
NEWS RELEASE :

History of the Reading Railroad

The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad was incorporated on April 4, 1833 to carry anthracite coal in southeastern Pennsylvania. The railroad extended along the parallel Schuylkill Canal from the coal fields near Port Clinton to Reading and eventually Philadelphia. The railroad was opened between Reading and Philadelphia on December 5, 1839. With the opening of Port Richmond on the Delaware River, May 17, 1842 the P&R had created a large outlet for its anthracite traffic.

Expansion of the Reading began January 1, 1850 with the purchase of a segment of the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad in Philadelphia. Over the next century the company would lease, purchase, and merge with nearly 100 smaller railroad companies. From the 93-mile main trunk the railroad would eventually become a 1,300-mile system. The more important of these additions were the Lebanon Valley, East Pennsylvania, North Pennsylvania, and Catawissa Railroads. As a result of these acquisitions the Reading became a strategic bridge-line railroad with connections from the west at Shippensburg (Baltimore & Ohio via the Western Maryland) and Williamsport (New York Central and Erie Railroads) and in the east in the Allentown area (Central Railroad of New Jersey, Lehigh Valley, Lehigh & Hudson River, and Lehigh & New England). With the completion of an extension to Port Reading on Arthur Kill, the Reading gained direct access to New York Harbor.

The many branch lines and relatively short haul of its bridge traffic would have an influence on the type of motive power employed by the railroad in both the steam and diesel eras. The longest haul was from Philadelphia to Newberry Junction (Williamsport) a distance of 202 rail miles.

The Reading's demise in the 1970's was brought about by many factors. The decline in anthracite coal traffic, from 16 million tons in 1946 to just 1, 816, 646 tons in 1975, was probably the biggest factor. The conversion of homes and industries from coal heat to petroleum and natural gas lessened the demand for anthracite. Another factor was the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1957 which diverted much of the Midwest grain traffic formerly carried by the railroads to Atlantic Coast ports. The expansion of the Interstate Highway system, the Pennsylvania Central merger in 1968, and the sale of the Chessie System's Reading Company stock in 1973 also contributed to the bankruptcy of the Reading. The Penn Central merger removed much of the bridge traffic with the New York Central and New Haven Railroads, traffic the Reading desperately needed to make up for the loss of anthracite car loadings. The traffic which had been interchanged with the New York Central at Newberry Junction (Williamsport, Pa.) before the Penn Central merger was now handed over to the Penn Central at Harrisburg, Pa. Former New Haven traffic destined for interchange at Allentown stayed on the Penn Central.

The resulting bankruptcy of the Reading led to the railroad's inclusion into the government-backed Conrail system on April 1, 1976, thus ending 138 years of railroad service to southeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. However, the legacy continues in many communities. The founding and growth of hundreds of towns, many whose names relate to the railroad, are evidence to the impact of the railroad. Industrial communities such as iron and steel, breweries, automobiles/tires/frames, brick, electric power generation, chemical, food (Hershey Chocolate), and railroad suppliers all depended on good rail transportation provided by the Reading. Socially the railroad affected the organized labor movement, fraternal organizations, club and school recreational outings and local charitable organizations. It offered suburban residents easy dependable access to jobs in Philadelphia. It carried the mail and express packages for over a century. It served as one of the strands in the social fabric of the Philadelphia area. Its station building architecture brought a variety of styles to communities in the region. The railroad also impacted the environment it passed through in both positive and negative ways.

Truly, the Reading Railroad shaped the communities of southeastern Pennsylvania.

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