Ask The Rambler Martin Van Buren and the Railroads

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U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration

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1200 New Jersey Ave, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Ask the Rambler

Martin Van Buren and the Railroads

Dear Rambler,

I came across the following letter and I'm wondering if it's true:

January 31, 1829

> To President Jackson,
>
> The canal system of this country is being threatened by the spread of a new form of transportation known as "railroads." The federal government must preserve the canals for the following reasons:
>
> **One.** If canal boats are supplanted by "railroads,"serious unemployment will result. Captains, cooks, drivers, hostlers, repairmen and lock tenders will be left without means of livelihood, not to mention the numerous farmers now employed in growing hay for the horses.
>
> **Two.** Boat builders would suffer, and towline, whip and harness makers would be left destitute.
>
> **Three.** Canal boats are absolutely essential to the defense of the United States. In the event of the expected trouble with England, the Erie Canal would be the only means by which we could ever move the supplies so vital to waging modern war.
>
> As you may well know, Mr. President, "railroad" carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour by "engines" which, in addition to endangering life and limb of passengers, roar and snort their way through the countryside, setting fire to crops, scaring the livestock and frightening women and children. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed.
>
> Martin Van Buren
>
> Government of New York

The Rambler Responds: Although the Rambler is no expert on this matter, he has never let that stop him from having an opinion. And in this case, the opinion is that the letter is bogus.

First, there's the context. On January 31, 1829, the date of the letter, Andrew Jackson had not yet become President. He was sworn in on March 4, 1829. Thus, Van Buren would not have addressed a letter to "President Jackson" and probably would not have referred to him as "Mr. President."

Second, Van Buren was the Governor of New York in January 1829, but he expected an appointment under Jackson. According to a Van Buren biography by John Niven:

> Van Buren was never the man to presume on Jackson, and he was too conscious of his position to initiate any correspondence with Jackson's lieutenant [James A. Hamilton], though he responded when his advice was sought. As Jackson remained aloof in any personal exchange between the two but acted through [William B.] Lewis, so Van Buren adopted the same stance, relying upon Hamilton to maintain

> communications . . . . Except for one or two letters from Lewis before the election, all correspondence was addressed to Hamilton.

After much behind the scenes debate and maneuvering, Jackson wrote a polite request on February 14, 1829, asking Van Buren to become Secretary of State, the top appointed post. The published letters of Jackson include the February 14 letter but nothing else addressed to Van Buren during this period--certainly no reply to a letter about the evils of railroads. Niven had access to Van Buren's papers; if he had come across the January 31 letter about railroads, he would not have stated that Van Buren addressed all his correspondence to Hamilton.

Third, Van Buren was a highly sophisticated politician known as the "Little Magician" not the bumpkin portrayed in the letter. He was a lawyer, a State Senator, a State Attorney, a United States Senator, and a Governor of New York, a position he held for only a few months before joining the Jackson Administration. In addition to serving as Secretary of State, he was Jackson's Minister to England in 1831. He served as Vice President during President Jackson's second term (1832-1837) and succeeded Jackson as President for one term (1837 to March 3, 1841).

Van Buren understood the value of the Erie Canal, and also was involved in the long-running national debate on "internal improvements." His position was that the Federal Government should not participate in intra-State improvements, but only in improvements of a national character. After all, why should New York, which had enhanced its economic position by financing the Erie Canal, help other States become more competitive? In fact, he prepared the first rough draft of President Jackson's legally sophisticated Maysville Turnpike veto (May 27, 1830). The bill authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to subscribe for 1,500 shares in Kentucky's Maysville, Washington, Paris and Lexington Turnpike Road Company. As explained in *America's Highways 1776-1976:*

> The Maysville Turnpike veto not only put an end to all thought of national aid to local road improvements, but it also forestalled any efforts that might be made to provide Federal aid to such genuinely national promotions as the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Over 20 years would pass before Congress would provide any significant subsidy for railroads.

Niven, in his biography of Van Buren, discussed the veto of the Maysville Turnpike, which was located in the home State, Kentucky, of presidential rival John Calhoun:

> As Van Buren anticipated, there were not enough members willing to vote for an override, despite the popularity of internal improvements. He had again succeeded in reemphasizing Jeffersonian principles, thus strengthening the Administration in Virginia, in Georgia and even in South Carolina. He scored heavily against Calhoun's avowed position. In his own state where realistic appraisals rather than abstract constitutional principles were the governing force, the Maysville veto eased fears that Pennsylvania would rapidly complete its east-west canal projects, drawing down the tolls of the Erie and enriching the port of Philadelphia at the expense of Albany and New York City.

This does not sound like a man who would use the argument that, "The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed."

Although the letter (which is sometimes published with a different date) is bogus, it reflects an essential truth of transportation evolution, namely that each new mode has to fight for position with the dominant mode at the time. The pack train entrepreneurs fought against better roads, because better roads would lead to wagons and coaches, thereby putting pack trains out of business. Stewart H. Holbrook, in *The Story of American Railroads,* discussed the reaction to railroads in the 1830's:

> The coming of the railroad, and the rapidity with which it expanded during the 1830's, found a public wholly unprepared, and pretty much confused. What, thoughtful men now asked one another, was a railroad? There had been little thinking on the subject, hence there was no philosophy of railroads. The canal builders and operators, of course, simply damned the new method of transportation on every count they could think of. It was dangerous. It wouldn't work. It was merely a clever method by which

> smart scoundrels could steal your money more or less legally by selling you worthless stock. The canal men had something there, for a terrible amount of stock did prove worthless. The railroad was also against nature. And, finally, it was against God; and many a preacher found friends among canal and stagecoach men when he opened up full blast on this new curse that a tireless Satan had promulgated to try all Christian men.

So it goes today. What is the wave of the future? Turns out, it wasn't the supersonic transport as represented by the British/French Concorde, which went out of business in 2003. Will it be:

- Magnetic levitation, which is receiving its first commercial test in China?
- Hydrogen fuel cells, the energy source that for the past decade has always been "about 10 years" from commercial use to end America's dependence on foreign oil?
- Segway, the "It" invention that was touted before its unveiling as the next step in transportation?
- Telecommuting, which is already in use in many parts of the country?
- Cars that travel vertically and horizontally, as in the underrated 1997 Bruce Willis movie *The Fifth Element?*
- Or perhaps it will be "Beam me up, Scotty," the catchphrase of *Star Trek* that didn't work out quite so well in the 1958 or 1986 versions of the movie *The Fly.*

We won't know for 25 or more years. In the meantime, we can say that whatever it is, someone, somewhere will oppose it.

In conclusion, the Rambler will add that the Van Buren letter expressed sentiments that were expressed at the time by others. What we can't say is that Governor Van Buren expressed them as well.