Would north-south railroad have staved off the Civil War?

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A century and a half after the Civil War, a Clemson University historian wonders whether a railroad linking Ohio and South Carolina — a railroad proposed in the 1830s but never built — might have helped stave off the conflict.

In his new book “The Louisville, Cincinnati & Charleston Rail Road,” H. Roger Grant examines attempts to build the first railroad across the Appalachians linking North and South.

Grant, a professor of history at Clemson, suggests linking growing markets in the Midwest to Charleston and its port would have forged stronger economic bonds between the regions.

Even Abraham Lincoln said as war broke out that secession might have been avoided in a nation more closely connected by steel rails.

With stronger economic connections, Grant suggests, Northerners might have been less susceptible to shrill abolitionists and Southerners less susceptible to pro-slavery Fire-Eaters calling for secession.

"The people on the extremes are going to be somewhat pushed into their corners by the mainstream," Grant said.

A convention was held in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1836 to discuss building the railroad. It was never built for a number of reasons, including a financial panic, the death of the line's chief advocate and opposition by John C. Calhoun, an ardent slavery supporter.

Instead of following the French Broad River to Tennessee, Calhoun wanted a line running along the Savannah River past his South Carolina plantation.

Grant's book includes Henry Charles Carey's 1876 recollection of a conversation with Lincoln about railroads in the spring of 1861.

Carey, Lincoln's chief economic adviser, recalled asking Lincoln whether he thought secession would have occurred if railroads linked the North to the Gulf of Mexico through Alabama and linked Ohio to Charleston.

"No," said he. "It would have been entirely impossible," Carey recalled the president saying.

Military historian Robert Angevine of Washington, D.C., who wrote "The Railroad and the State: War, Politics, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America," said that before the war, many proposed railroads were promoted as bringing the nation together to attract investors and government support.

But Angevine said the nation was already drifting apart in the 1830s and while the railroad might have strengthened some economic ties, staving off war is another issue.

"Realistically whether it could have actually achieved that, I'm dubious," he said.

Attorney and historian Gordon Rhea of Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, who has written extensively on the 1864 Overland Campaign in which Robert E. Lee first faced Ulysses S. Grant in Virginia, doesn't think railroads would have made a difference averting the war.

"In the South slavery was so deeply embedded and the ardor to extend slavery into the new territories wasn't going to change. That was the real fight," he said. "I don't see how a railroad, even if it would have strengthened some economic ties, was going to change that."

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