



RAIL TRANSPORTATION IN LANCASTER COUNTY

RAILROAD HISTORY

The first railroad to pass through Lancaster County was the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad, opened through Lancaster to the canal port of Columbia on March 31 or April 1, 1834. It was constructed by the state as part of the Main Line of Public Works, a combined rail and canal system connecting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In these early days, it was looked upon as a sort of public highway, and private horses and wagons that fit the gauge could be used on the line until 1844. Today this might be called open access.

The Philadelphia and Columbia quickly inspired connecting lines. In 1836, the Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy and Lancaster Railroad (HPMt.J&L RR) built a connecting line from Dillerville, just west of Lancaster, to Mount Joy. Building from both ends, the line was completed from Dillerville to Harrisburg in 1838. This bypassed the canal between Harrisburg and Columbia. The P&C also encouraged the businessmen of Strasburg, who built the Strasburg Railroad from the Philadelphia and Columbia at Leaman Place to Strasburg in 1837. Transformed from a freight line to a tourist railroad in the 1950s, it is now one of the county's most popular tourist attractions.

In 1849, the HPMt.J&L RR was taken over by the Pennsylvania Railroad, then constructing an all-rail route across the state. It also bought the Marietta and Portsmouth Railroad, under whose charter it built a branch, paralleling the river and canal, from Royalton to Columbia. Besides the canal, the Philadelphia and Columbia (and the new branch from Royalton) connected to the Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge, which provided rail access to the Northern Central Railway via the Wrightsville, York and Gettysburg Railroad.

The PRR was forced to use the Philadelphia and Columbia between Dillerville and Philadelphia, and the sometimes lackadaisical operation of the state-run railroad proved burdensome and a bottleneck to traffic. In 1853, the PRR arranged to lease the Lancaster, Lebanon and Pine Grove Railroad, an as-yet unbuilt line from Philadelphia to Salunga via Phoenixville, and threatened to bypass the State line entirely. The threat, and intensive lobbying, was ultimately successful in persuading the Commonwealth to sell the entire Main Line of Public Works to the PRR in 1857. The PRR sold its interest in the LL&PG the following year, and the line would never be built.

The PRR also formally leased the HPMt.J&L RR in 1861, giving it complete control over its line from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. This line would provide valuable service during the Civil War, particularly when the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad came under attack from Confederates and saboteurs or was simply jammed with traffic. Troops could be sent via the PRR to Columbia, cross the Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge, and ride down the Northern Central to Baltimore. However, Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania forced the state militia to retreat across the Columbia-Wrightsville Bridge and burn it behind them on June 28, 1863. While the destruction of the bridge saved the county from a Confederate invasion, it cut off access to the markets of York County, and it was not replaced until several years after the war.

During the Civil War, a new railroad appeared on the scene in Lancaster County. Controlled by the Philadelphia and Reading Rail Road, the Reading and Columbia Railroad built down from the Reading area to reach Columbia, crossing the PRR at Landisville, with a branch from Lancaster Jct. to Lancaster. The Columbia and Port Deposit Railroad also proposed to enter the county from the south, following the Susquehanna, but its construction was long stalled by inadequate funds and the difficult, rocky bluffs along the river.

While the principal arteries of the Lancaster County railroads had mostly been completed by this time, the Gilded Age witnessed a period of independent railroad construction, speculation, and financial maneuvers. The Lancaster and Reading Narrow Gauge Railroad was chartered in 1871 to build a 4 ft 0 in (1.22 m) gauge route from Safe Harbor to Lancaster to Reading, with a branch from Lancaster to Quarryville, competing with the Reading & Columbia. Construction began on the branch line to Quarryville, but was quickly changed to standard gauge. Hindered by the Panic of 1873, the company struck a deal with the Philadelphia & Reading to complete the line from Lancaster to Quarryville in return for control of the company, which it did in the following year. It thus became an extension of the Reading's Lancaster Branch. In 1876, the East Brandywine and Waynesburg Railroad built into the county from the east to reach the prosperous agricultural town of New Holland, and was promptly leased by the PRR. In 1877, the Columbia and Port Deposit, under control of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad, finally finished its line into Columbia.

1878 saw the construction of one of the more implausible railroads of the area, the Peach Bottom Railway. Born of the "narrow-gauge fever" then sweeping the country, it was conceived as a 3 ft 0 in (0.91 m) gauge line from Philadelphia to the Broad Top coal fields. Surprisingly, the Eastern Division of the line was constructed from Oxford into Lancaster County, ending on the banks of the Susquehanna at Peach Bottom; no bridge was