

Tracking the Pennsylvania Railroad in Philadelphia

by Stephen B. Ferrell

I love to make all-day trips riding a variety of trains and routes. In this case, my goal was to ride all the remaining former Pennsylvania Railroad commuter routes serving Philadelphia. All these lines are now operated by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). A quick schedule search showed that this trip could be done in one day, or about 14 hours. I've lived or worked most of my life within two miles of a Pennsy commuter line. As a child in the early 1960s, I used to watch MP54s—electric MU cars—sway into Swarthmore and Morton stations. You could get seasick watching the cars of an eight-unit consist oscillating sideways out of sync with each other on incoming trains. I also recall MP54 traction motors groaning as they left the station and occasionally a crew member would have to climb down and bang on something with a hammer to facilitate their departure. Early Silverliner MUs were used between morning and evening rush hours and they would glide quietly and smoothly to the station platform—much different from the noisy arrivals and departures of the MP54s.

I usually watched these trains at Swarthmore station, about a mile from my house. The station area was right next to the campus of Swarthmore College, and the depot building itself had an apartment for the ticket agent and his family on the second floor. His kids were always playing around the area.



A SEPTA electric MU train arrives at the Elwyn, Pa., station, at the end of the Media/Elwyn Line on Nov. 1, 2007. Alex Mayes

Throughout my life, I worked and/or lived near many stations on the Media–Elwyn line. I lived in Gladstone and worked in Media and was a school librarian at Aldan, Yeadon, Lansdowne, Darby, and Colwyn. For a while I lived in Narberth on the Paoli line. Also, my mother and father retired in the early 1980s to an apartment that overlooked the Wilmington line as it went through Ridley Park. For the last 22 years, I have lived within two miles of Exton Station on the Paoli–Thorndale line. This has allowed me to do some train-watching with my grandsons and also catch the many Amtrak trains that stop here for my trips to New York, Boston, Washington, Chicago, and many more destinations.

SEPTA operates 13 commuter rail lines in the Philadelphia area. Six of these are former Reading Railroad lines and another six were former Pennsylvania Railroad operations. The Airport line was created after SEPTA took over operations and utilizes tracks from both former operations. After diverting from the former PRR Northeast Corridor, the line uses former Reading freight tracks to reach the airport area. New tracks and stations were constructed at the airport.

Venerable ex-PRR MP54s mingle with the new stainless-steel kids on the block at Paoli, Pa., during the winter of 1975–76. jim boyd/kevin eudaly collection



Paoli–Thorndale Line

right-of-way was so wide, with four tracks. This line was the first of the Pennsylvania Railroad's commuter lines to be electrified with AC power service starting in 1915. Earlier, the Long Island Rail Road, operated by the PRR, used DC third rail for power.



Amtrak's Philadelphia 30th Street Station—originally a Pennsylvania Railroad facility—is shown in a view that looks westward from Norfolk Southern's Philadelphia headquarters building in 2006. Northeast Corridor trains serve platforms that are out of sight beneath the building. Perpendicular to the NEC route, the upper level of 30th Street Station is on

platform photo, Alex Mayes

I left my house for Exton Station at 6:45am, planning to catch the 7:30 train to 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. After depositing four quarters in the SEPTA parking meter for my parking space, I walked to the inbound tracks. The 7:08am express was just pulling into the station, so I hopped on board. Catching an earlier train gave me more time to eat breakfast. Onboard, I used the first of my 85-cent senior tickets, as I had just turned 65. I had a strip of ten with me that I had purchased on the SEPTA website.

My train was a five-car consist made up of Bombardier coaches with an AEM7 locomotive pushing in the rear and a cab car—one of the Bombardier coaches—in the front. This train ran as an express from Paoli straight through to Center City and made the trip to 30th Street Station from Exton in 45 minutes! I went straight down from the second-level commuter platform to the massive main concourse of 30th Street Station. Don, my regular rail-riding buddy, was waiting for me near the information counter. He was just recovering from major knee surgery and was anxious to enjoy this trip, his first one since his surgery. He traveled to 30th Street by bus and the Market-Frankford Subway-elevated from his home in Drexel Hill. I was hungry so we went to Jersey Hank's for a hearty breakfast sandwich. Located in the former McDonalds space, Hank's shares the space with a Wendy's franchise and serves some really good breakfast sandwiches.

Wilmington Line

for trips into Delaware and New Jersey. I purchased a ticket to Wilmington for \$4.50. Don negotiated with the agent and used his 85-cent ticket to the last stop in Pennsylvania and then another ticket for \$3.25 for the trip into Delaware. We went to the upper-level platform and waited for our train, which arrived right on time at 9:28am. Upon boarding, the conductor accepted Don's \$3.25 ticket for the entire trip. (I have to remind myself to let him do all financial negotiations on any future trips!)

The Wilmington line opened in 1838 as the Wilmington & Susquehanna Railroad, with the Pennsylvania Railroad controlling it from the 1880s. This line was electrified in 1928 to Wilmington and was extended to Washington, D.C., in 1935.

Shortly after leaving 30th Street Station, we stopped at University City, a nice newer station serving the University of Pennsylvania. After departing, we passed through the urbanized and somewhat blighted areas of southwest Philly and Darby, after which the views became more suburban as we traveled south. We passed Ridley Park and I pointed out the apartment to which my parents retired. We then rolled past the site of the former Baldwin plant and offices in Eddystone. We passed a few more stations and rolled into Chester returning to an urbanized setting. Chester itself appeared to be a very distressed and blighted city. Leaving Chester we went under the Commodore Barry Bridge which crosses the Delaware River and sped south towards the state line. Our first stop in Delaware was Claymont. We continued south and the line came really close to the banks of the Delaware River, which was quite wide at this point, and we could see a lot of boat and freighter traffic. Before coming into the recently refurbished Wilmington station, our train crossed over three tracks



The beautifully renovated Wilmington station—now also known as the Joseph R. Biden Jr. Station—is shown in 2015.

Wilmington's station was designed by renowned architect Frank Furness and opened in 1908. The station was extensively refurbished in 2011. This facility has three tracks with two side platforms and one island platform which is used for Amtrak trains. All of the tracks that serve Wilmington are elevated.



A SEPTA train is about to head back to Philly as Amtrak's Silver Star makes its station call. Stephen Ferrell

Leaving our train, we exited on a high-level platform. This platform was high-level for the first two cars and a low-level platform for the remaining cars. Ours was a four-car consist. We walked to the stairs and down to the main waiting room and passenger concourse. I walked outside the station and took some photographs. After taking pictures of the waiting area, we went back up to the platform for our return train, which would be the same consist we had for our ride down. While waiting, Amtrak's late-running northbound *Silver Meteor* arrived with one of their new Siemens ACS-64 "Sprinter" electric locomotives in the lead. It also had a new baggage car and several Viewliners.

Subway or Wendy's, and Don said he would like to try the value menu at Wendy's. Since we had a late breakfast, this was more than enough to satisfy us. Now on to our next train...

Cynwyd Line

The Cynwyd Line is very short. It takes only 15 minutes to travel the entire line with only two stops along the way! Service is in the mornings and evenings only. We needed to come back on the same train as the next return train would be four hours later. There is no weekend or holiday service on this line.



The attractive depot at Cynwyd [SIN-wid] features an appealing-looking cafe. [stephen ferrell](#)

Our train arrived at the 30th Street commuter platform on time and consisted of only one car. After departing and taking the PRR line toward Paoli, our single car took the flyover bridge over the main line and then continued along this short, single-tracked line. We stopped at Wynnefield Avenue and Bala stations and then arrived at Cynwyd. Here we found a very pretty classic station building that had a nice looking café within.

Electrified in 1930, The Pennsylvania Railroad operated trains to Norristown on this line—the former Schuylkill Valley line—but stopped service in 1960 because of competition from the more popular Reading line. SEPTA ran trains on this to Manayunk, across the Schuylkill and ended the line at Ivy Ridge. They attempted to shut down service many times on this line, but political pressure prevailed to keep the line going. This is also the line that dispatchers accidentally rerouted an Amtrak train onto recently. For such a small line it has an interesting story to tell.

The return trip departed after a 16-minute layover in Cynwyd. We departed, stopped at the two stations on the line, and then rolled through a tunnel instead of the flyover for the connection to the main line. We stayed on beyond 30th Street Station to the line's terminus at the underground Penn Center Suburban Station.



Suburban Station

1930; intended to replace Broad Street Station which finally closed in 1953. The Pennsylvania Railroad had its headquarters in the building on top of the terminal. Suburban Station was formerly stub-ended, then in 1984 the Center City commuter tunnel was opened that connected the former Pennsylvania Railroad and the former Reading lines, which used to terminate at Reading Terminal. A third Center City station was opened near the former Reading's terminal and was named Market Street East. This station was recently renamed as Jefferson Station. Suburban Station is a bustling area of activity—with seven tracks serving all the SEPTA commuter lines, trains arrived or departed every five or ten minutes, and it wasn't even rush hour yet. Don decided that he would take leave from our trip here and head down to the Reading Terminal Farmer's Market for some shopping. He didn't want to push himself after knee surgery. We bid adieu and I went down the steps to the platform and boarded the Chestnut Hill West train.

Chestnut Hill West Line

The Chestnut Hill West line opened in 1884. The line was electrified in 1918, making it one of the earliest commuter lines to receive electrification. SEPTA has two lines going to Chestnut Hill: the Chestnut Hill East line is a former Reading line and the Chestnut Hill West line is formerly a PRR operation. The terminals in Chestnut Hill are only about a quarter of a mile apart.

Departing from Suburban Station, the train stopped at 30th Street Station and then traveled up the Northeast Corridor Trenton Line to North Philadelphia station. Just before the main North Philadelphia platform, our line diverted to the left and I noticed separate platforms at the station just for this line, at a 45-degree angle from the rest of the North Philadelphia station platforms. Continuing on, we traveled over a double-track freight line and the former

West Trenton lines. We continued through North Philly's urbanized areas to Cheltenham. The line went through Germantown and Mount Airy and then became quite rural for a line that didn't leave the city limits. Arriving at Chestnut Hill, I noticed many large homes and estates indicating that folks here had some money. It looked like it was old money to me, with executives who liked to commute to their Center City offices by train.

Getting off the train, I noticed that the line at the station was below grade. Chestnut Hill West station had an attractive platform area and classic old station house that appeared in good repair. I walked around the platform area to take some pictures and then took the steps up to the town center. Chestnut Hill seemed to be a really pretty area of the city with storefronts having hanging plants and nice clean streets. I couldn't see north to the former Reading station and the Chestnut Hill East line, but was assured that it was within walking distance. Returning to the station platform, I reboarded the same train for my return trip. This time I detrained at 30th Street Station as I had to catch my next train in 15 minutes.



One aspect of the Pennsylvania Railroad's far-flung passenger network.
gary zuters, david p. oroszi collection

Media-Elwyn Line

This line opened in 1853 as the West Chester & Philadelphia Railroad. The Pennsylvania Railroad gained control in the 1880s, and the line was electrified in 1928.

Childhood and adulthood memories meshed together on this line. Departing 30th Street Station, we went through a curving tunnel to access the southbound right-of-way of the Northeast Corridor and Wilmington line. At University City, the Amtrak line bypassed the station while the Wilmington and Media line trains stop at this busy station. Departing this station the Media line diverts to the right for its westbound journey to Media and onward to Elwyn.

We stopped at 49th Street, which is a flag stop, and Angora, both within city limits. After crossing over Cobs Creek on a trestle, we coasted into Fernwood-Yeadon. After stopping at Lansdowne we came into Gladstone station, where for eight years my wife and I lived in an apartment that overlooked the line. Next we stopped at Aldan (called Clifton-Aldan), where I taught for almost 20 years of my 35-year career. We then called at Primos, Secane, and Morton-Rutledge, the latter of which was the site of manually-operated grade crossing gates in the 1960s. Next we stopped at Swarthmore. Many memories came back of chocolate sodas at Cathermine's Pharmacy, hoagies at the Cracker Barrel next door, and train-watching at the station.

After departing Swarthmore we rumbled over a high trestle and through a wooded area into Wallingford. After one more stop, we rolled into Media. This

Chester. Today, West Chester commuters drive about 15 minutes north and catch their train at Exton, on the Paoli–Thorndale line. In 1986 SEPTA discontinued service on the line from Elwyn to West Chester because of deteriorating trackage and low patronage. It was quicker for commuters near West Chester to use the Exton station on the Paoli line. I stayed on the train past Media to Elwyn, the next and final stop. Here the rest of the line that is not used for passenger service is single track to West Chester. Some of the track west of Elwyn is still used for SEPTA crew training and there is talk of starting service to Wawa. There is a tourist line, the West Chester Railroad, operating out of West Chester using diesel locomotives and historic coaches (former MU cars). This line operates from West Chester to Westtown and Cheyney, turning around at Glen Mills.

After letting off the passengers, our train to Elwyn moved west on the single track and switched to the inbound track and moved into the new platform. Within 15 minutes we were headed back to Philly. Arriving at 30th Street Station, I went up to the commuter operations ticket counter and purchased my tickets to Trenton. I noticed a train leaving in only one minute, so I hustled back up to the platform and boarded immediately.

Trenton Line

The Trenton line, which is part of the four-track Northeast Corridor to New York City, was electrified to Trenton in 1930. I was so tired that I hardly recall this portion of the trip. As I have traveled this line often to New York City, most of the scenery is very familiar. I didn't see any evidence of the recent major Amtrak derailment at Frankford curve, as I was sitting on the left side of the train. My train was called the Trenton Express, but it sure seemed to make

Trenton Transit Center

Getting off at Trenton, I noticed a lot of activity. Here SEPTA service terminates and New Jersey Transit service begins. Trenton is also a major stop for Amtrak, although several *Acelas* skip this station using the through tracks in the center that do not have a boarding platform. The tracks and platform are below grade level. Taking the escalator up to the terminal, I checked out the passenger concourse, and took photographs. The terminal had a major facelift in 2008 and is quite modern. Unfortunately, there were quite a few panhandlers and street people around. Also, the air-conditioning wasn't working well and fans were placed at strategic places to help cool the facility. I noticed both Amtrak and NJT security and an Amtrak K-9 unit, so I felt safe while at the station. I went outside to photograph the River line terminal across the street and the light-rail diesel consist that was at the platform.

Within the Trenton Transit Center, there appeared to be only two choices for eating. I spied a McDonald's on one side of the passenger concourse and an Italian take-out place on the other. I chose the pizza place as I wanted a slice of pepperoni pizza and a very large soda to quench my thirst.

The final leg of my trip would be on an Amtrak Keystone Service train to my home station at Exton. The train came in right on time and I boarded it and sank into my soft Amtrak seat. I immediately fell into a light sleep, waking up at Paoli, one stop before Exton. Exiting the train, I shuffled over to my car and drove home. After a hot shower and a bedtime snack, I was ready for dreamland.