

The Railroad Comes To Westtown

by Dave Walter, Township Historical Commissioner and Treasurer, West Chester Railroad Heritage Association

Most residents of Westtown have probably heard the honk of a railroad engine horn and the rumble of a passenger train on the railroad tracks that bisect the township. It is hard to miss the former Pennsylvania Railroad line: going east and west in our township, one can only cross it at either the underpass on Oakbourne Road (if your vehicle isn't higher than 9' 6"), or the overpass on Street Road. Here's a brief history of those tracks.

In 1832, a railroad first reached West Chester, the growing county seat of Chester County. Merchants decided to connect West Chester with the "Main Line of Public Works" (the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad) which had bypassed West Chester through the Great Valley. These businessmen connected West Chester with the Main Line, at what is today's Malvern station, by building a horse-drawn railroad line.

Within a decade, other business interests, especially those on the south side of West Chester who weren't efficiently served by the line to Malvern, decided that competition was needed in order to provide better and less expensive service to the markets in Philadelphia. They joined with Delaware County manufacturers, merchants, and farmers, to incorporate and build a railroad from the Schuylkill River at Chestnut Street in West Philadelphia to West Chester via Media, Glen Mills, and Westtown.

Construction began on the West Chester & Philadelphia Railroad Company (WC&P) in 1854. A carved stone "1854" marker along the tracks in Westtown is still in place. Financial difficulties led to a bankruptcy and re-organization, and the railroad was not completed until 1858. The first train into West Chester on the new line commenced operations on November 11, 1858.

The station called "Westtown" has always been in Thornbury Township, just south of Street Road. Here, north of Street Road, Westtown School had a siding built for the delivery of coal, and another siding existed for general freight. The stop at Oakbourne Road in Westtown originally may have been known as "Lecompton" and served a picnic grove. By 1861, according to an area map, the station's name was "Belmont," which was the name of the nearby Hulme estate. Later, the stop became known as "Hemphills" after another local landowner, and finally, in 1885, it was named "Oakbourne" when the Smith family took over the Hulme property and refurbished and enlarged the mansion that exists today. The huge Pennsylvania Railroad (the "Pennsy") effectively acquired the line in 1879, and it was electrified for commuter trains in 1928.

Other railroad lines were proposed to run through Westtown Township. An 1854 map depicting the proposed WC&P included a branch off the line from Westtown to Oxford in southern Chester County. This branch was eventually built from Wawa to Oxford and on to the Susquehanna River. Another line, to be known as the "Chester Creek and Brandywine Railroad," was organized under an Act of the Pennsylvania Assembly on April 5, 1868, to connect the WC&P at Westtown station with the mouth of Pocopson Creek on the Brandywine. By 1873, \$45,000 was subscribed and a survey of the roadbed and acquisition of property was in process. This line would have served Brinton's Quarry and paralleled Street Road through today's Pleasant Grove community and Crebilly Farm. The line was never built, but a short embankment was started and can be seen today extending westward from the tracks north of Westtown station and terminating in the backyard of a private residence on Westbourne Rd.

For a number of weeks, after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, the railroad carried materials and supplies to the Union Paroled P.O.W. camp at Oakbourne alongside the track and Goose Creek. The "Oakbourne" station primarily served the local farmers and Williamson's saw and grist mills. In 1871, a two and a half story structure was built with living quarters for the station agent. Members of the Speakman family served as agents from 1878 until 1928. The Oakbourne Post Office was established in 1883, with Mrs. Speakman serving as postmistress until it closed in 1928. After the turn of the century, in addition to the locals, the station did a bustling business with visitors and workers going to and from South Concord Road's J.C. Smith Memorial House for Convalescent Women (now Oakbourne Mansion) and the Pennsylvania Epileptic Hospital (now Gaudenzia). Coal for their powerhouses and local residents was delivered on a siding at the station. Improved roads and widespread use of automobiles eventually led to a decline of passenger traffic. After 1961, commuter trains no longer stopped at Oakbourne and the station was soon demolished. Look closely, just west of the railroad bridge, and one can see where the station driveway ran. A cut stone retaining wall, erected by the Pennsy in the 1880s, can be seen north of the station site where the freight and coal siding once existed.

With the Eastern railroads in serious decline, the Pennsy merged with the New York Central in 1968 and, when it failed, it became part of Conrail in 1976. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) acquired the line in 1983.

The decline in passengers continued, and SEPTA abandoned service beyond Elwyn in 1986. For more than ten years, the rails through Westtown were quietly rusting away. Then, in 1997, Four States Railroad Service, Inc. leased the tracks from SEPTA, did extensive track rehabilitation, and began excursion trains between West Chester and Glen Mills. A portion of the line through the woods between Oakbourne Road and Westtown Station can be seen from the trails in Oakbourne Park, but it is not permitted to trespass or hike along on the tracks.

To see the line, take the popular excursion trains that continue to this day, under the volunteer efforts of the West Chester Railroad Heritage Association. The WCRHA offers Sunday excursions in the summer, and extra "Fall Foliage," "Christmas Tree," and "Santa" trains during the holidays. Check out their website at wcrailroad.com, and take the family out for a leisurely 15 mile round trip ride from West Chester, along the beautiful Goose and Chester Creeks, to historic Glen Mills and back.



Excursion train crosses Goose Creek near Oakbourne Park. Photo by Ron Fricker, courtesy of West Chester Railroad Heritage Association.