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02 A Brief History of Transportation in West Chester

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A Brief History of Transportation in West Chester

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The history of West Chester is intimately connected to its role as a transportation hub. West Chester is situated on high ground between the Brandywine and Chester Creek watersheds, at a point that attracted travelers since the earliest days of recorded history. The Great Minquas Trail of the Lenni Lenape passed through the area in the 17th century, connecting settlements and trading posts in the lower Schuylkill Valley with fur-producing regions to the west.

Early Roads

The first roads in the area were laid out in the early eighteenth century. Although neither the "Old Lancaster Road" (**US30**) nor the "Old Baltimore Pike" (**US1**) passed through West Chester, William Penn's "Street Road" (**PA926**) passed a short distance to the south, and the "Strasburg Road" passed along what later became the north edge of the borough. A road from Wilmington to Reading (**PA100**) passed directly through the center of the future borough, and another early road (**PA100**) ran southwest from the site to Jefferis' Ford on the Brandywine, near modern Lenape Park.

In 1762, a local cooper named Phineas Eachus applied to the Pennsylvania Legislature for permission to open a "public house" for travelers on the Wilmington-to-Reading Road, at the intersection (presently **Gay and High Streets**) with the road from Jefferis' Ford to Philadelphia. Permission was granted, and Eachus' house became the "Turk's Head Tavern," named for the sign used to mark its location. That tavern, and its surrounding community, became the nucleus for the borough of West Chester, which was incorporated on March 20, 1799.

In the nineteenth century, the number of roads to West Chester began to increase rapidly. Following the lead of the "Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Road," which opened in 1795, a private company sought a charter to build a toll road from West Chester to Wilmington in 1811. That road was never constructed, but in 1854, the "West Chester and Wilmington Plank Road Company" completed a road from West Chester to Dilworthtown, and replaced the wooden plank surface with more durable macadam in 1858. Meanwhile, the Strasburg Road, which charged no tolls, became the favorite fair-weather alternative for heavy freight wagons bound for points between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Canals

The nineteenth century brought other changes in transportation. Canal construction, which began with the Erie Canal in 1825 and the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal in 1830, was impractical around West Chester, since it was situated on high ground. Nevertheless, West Chester resident Edward Darlington supported a plan, authorized by the state in 1794, to build a canal along the Brandywine River as far north as Downingtown. His son William S. Darlington served on the first Pennsylvania Canal Commission from 1825-1827, and became its president in 1826. Meanwhile, West Chester obtained more mundane improvements, like paved footpaths in 1809, brick sidewalks in 1823, and the first paved streets in 1829.

Railroads

The biggest advance of the nineteenth century was the construction of railroads, and West Chester was in the forefront of the movement. On December 11, 1830, a group of citizens met at the Turk's Head Hotel to discuss plans to build a railroad to West Chester. More meetings followed and the group agreed to form the West Chester Railroad Company to build a connection to the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad, already under construction between the Susquehanna River and Philadelphia. They decided to use horse-drawn cars pulled over yellow pine rails topped with iron straps as the cheapest way to get a railroad into operation quickly. The work was completed during the following year, and in 1833, the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad completed the link to Philadelphia.

The West Chester Railroad had several problems. Its rails had to be rebuilt to carry steam locomotives, which began arriving in 1834, and it paid high tolls to use the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad. Although the company paid stockholders a dividend in 1834, the economic crash of 1837 placed it heavily

in debt, and the 1840s were a period of reorganization and reconstruction. In 1846, West Chester obtained its first permanent railroad station, and by 1849, the entire line had been rebuilt to handle steam locomotives.

Dissatisfaction with the West Chester Railroad prompted another group of citizens to organize a second railroad company. The West Chester and Philadelphia was incorporated in 1848 to build a direct line to Philadelphia. Construction started in 1852 and was completed to West Chester in 1858. The two railroads competed until 1879, when a series of lease agreements and reorganizations culminated in their takeover by the Pennsylvania Railroad and operation as the "Frazer branch" and "Media branch."

For over half a century, passenger trains from West Chester used both tracks to reach Philadelphia, but after the Media branch was electrified in 1928, passenger service on the Frazer branch was abandoned in September 1932. The Pennsylvania Railroad continued to operate over the Media branch, but began to scale back passenger service in the 1950s. Even the introduction of more efficient diesel locomotives in July 1952 failed to slow the decline, and in January 1958, Sunday train service was suspended. Ridership continued to diminish and by 1961, a local reporter described the Market Street station as a "ramshackle building about which residents have been complaining for years." In 1967, fire destroyed the freight station and the passenger station was torn down. The Pennsylvania Railroad finally ended service to West Chester in April 1986.

Trolleys

The demise of railroad service was brought about by new forms of transportation that developed around the turn of the century. Bicycles began to challenge the railroad on short distance trips in the 1890s, about the same time that street railways and electric trolleys began to operate. The first electric trolley ran from West Chester to Lenape on November 10, 1891, and led to the construction of an amusement park at Lenape in 1892. Other trolley companies soon followed, creating connections to Philadelphia by 1899, Downingtown by 1902, and Coatesville and Kennett Square by 1904. West Chester's favorite trolley was the "High Street Dinky," which provided local service between the State Normal School and the main trolley depot on Gay Street.

The trolley lines were profitable until the end of World War I, but then private bus companies joined the competition. In 1923, the Philadelphia firm of Kelly, Cooke & Company purchased several West Chester trolley lines and

consolidated them with a number of local independent bus lines, hoping to produce a more rational system and reduce competition. The resulting system, called the Chester Valley Lines, did well at first, but by 1928, it suffered from competition with another new form of transportation, the automobile. The Depression stifled any chance of recovery, and the company closed its trolley lines in late 1929. During World War II, the Short Line company operated buses from its terminal on West Market Street, and some time later, the trolley line to Philadelphia's 69th Street station became part of the "Red Arrow" system operated by the Philadelphia Suburban Transit Company. Trolley service finally came to an end in West Chester on June 4, 1954.

Automobiles, Trucks and Buses

The first automobiles reached West Chester in 1900. Various sources identify the borough's first automobile owner as Joseph Sager or D. M. Sharpless, but the device quickly became popular among West Chester's elite. By July 1900, several residents were building automobiles, and in the same month, Harvey Hillegass and his wife drove their automobile from West Chester to Quakertown, Bethlehem and Atlantic City. In 1906, C. E. Woodward became the first doctor in West Chester to use an auto.

The new form of transportation triggered a campaign to improve the roads around West Chester, and by 1906, Philadelphia "autoists" observed that the road to West Chester was much improved. High Street was paved south of the borough in 1907, and by 1929, the Keystone Automobile Club description of West Chester mentioned "good highways north to Pottstown and Reading, to Morristown and Valley Forge, and south to Wilmington and Baltimore." In 1954, the West Chester bypass was completed from the Wilmington Pike to Route 100, and extended to Route 322 in 1956. Other improvements, too numerous to mention, continued over the years, but perhaps the most dramatic innovations were the introduction of one-way streets in 1935 and limited parking districts on the borough's south side in 1978.

West Chester's central location and good roads made it a logical base for several transportation companies. Among those that survive, the Ralph G. Smith Company began in 1916 as a milk hauling and moving firm, then branched out into general freight, warehousing and finally, "dependable horse transportation," as the signs on its trucks proclaim. The firm of A. Duie Pyle got its start in Coatesville in 1924, but as it expanded, it opened its West Chester terminal and then moved its headquarters to the borough. Although it has since closed, Lewis Hickman Jr. began to transport school children in

1920 and built a charter bus company that operated until after World War II. Other companies have come and gone, and firms like the American Truck Lines, DeMaio Transportation, Glennon's Milk Service, Grannetino Trucking, Montgomery Tank Lines and Volunteer Express maintain terminals in the West Chester area.

Aviation

One other form of transportation deserves mention--airplanes. According to a 1908 editorial, Cestrians were more interested in their sewers than aviation, and Coatesville claims the first airplane in the county. However, in November 1929, James B. Jacob opened the Sky Haven Airport east of town on land rented from Harry Taylor and his family. The airport was home to crop dusters and the site of barnstorming air shows until 1932, when a civil suit brought by disgruntled neighbors forced the airport to close. The site remained vacant until late 1940 when Paul Gingrich, with the help of federal money for pilot training, reopened the field as the West Chester Airport. William B. Wilson bought the airport in 1947 and changed its name to Brandywine Airport in 1982. Most recently, in 1997, a group of pilots calling themselves the "New Brandywine Airport Club" purchased the airport in order to keep it open.

The Present (late 1997)

Although all of the major transportation innovations of the last two centuries have touched West Chester, the automobile dominates West Chester life today. The consequences are evident in the unequalled mobility afforded residents of the borough, as well as traffic congestion on our streets and the movement of downtown businesses to outlying shopping malls. The borough maintains ten municipal parking lots and nearly 740 metered spaces on streets. Four bus lines connect West Chester to King of Prussia, Coatesville, Media, and Philadelphia's 69th Street Terminal. Finally, in September 1997, the Four States Railway Service, Inc. revived rail service to West Chester by restoring the old Media branch tracks to launch the new West Chester Railroad Company, with plans to connect with SEPTA service by the end of the century.
