nevin for their help with this event. The model train display in December had an N Scale modular layout, a 4x8 Lionel layout donated to the society, and a large-scale train operating during the weekend. Hopefully we can make this an annual event, so local help is needed. In December we will meet with a website developer, and our desire is to get our new site done next year.

The first quarter of 2023 is somewhat quiet at this time with only Thursday work sessions scheduled. It has been decided by Grant and myself that if there is any major snow event that would require snow removal, the building will be shut down until it melts away. We are not young anymore and with the cost of fuel going out of sight it is not worth the expense of cleaning

sidewalks and the parking lot. Check our website and Facebook page for updates.

Models were a problem in 2022, particularly the color of Rapido's USRA single sheathed boxcar. After reviewing my emails, I found the notification we sent on the correct color for the cars the society was producing. Rapido has agreed to redo the shells and make an adjustment in the lettering. The shells should be here in January. The fuel tank cars from Tangent have been here. Some have been held up so they can be shipped with the boxcars. The model committee is looking into other model projects at this time, but with supply chain problems, raw material expense, and slowing economy, it may be some time until it is reasonable to develop something new.

Publications are still progressing at a slow pace. The St. Louis Division book is now moving along with the opening of state, regional, and local museums and historical societies. The archival staff should have the first chapter in our hands for review by December 2022. The food service car book is progressing with additional information and photos still popping up. It looks like the time has come to place a limit on pages to get this done. The headend car book is slowly moving. With my other duties as president and the last two months' activities in building, my time has been short. I hope to get back on track in the first quarter. The 2024

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 39)

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 P. O. Box 1608  
 Sykesville, Maryland 21784

**E-mail:** info@borhs.org  
**Website:** borhs.org  
**Missing Sentinel:** storemanager@borhs.org

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 president@borhs.org

**Grant Berry** - VICE PRESIDENT  
 vp@borhs.org

**Allen Young** - SECRETARY  
 secretary@borhs.org

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 GRAPHIC DESIGN—roberta@thundergrafix.com

## Contributors welcome:

*Articles, manuscripts, photographs, reviews, and other historical data are solicited for publication. Original material will be returned upon publication. Send all material to:*

**Ken Wing**, sentinel@borhs.org  
 or mail hardcopy material to  
 P.O. Box 1608, Sykesville, MD 21784

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## On the Covers

**FRONT COVER:** It's July 27, 1979, and commuter train 39 is about to make its evening stop at Point of Rocks. Suburban commuter traffic has substantially picked up by this time as evident by the five RDC's. Only a few years earlier the consist would have been a three car train. The vantage point for this photo was atop the CPL platform. A dramatic photo but against rules and regulations. (Photograph by Bruce Elliott, B&ORRHs Archives)



In this scene from 1946, a year after the new station was built, Train No. 9, the *Washington-Pittsburgh-Chicago Express*, is about to make its 2:14pm scheduled stop at Silver Spring on its way to Chicago. Visible in this view are the public address system loudspeakers under the canopy roof for announcing train arrivals, an unusual feature for a small-town station. In recognition of Washington, DC's suburban population growth into southern Montgomery County, starting September 27, 1936, all passenger trains stopped at Silver Spring, the only station on the Metropolitan Branch with this level of service or served by long distance passenger trains. (Photograph B&ORRHS Archives)

# B&O's Metropolitan Branch Turns 150

by Donald Plotkin

The 42-mile Metropolitan Branch didn't exist until more than 40 years after the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad began operation, but it would become an integral part of the main line westward and give the company its Capitol dome emblem. As the Metropolitan Branch officially turns 150 years old in 2023, here's a look back at how it came to be and the effect it had on Montgomery County, Maryland, which contains most of the line's mileage.

## Before The Metropolitan Branch

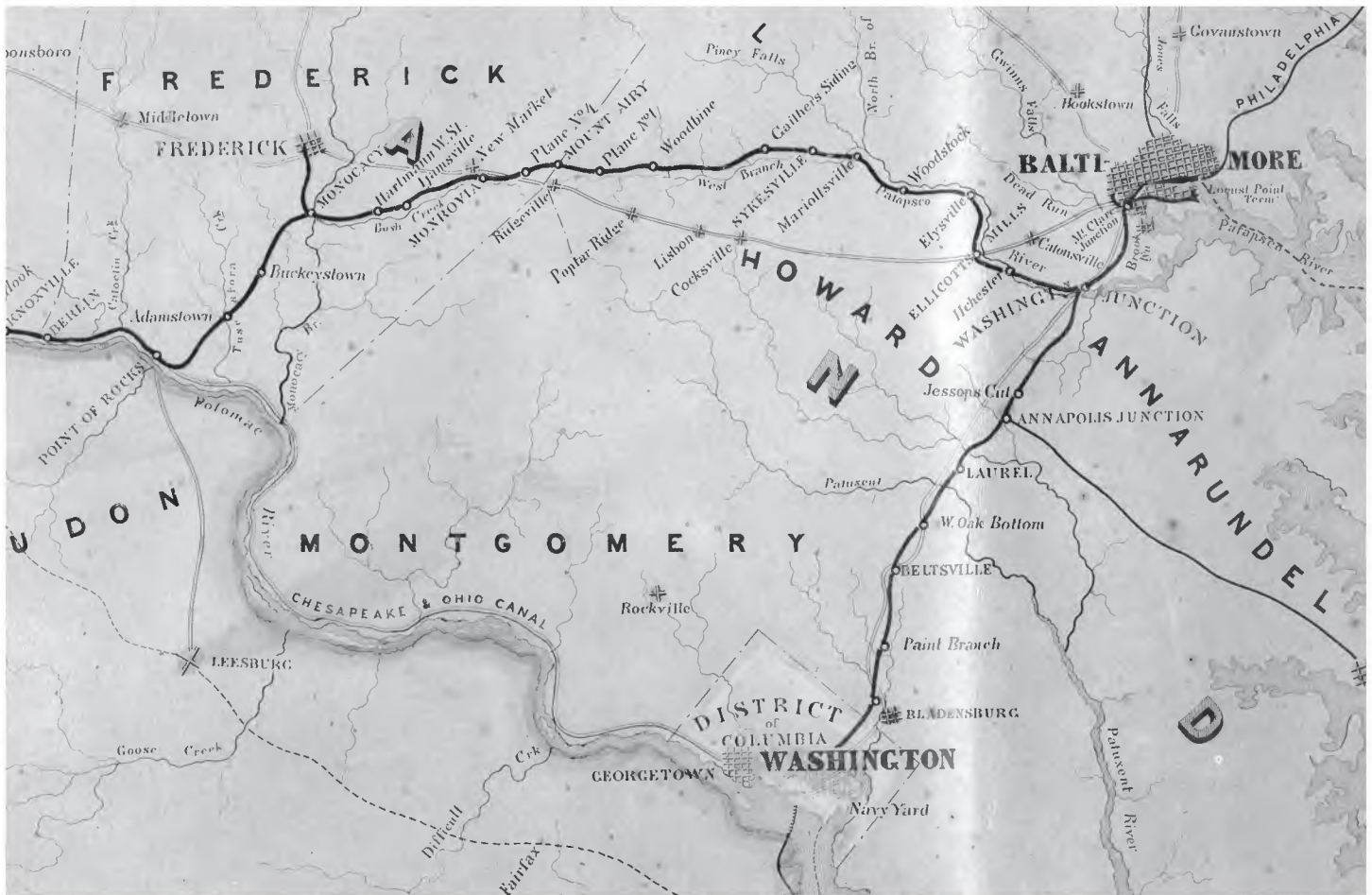
A sleepy southern town is one description often found of the nation's capital in 1860. Referred to then as Washington City, it occupied less than 25% of the District of Columbia's land area.<sup>1</sup> It had a population of about 60,000, compared with 212,000 for Baltimore and 565,000 for Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> It was not a major port or manufacturing center. It existed mostly

to serve the national government, housed in the federal buildings between the White House, or Executive Mansion as it was often called, and the Capitol, which did not yet have its now-familiar dome. It's main freight transport was via the Chesapeake & Ohio canal, whose eastern terminal was in Georgetown, then a separate community from Washington.

Washington got its first railroad service when B&O completed its line from Baltimore in 1835, but unlike the reason for building its route west from Baltimore, this line was intended primarily for passenger service to and from the nation's capital.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-five years later, in 1860, traveling to Washington from the west still required a trip across the Old Main Line to Relay (Washington Junction) and then southwest for 30 miles to the capital city. With its limited freight traffic potential, serving Washington more directly from the west was not a B&O priority.

Adjacent to the District of Columbia's northern corner is Montgomery County, Maryland. It occupies 507 square miles, and in 1860 its population was 18,000. Its largest town was Rockville, the county seat, with a population of about 400.<sup>5</sup> It was a county of mostly small farms.

Like many places in the country, Montgomery County wanted a railroad, and in the 1850s it came close to getting one. In 1853, the Maryland legislature granted a charter to build a railroad from Georgetown, at the west end of the District, through Montgomery County, to Hagerstown, Maryland.<sup>6</sup> A survey was made, a route was selected, and grading started, but that's as far as it got. In early 1857 work stopped for lack of funds; additional funding was not secured due to the Panic of 1857 hitting the nation's economy, which didn't fully recover until 1861.<sup>7</sup> And then came the Civil War.



B&O's east end, before the Metropolitan Branch was built, showing the route required to reach Washington from the west.

(Library of Congress)<sup>4</sup>

## B&O's Priorities Change

By 1865, B&O had a different view on the need for a line running west from Washington. The inadequacy of its indirect route was emphasized during the Civil War, with troops and supplies from the west having to take the long way around to reach the capital, or take the slow trip on the C&O canal after a transfer at Point of Rocks. Then, there was Washington's population growth, accelerated by the city's importance in the Civil War.

But for B&O, two other factors had an even greater influence. One was the traffic congestion on the line from Point of Rocks to Baltimore. Despite the disruptions from the Civil War, freight traffic, overall, was growing, especially coal.<sup>8</sup> And running an increasing number of heavy coal trains on this segment, with lots of sharp curves and a steep grade over Parr's Ridge near Mt. Airy, was causing interference with the faster passenger trains. Added to this operational inconvenience was this segment's susceptibility to occasional flooding. To B&O, it was clear that they needed a supplementary route to the west.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, there had been a number of proposals to build railroads west from Washington, and B&O wanted to protect what it saw as its territory. If there was going to be such a line, B&O wanted it to be theirs, and not of another company, especially one backed by their increasingly aggressive competitor to the north: the Pennsylvania Railroad.<sup>10</sup>

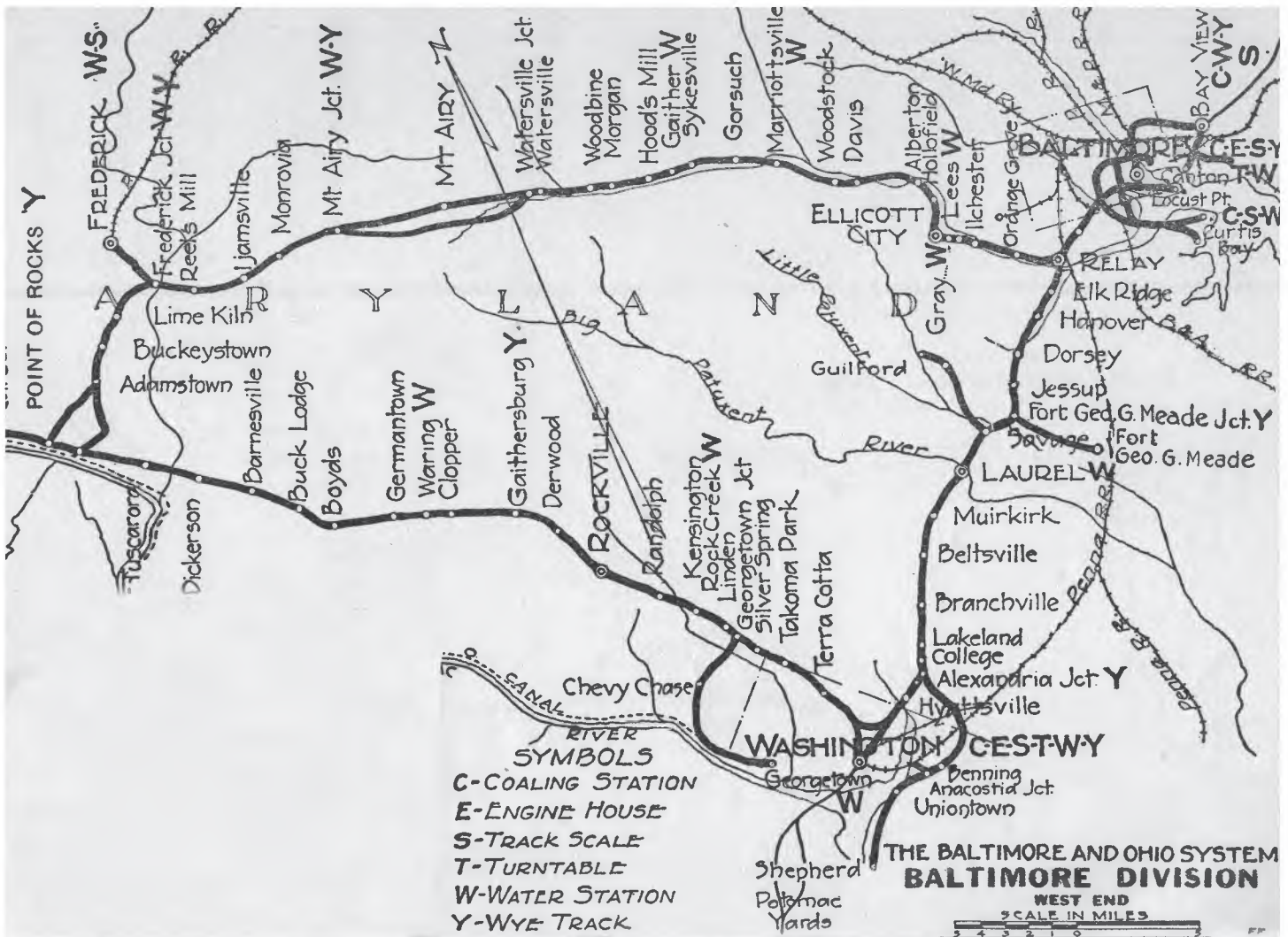
From a combination of these factors, a line west from Washington now became a B&O priority.

## The Metropolitan Branch Begins to Take Shape

To aid in constructing this new line, B&O acquired the 1853 charter of that never-built railroad intended to run northwest from Georgetown through Montgomery County.<sup>11</sup> The name it had was the Metropolitan Rail Road. Its charter, and its name, became the basis for what B&O would call the Metropolitan Branch, a 42-mile segment that would connect B&O's Washington terminal to its main line at Point of Rocks.

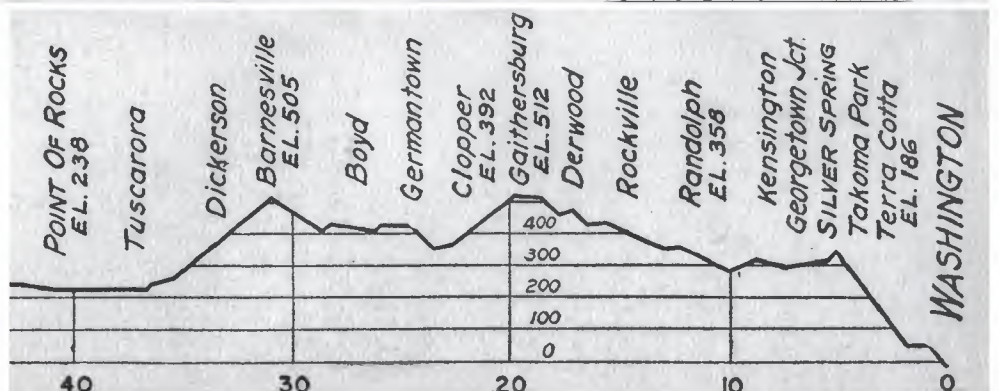
The progress, or in some cases the lack thereof, in building the Metropolitan Branch was often reported in the local newspapers. Much of what follows is from available editions of these two—the *Montgomery County Sentinel* (published once a week) and the *Washington Evening Star*<sup>13, 14, 15</sup>

The following, from the *Sentinel* of March 9, 1866, is quoted at some length here to show just how eager Montgomery County was for the Metropolitan Branch to be built and the enthusiasm it produced for the county's future. While never a major battle ground, Montgomery County had not fared well from the Civil War, sustaining considerable loss and damage as soldiers from both sides passed through at numerous times, often taking what they wanted and then sometimes destroying what was left. In addition, the general downturn in the economy at the war's end, as the nation no longer needed to feed and supply a large military operation, caused further economic harm. The Metropolitan Branch seemed like a pathway back to prosperity:



Map of the Metropolitan Branch (Washington, DC to Point of Rocks), the Old Main Line (Point of Rocks to Baltimore), and the Washington Branch (Baltimore to Washington). The Metropolitan Branch's route from the District line, near Takoma Park, to about 1½ miles west of Dickerson, is in Montgomery County.

(Map and profile B&ORRHS Archives)<sup>12</sup>



“The contractor, Mr. J. A. Boyd broke ground on section 11, (the summit of Parr’s Ridge) of the Metropolitan Branch of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, on Tuesday the 27th (of February).

“There was a pretty general turn out of the neighbors, who assisted at the ceremony with pick and shovel. Mr. J. W. Brown, of Barnesville, threw out the first shovel-full of earth.

“There is a large force of carts and horses now regularly at work; and

the Company show that they are in earnest, and manifest the intention to push the work on to completion at the earliest possible moment.

“This road running, as it does, diagonally through the county, will afford facilities for travel and transportation to our citizens such as could be obtained by no other route, and will, undoubtedly, prove a great blessing to our people. The cheap transportation of fertilizers, and the easy and rapid means of

communication with the National Capital and other prominent points, that will be afforded by this road, will invite population and greatly enhance the value of our real estate. Not only will our people be enabled to retrieve their losses occasioned by the late war, but such an influx of population, such rapid development of resources of our county will follow, and such a spirit of enterprise be awakened by the construction of this road, that our barren fields will be

converted into blooming gardens, as if by magic. We trust that no obstacle will be thrown in their way, but every assistance rendered the Company by our people. As for ourselves, we wish the good work God speed.”

Construction of the roadbed for the line was apparently divided up into sections of about one mile each and put out for bid to contractors, with the company of J. A. Boyd awarded the first few sections. The work started across Parr’s Ridge (the summit at Barnesville), about 10 miles east of Point of Rocks, as this area was expected to take the longest time to complete, thus warranting the earliest start.<sup>17</sup>

## How to Enter the District

Although construction had started on the western portion, B&O had yet to decide how its new route should enter the District of Columbia. Two options were being considered. One would run the line from a point south of Rockville over to the Washington Branch somewhere near Bladensburg, using the south end of that existing line to reach the Washington terminal. This would avoid any new track construction through the District. The other option would be a more direct route from Rockville to Washington, with a new route constructed through the District to B&O’s passenger terminal near the Capitol. Doing this depended on getting the required right-of-way through the District of Columbia, which was proving to be difficult.

B&O and most of Washington’s business community wanted a direct route constructed from Rockville, with the District granting the railroad the required right-of-way land. But opposition came from people who lived along this proposed route, and from speculators who bought land there and didn’t want it taken through eminent domain. Drayage and carriage companies wanted the line stopped at the city boundary so they would get the business of carrying the freight and passengers into the city. Speculators who bought property in the District north of the city’s boundary favored this requirement as well. And the District’s governing council was divided on whether to grant B&O the favorable tax and financial conditions as Maryland had done.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, the promise of the business benefits that the line would bring to the city and the construction jobs it would create was enough to overcome the opposition, and in October, 1868, B&O finally got their District right-of-way on acceptable terms. They would proceed to build the Metropolitan Branch on the direct route from Rockville that they and the majority of the city’s business community had wanted.

## Cycles of Optimism and Discouragement

Once B&O began building through the District, Montgomery County’s residents expected rapid progress to follow, with the line soon completed and put in service. Instead, they found that each increment of progress was followed by a period of disappointing and inexplicable delay.

Construction of the line through the District began in October 1868, with the first seven miles of track, to Silver Spring, in place on July 17, 1869.<sup>19</sup> It would be nearly three months later, however, before finish work (probably mostly track ballast and surfacing) was complete and service could begin, with the first passenger trains on the line running from Washington to Silver Spring on October 14, 1869.<sup>20</sup>

And then, no additional mileage opened for service until two years and nine months later, in July, 1872, when enough work had been completed to allow limited freight service to Rockville, running at slow speed for the nine miles west of Silver Spring.<sup>21</sup> After further work (likely siding additions), passenger trains were run to Rockville beginning September 11 for service to Montgomery County’s annual agricultural fair, with operation still limited to slow speed west of Silver Spring.<sup>22</sup>

Regular service, however, did not start, as ballasting and other finish work between Silver Spring and Rockville was still not complete in September, or even by the end of that year. Now, the county’s patience with the slowness of construction progress was clearly wearing out, as this item from the *Sentinel* of January 17, 1873 makes clear:

“From present indications we think it can be safely assumed that a portion of it - that part reaching Rockville - will be completed towards the close of the present or early in the beginning of the next

century...when the ballasting will be completed to Rockville, none can tell.... There can be no excuse for this long delay.”

## Finally—Almost

After the blast from the *Sentinel* of January 17, better news would soon arrive. On February 8, 1873, the last rail on the Metropolitan Branch was installed at Gaithersburg.



METROPOLITAN B. R. R.—The last rail was laid on the Metropolitan B. R. R. at about 1 o’clock, on Saturday last. The two forces employed, one of 95 men, at this end of the road, under the management of Mr. Shauen, and the other force of about 200 men, from the Monocacy end, under the management of Mr. Collins, met on that day, at Gaithersburg. As the parties neared each other the contest as to which should lay the last rail, became exciting, and never did men move more actively and muscle more briskly, to gain the honor of laying the last rail, and this credit was awarded to the force under Mr. Shauen who reached the goal about two seconds ahead of the other when a shout went up that made the welkin ring. The ballasting on the road has been completed between Washington and Rockville at this end of the road, and from Point of Rocks to the Monocacy at the other end; leaving only the distance between the latter point and Rockville to be ballasted. We have only to say now to Mr. Garrett to “hurry up the cars,” and hasten the work to its final completion. The public had become impatient at the long delay, but are now becoming cheered at the prospect of soon realizing their long-cherished hopes. The intimation is given that trains may be in readiness to convey passengers to the Inauguration on the 4th of March.

As it appeared in the *Sentinel* on February 14, 1873, notice that track construction on the Metropolitan Branch was completed on February 8 at Gaithersburg, the midpoint and highest point on the line. (*Library of Congress*)