

**President’s Message**

Just a few short years ago, if you had told me I would lead the C&O Historical Society through its semicentennial year, my response could not have overstated how unlikely that prediction would have felt. But isn’t the C&OHS and its depth an unlikely story? Who would have thought we would exist globally and over 2,200 members strong 50 years after the society was founded by our own Thomas W. Dixon, Jr. I want all members reading this closing message for 2019 to give yourselves and those not with us a proverbial hand for 50 years of work that grew the society into everything it is today. Tireless work by those here and not has contributed to our tremendous story in a diversity of ways.

Whether it has been through archiving photos, researching and writing articles, building historical models, exhibit creation at our Heritage Center museum, restoring rolling stock, organizing and working train shows, event planning (like our marvelous Cincinnati team this year), authoring books, or the thousands of hours of volunteering that created a business—this wonderful society—with multiple parts that have contributed in some way to our joy felt for 50 years. At the close of our 50th year, I say—let us continue.

Throughout the year, countless people have asked--how do we make the C&OHS last another 50 years? Fortunately, we have an energetic set of officers and board members who are launching us into our next chapter, where we will decide how to diversify the business historically and strategically. The earliest plans, ambitious yet responsible, have fallen into place throughout the year, as announced through the pages of this magazine and through our various media efforts. Your board of directors, led by Chairman JC Watson, seek to excite and energize our membership with additional initiatives. These future success stories, whose seeds--already planted--are slowly growing and set to blossom in 2020.

The endurance of the C&OHS runs even deeper than its organizational strength. The tone felt in the hearts of members was demonstrated to me quickly. Several years ago, when I was new to the society, I was invited to join a long-time member at his Virginia home. As we sat down for an unexpected meal at his dinner table, his first words to me were, “Welcome to the C&O family.”

From the society’s beginning, our unifying bond—the history of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway—has bridged together members of unlikely backgrounds who will forever gather to enjoy these friendships that would not have otherwise occurred were it not for this common love. Our society and its strong fabric, like a second family, will endure. -Mark Totten

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**After Twenty Years, Serendipity Led to Completion of Society’s Original Children’s Book**

By Mark Totten

Our society publishes multiple works throughout the year, completes various interpretive projects, organizes a major conference and multiple events, has been fortunate enough to receive significant historical donations throughout the last 50 years, maintains our Heritage Center museum, and is responsible for so many other efforts that go unmentioned, but all comprise the tapestry of our unique mission to which we dedicate ourselves. As many members and volunteers know, some of our success stories are so serendipitous, the background deserves to be told with some detail. I want to do just that as it relates to our new children’s book, *Chessie Takes a Train Trip*, by Thomas W. Dixon, Jr., and illustrated by artist Natalie O’Dell.

Shortly after becoming president of the C&O Historical Society at the 2018 Annual Conference in Lynchburg, Tom Dixon and I arranged a meeting to discuss some background and history of the society itself. On Saturday, September 22,
2018, we met in Lewisburg, West Virginia, chosen for its location between our residences of Lynchburg and Charleston. Toward the end of our extensive outlining, Tom mentioned somewhat offhandedly that he had written the manuscript for a children’s book about Chessie the Railroad Kitten approximately 20 years prior, but after several attempts, the society could never find a professional illustrator for the project, which was necessary to complete the vision.

Shocked that an unpublished Chessie adventure existed, I immediately asked several follow-up questions, and learned Tom had even assigned photos from the C&OHS archive throughout the manuscript that a future artist could utilize so illustrations could be historically guided. I asked Tom if he could find the manuscript and documentation so I could pursue an illustrator for the book’s development, and he agreed. I was excited and intrigued to take on a project like this so early for the society that was both personally exciting and revenue generating for the organization.

On the morning of Thursday, September 27, Tom emailed to me a scanned draft of the years-old Chessie Takes a Train Trip. The next day, a fire took much of the Dixon home. While the book’s physical manuscript and notes survived, it was later discovered, Tom’s attention at that time rightly turned to family.

Separately for both of us, at this complicated juncture beginning autumn 2018, Tom had the unthinkable task of rebuilding a house and my attention was turning more deeply into the society’s operation. Had Tom not emailed the storybook manuscript when he did, this part of Chessie’s “fifth life” would not likely have gotten off the ground as other society matters would have moved forward away from the offhand children’s book discussion in Lewisburg. But fortunately for the future, Chessie landed on her feet.

I learned of artist Natalie O’Dell’s work in 2015 when C&OHS Member and then-Amtrak Station Agent Matt Crouch made me aware of her Parkersburg, WV exhibition of paintings inspired by the scenery viewed during her trips on Amtrak’s Cardinal route from Washington to Chicago. Formerly of Baltimore, Natalie was now based out of Lexington, VA (and not primarily working on rail-inspired art). I told her about the society and the story of Tom’s manuscript that had been unpublished without an illustrator.

Natalie excitedly agreed to join the Chessie team when the C&OHS asked her to apply her talent to our children’s adventure that was set to return the famous railroad kitten for young readers in 2019. She was enthusiastic not only to create her own vision of Chessie to follow the Ruth Carroll version from the 1930s, but for making the scenery and equipment in the story historically accurate in accordance with the goal of the author, Tom Dixon. She was up for the challenge and willing to absorb any research material the society could provide. And we did!

In order for our artist to capture the C&O Railway in our 1935-set story, our C&OHS team sent materials digitally and via U.S. Mail. For what I felt was the most obvious source material, Wendy Montgomery at our Hays T. Watkins Archives Building in Clifton Forge mailed approximately ten years of Chessie calendars featuring the

![Tom Dixon](image1.jpg)  ![Natalie O’Dell](image2.jpg)
C&O’s officially-commissioned artwork and advertisements. Brandy Dudley emailed the artist a dossier of C&OHS publications on Chessie the Railroad Kitten for reference. And very importantly, Tom’s original manuscript and notes from nearly 20 years prior, scanned and emailed before the Lynchburg fire, served as the guiding foundation for Natalie’s first pencil sketches, then storyboard planning, and final painting. Michael Dixon’s experienced digital layout work signed and sealed our history-making publication.

I consider myself fortunate to have been a spectator for this marvelous project. During the artistic process, Natalie, emphasizing accuracy for our historical audience, would occasionally ask mechanical questions or request additional pictures before finalizing a scene. Tom would respond and provide the desired C&O rolling stock numbering or references from the C&OHS archive. My favorite creative exchange during development came when the artist asked the author for photos of a heavyweight passenger car’s vestibule. Rather than rely solely on archival pictures in our Ridgeway Street archive, Tom also went to our Heritage Center Museum and climbed aboard a C&O heavyweight passenger car, snapped several digital photographs of a vestibule, and emailed them directly to the artist. I will always remember this when I look at that finished scene in the book, as well as other C&OHS team moments as I gaze through other parts of the finished story and think of the details behind the forty magical pages that so many hands-on moments created.

Chessie’s return in 2019 has already generated media coverage, appearing on the front page of the Saturday, December 14 Virginian Review in Covington and in the December 16 Free Lance-Star of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Not specifically mentioned by name in the pages of Chessie Takes a Train Trip is C&O Business Car #1, the Richmond, the piece of C&O passenger rolling stock used in real life by C&O President W. J. Harahan where much of the book’s plot takes place. To add to the serendipity of this background, I must mention another C&O Historical Society development; C&O Business Car #2, also known as the Erie 400, that was donated to the society in 2019, which has many cosmetic similarities to the exterior and interior of the Richmond as it appears in the storybook’s final illustrations. This coincidence was incredibly eerie--no pun intended--as I first viewed the completed book digitally months after having accepted the donation of the Erie 400 from Mr. John Hankins in Huntington and toured its compartments. Our art was created even earlier by Natalie, unaware of the donation of C&O Business Car #2 to the society and the opportunity we may soon have to tie together much of the visual setting of this storybook in the present day. You could not come closer to picturing Chessie napping on one of the beds, as she does.

We hope the uniqueness of being a historical society with an original children’s book that appeals outside the railroad community generates attention that will reach a mainstream audience. Part of our business plan is to introduce our organization to future members nationally who would not otherwise learn about the C&O Historical Society and our 50 years of work. This exciting and beautifully-illustrated book will give young readers the gift of history, this year and for years to come, and that is a big step for us toward our long-term goals as an organization with plans to continue this mission for another 50 years. And Chessie, the C&O Railway’s “Kitten of Destiny,” as the Wall Street Journal called her, is so beloved by generations even today, we expect our society will find a new audience in 2019 and beyond.
Illustrated by artist Natalie O’Dell of Lexington, Virginia, it is a new story meant to appeal to children. Testing it on some adults, it seems to appeal to them as well. The children may see it as a great adventure, the adults as “cute” and a new and different addition to the literature surrounding Chessie, the most famous railroad advertising symbol of all time.

C&O, Chessie System, and CSX CEO Hays Watkins said when he saw to it that she was transferred to C&OHS for the 1992 calendar and beyond said: “Chessie is just on the third of her nine lives.” In her first life she advertised the comforts of C&O’s great passenger trains with the slogan “Sleep Like a Kitten.” In her second, she advertised C&O’s freight service with the slogan “Pur-r-r-fect Transportation.” In her third, she became to symbol for the combined C&O, B&O, and WM railroads as Chessie System, with her own outline emblazoned on cars and locomotives. Since 1992 she has helped C&OHS tell the history of the C&O. – It looks as if she will go on and on!

The new child’s book tells a story of how Chessie is living in C&O President Harahan’s office in Cleveland in the Depression year 1935. One day she stows away on his business car as he travels to Richmond and at Ashland two orphan children sneak on board. Chessie finds and takes them to Harahan. He gives them a place to sleep and food, and when they get to Richmond the children are adopted by a C&O employee family there. Of course, Chessie is involved throughout. Most people who have read the story call it “charming” or “heartwarming.”

Now Shipping!

Every child you know deserves to know Chessie!
An Opinion - Chessie and the C&OHS
By Thomas W. Dixon, Jr.

We are going to be concentrating more than usual on Chessie, the railroad kitten in the next year. This is because she is important to us, and I believe, to you.

When people ask me why the C&OHS has grown so large and why it is different from other single-railroad historical groups (of which there are over 70 in the U. S.) I often tell them that our extraordinary and perhaps unexpected success has rested mainly of three things:

- Our frequent (monthly in the old days) magazine;
- Hays T. Watkins, President of Chessie System and CSX;
- Chessie.

No other railroad history group has had such great support from the head of “their” railway. Because of Mr. Watkins we have almost all the archival material on which everything we do is based. No railroad official gave a historical group so much support. And, of course, with the boss’s support the rest of the company was very obliging.

The frequency of our magazine has meant that people didn’t forget about us, and enthusiasm remained high. We were, as I have often said, “in your face all the time.” Now we aren’t so frequent with the print magazine (6 times a year) but it is three times larger, and is supplemented with a monthly electronic magazine full of color photos and many other interesting articles. Besides that, we issue a weekly e-mail update each Friday that details new things we have for sale. -- So, we are still in your face all the time. . .you can hardly forget us.

But, it is Chessie that has made us. Her popularity crosses all lines. People who know nothing of her past as a passenger train advertising symbol still love the cute little kitten in all those nostalgic settings. The C&OHS’s financial standing has been based in great measure on our sales of Chessie items. Often we make the most money on models or books in a year, but issuing all those Chessie memorabilia items over time has shaped us markedly.

I am grateful we can deal with such a nostalgic symbol. . . Everything has its purpose and Chessie had and has hers.

**Chessie Enters the Computer Age! -- 1956:**
A C&O advertisement in Time magazine Sept. 24, 1956 shows Chessie (or perhaps one of the kittens) using the keys of C&O’s marvelous, new UNIVAC I computer. (C&OHS Collection)
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Chessie Collectibles


Chessie and Her Family Coaster (Set of 4) Made from absorbent sandstone. CU-18-490 $19.99

Classic Chessie Card Case This stainless case isn’t just for your business cards, they are perfect for carrying your ID, credit cards and a bit of cash. CU-19-501 $16.99

Dark Wood Coaster Stand CU-18-491 $8.00

Classic Chessie Tray Perfect for emptying your pockets and placing your jewelry. Size: 6.5" X 4.5" CU-19-502 $6.99

Chessie Playing Cards CU-7-008 $5.95

Chessie Embroidered 3-piece Bath Towel Set CU-10-333 $29.95

Chessie and Her Family Hotplate 7" CU-18-492 $12.99


Letters to Chessie Magnet Size: 2.5"x3.5" CU-18-495 $3.99

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Chessie 9X Magnifier Hand poured epoxy finish. A gorgeous product that you can put anywhere. CU-19-500 $24.99

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Chessie Puzzle

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ELECTION NOTICE

In accordance with the Revised Bylaws of the Society, notice is hereby given that the 2020 election of one (1) Elected Director for the Society’s Board of Directors shall occur at the Annual Meeting in Charleston, W. Va. The Annual Meeting is scheduled to be called to order by the Chairman of the Board at the Charleston Marriott in Charleston, W. Va., the date to be announced. The one (1) incumbent director eligible for election is Jeremy Ferrell.

Any member of the Society who has been a member for two years or more is encouraged to be nominated to become an Elected Director of the Board. Members seeking to be elected shall submit his/her application to the Secretary, to be received by February 15, 2020. The application shall consist of the name and address of the candidate, signed by the candidate and endorsed by at least ten (10) current members of the Society in good standing. The names of the candidates shall be published in the Society’s magazine. Candidates may submit biographical statements of not more than 125 words, which shall be included in the announcement of the election.

To be nominated in 2020, mail or email your completed application, with endorsements, and biographical statement (optional) to the Secretary, for receipt not later than February 15, 2020, to:

W. F. Michie III, Secretary - Email: billm387@verizon.net
8165 Crestline Lane, Mechanicsville, Virginia 23111

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