

In the Spotlight

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 25, 2021

LIVING HISTORY



by Gene
Pisasale

All Aboard! railroads in Chester County

By Gene Pisasale
Contributing Writer

Pennsylvania led the nation in the production of natural resources for 100 years—from 1820 to 1920—due to its abundance of coal, iron ore, petroleum and timber. These heavy commodities were difficult to transport and required substantial efforts to cover long distances. The French Creek Mine and others in Chester County required sturdy vehicles to get ore to processing facilities. After the canal-building boom of the 1820s to the 1840s, railroads eventually took over as the preferred method of moving heavy cargo to manufacturing centers like Allentown, Bethlehem, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Passenger railroads also quickly became popular. Chester County's railroads played an important role, with a long heritage that dates back to the earliest days of train travel in the United States.

A Christmas Eve meeting in 1830 at West Chester's Turk's Head Tavern fueled the effort to create a local passenger railroad. In "Railroads of West Chester," author Jim Jones noted that prominent citizens wanted to make a dream come alive.

The group appointed Major John Wilson of the U.S. Topographical Service to find a route connecting West Chester with the planned Main Line of Public Works—a state-sanctioned project to link Philadelphia with the Susquehanna River by railroad, as well as canals to Pittsburgh and the Ohio River.

After being granted a charter, the group raised \$100,000 through stock offerings conducted at the Paoli Tavern, the Washington House Hotel in West Chester and the Merchant's Coffeehouse in Philadelphia.

Nine miles of track were planned along the ridge separating Brandywine and Chester Creeks, as well as a connection to the 'Main Line' at what is today the town of Malvern. After 18 months of work, in September 1832 the West Chester Railroad became one of the first in the nation to open for business.

Over the decades, railroads proved their desirability for both passenger and industrial usage, causing many "spurs" or offshoots from



West Chester Market Street station circa 1930, photo courtesy of the West Chester Railroad Heritage Association.



The Kennett Square station of the East Penn Railroad.

dominant lines around Chester County and the Philadelphia area. The West Chester and Philadelphia Railroad (WC&P) was one of those lines, first chartered in 1848. It later became part of the Pennsylvania Railroad and was ultimately merged into SEPTA. The 'iron horse' came to Kennett Square in December 1859 after local citizens requested a link to the WC&P. Today the East Penn Railroad serves the area for freight; it runs down to Oxford and also to Herr's Snack Foods and other locations.

The Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) was established in the mid-19th century, headquartered in Philadelphia. The PRR was an important part of the industrialization of America and a crucial provider of transportation services to several states and tens of millions of people. Management saw size and scope as keys to success, not only for moving commodities and freight, but also passengers to a variety of national destinations. The PRR began aggressively purchasing many of its rivals. By 1852, the goal of connecting two major cities—Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—was realized; it eventually ran all the way to Chicago and St. Louis. The PRR and subsidiaries acquired and built numerous lines around the region, many of them serving towns throughout Chester County.

Railroads had some

"firsts." In 1877, Edison's assistant Thomas Watson demonstrated a new invention called the telephone to PRR officials at Altoona. Telephone lines later followed railroads out West and around the entire nation. By 1882, the PRR had become the largest railroad and biggest corporation on the planet, with a budget second only to the United States government. In 1915, the PRR electrified its suburban Philadelphia lines to Paoli. The next year, it adopted a new motto: "Standard Railroad of the World." However, as with all industries, challengers were in the wings. By the 1940s, the nation had become infatuated with automobiles. Railroads in New York and other nearby states were aggressive competitors. Trucking companies formed to vie for their business. In 1946, the PRR reported a net loss for the first time in its history. In 1968, the PRR merged with the New York Central Railroad and later became Penn Central, but due to poor integration, it filed for bankruptcy two years later.

Some Chester County railroad lines still run, many for carrying freight; most passenger service is now under SEPTA or Amtrak. Station stops include Berwyn, Downingtown, Kennett Square, Malvern, Paoli, and other locations. Many old train depots still dot the landscape, like those at



Pennsylvania Railroad schedule circa August 7, 1949, courtesy of Chuck Ulmann.

Northbrook and Pocopson. Some dormant railroads have gotten a new purpose. The National Trails System Act of 1983 allowed vacated railway lines to be transformed into hiking paths. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy was created in 1986 to assist with this development. In 1990, Pennsylvania passed its own Rails-to-Trails Act to preserve abandoned railways. The Keystone State became a leader in this movement.

In "Railroads of Pennsylvania: Fragments of the Past in the Keystone Landscape," author Lorette Treese describes the successful program. The Chester Valley Trail currently offers 14.8 miles of access for walking, biking and in-line skating from King of Prussia Road between Gulph Road and U.S. Route 202 to near Indian Run Road and Commerce Drive in Exton. Kennett Square and other communities are

now planning to build new trails or link with others in the region to offer leisure activity to residents.

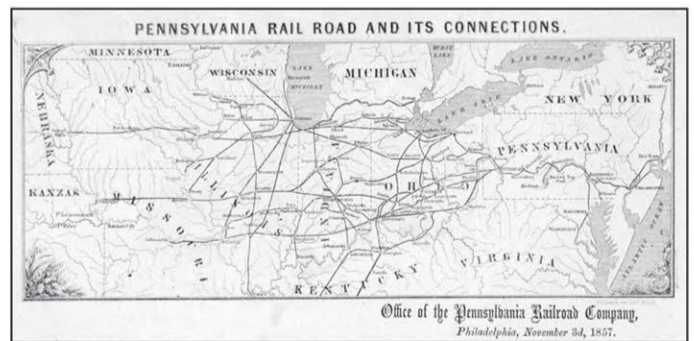
A few old railroads have come back to life. The West Chester Railroad Heritage Association now runs trains along the former line for scenic, historical and cultural tours from West Chester to Glen Mills, Pennsylvania. They have a variety of fulfilled programs for the entire family, including the Fall Foliage Express and the Trick or Treat Special. Their website has more information at www.wcrailroad.com. Railroad aficionados in America number in the tens of thousands. Chuck Ulmann, the curator at the Christian Sanderson Museum in Chadds Ford, has amassed a large collection of railroad memorabilia. He kindly provided abundant material for this article. So, if you want a link with yesteryear, just take a drive. Chances are, you'll cross



Pennsylvania Railroad moniker.

railroad lines or see a station which played an important part in our nation's history.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books dealing mostly with American history. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available on www.Amazon.com and on his website at www.GenePisasale.com. Gene can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasale.com.



The extent of the Pennsylvania Railroad circa November 1857.



The Glen Mills train station.



A Pennsylvania Railroad steam freight locomotive on the West Chester branch. Photo courtesy of Andrew Hart