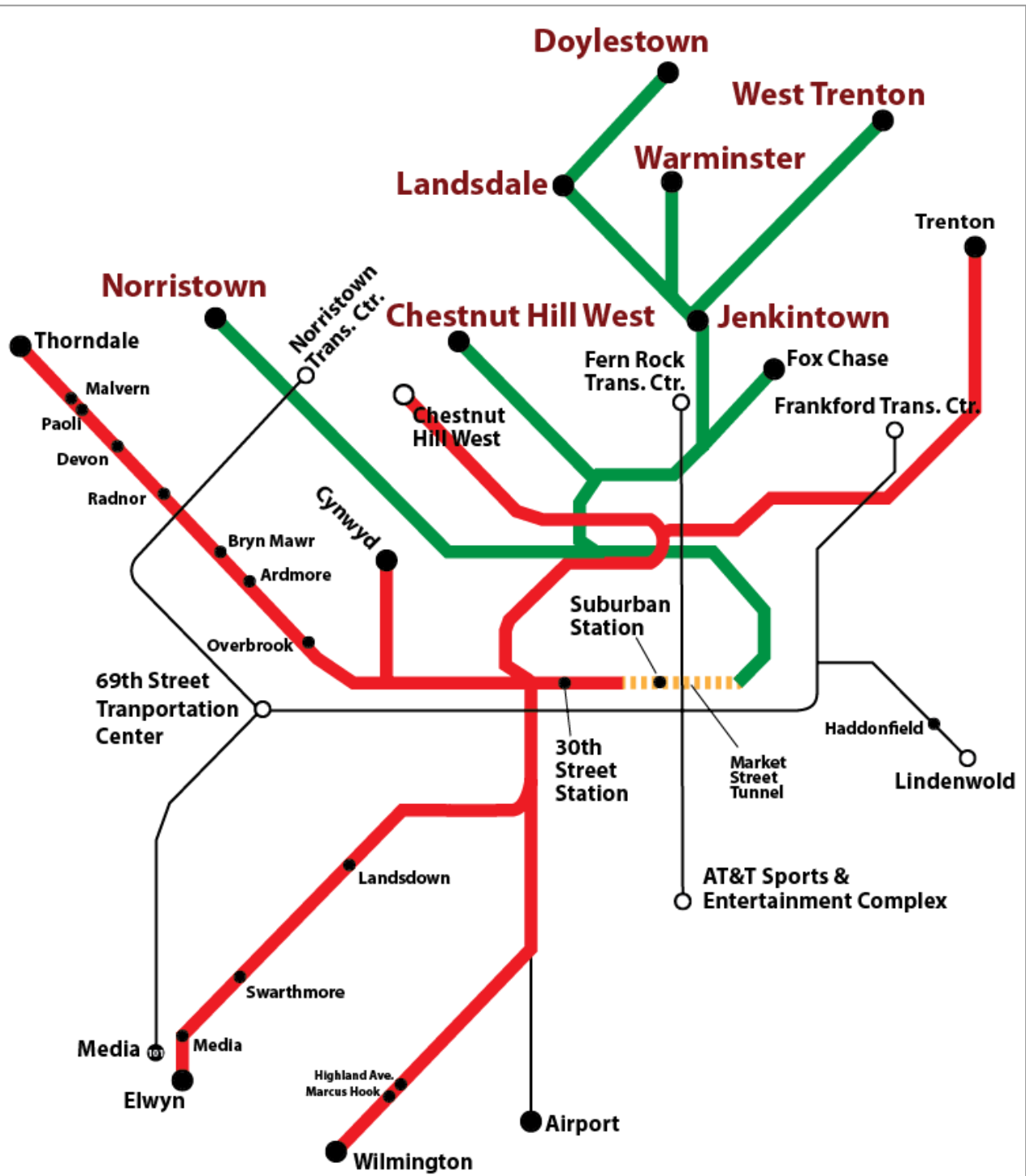


# Trail Blazer: Take a Ride on the (Former) Reading

*by Steve Ferrell; Photography by the author except as noted*

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A schematic of SEPTA's rail network. Lines in green are former Reading; lines in red are former Pennsylvania Railroad, covered in Trail Blazer in PTJ 2018–3. Black lines are other rail-transit routes such as subway, the Norristown High Speed Line (former Philadelphia & Western), or recent, non-heritage-line extensions that may be covered in future Trail Blazers.

white river productions/tom hooper

Take a ride on the Reading! SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority) still provides service on six of the former Reading Railroad commuter lines that once originated at Reading Terminal in Philadelphia. Early one morning in 2016, I caught a train to 30th Street from my home in Exton, Pa., to spend a day on the former Reading.

## Doylestown Line

Leaving from 30th Street Station, the SEPTA train was made up of Silverliner IV cars. We stopped at Penn Center Suburban Station and then Jefferson station in the Center City commuter tunnel. After departing Jefferson station, the tracks curved hard to the left, and soon we were above ground heading north.



A train of SEPTA Silverliner IV cars arrives at Temple University station in April 2016. This was once Reading Company's main line between Philadelphia and Reading, Pa.

We traveled along the bustling four-track right-of-way and then stopped at Temple University station. I got off to photograph this busy elevated commuter station. Temple's station is served by all six former Reading lines and is extremely busy.

Finishing my photography, I boarded the train to Doylestown. I noted how active this segment is, with trains every five to ten minutes each way. We went under Amtrak's four-tracked Northeast Corridor, SEPTA's line to Norristown, and then diverted to the left. We arrived at the very busy Wayne Junction station. Here the line to East Chestnut Hill diverts left to the northwest. There is a large yard here for rolling-stock storage and maintenance.

After departing Wayne Junction, the Fox Chase Line (formerly Reading's line to Newtown, Pa.) diverted right, to the northeast. At the Fern Rock Transportation Center, commuters can connect with the Broad Street subway line at the bustling northern terminus.

After Fern Rock, the scenery became quite nice. Large houses, rolling hills, and forested areas with streams seemed a stark contrast with the city scenes not too far to the south. This area had the look of the outer suburbs, but was still within city limits. We soon stopped at Melrose Park and Elkins Park and then at Jenkintown.



An impressive, beautifully restored stone depot greets passengers at Lansdale where the Doylestown branch splits from what was Reading's main line to Bethlehem, Pa.

At Jenkintown our line diverted to the left toward Doylestown, while the line to the right traveled up to West Trenton. After the next stop, Glenside, the line

Lansdale, which appeared to be a busy large town. The station has two separate platforms that are divided by a narrow parking lot. A line continues on the left (northwest) toward Quakertown and is used by CSX for freight. This is the former Reading line to Bethlehem, Pa., which is no longer operating and with most of the tracks removed. After Lansdale the scenery became very pastoral, with many horse farms. We pulled into Doylestown—the end of the line. I boarded the same equipment for our return trip 15 minutes later.



Jenkintown is a busy junction point right at the station. The line to the right is the former Reading main line to Bound Brook, N.J. SEPTA serves this as far as West Trenton.

many services and food options.

## **Warminster Line**

The Warminster line is another active commuter route with frequent train service. This is a short branch, and is part of the former Reading line to New Hope. The electrification ends at Warminster and the line continues on to New Hope. The New Hope & Ivyland Railroad occasionally runs excursions from New Hope to Warminster and even into center city Philadelphia.

Leaving Glenside, we stopped at Ards-ley and the line became single-tracked. The line traveled through very busy suburban areas of Hatboro and Willow Grove and within a short time, we arrived at Warminster.

After a short wait, I reboarded the same train for part of its return journey. We stopped at Glenside and continued on to Jenkintown and I detrained there. At Jenkintown, I connected to a train on the West Trenton Line.

## **West Trenton Line**

I boarded the West Trenton-bound train and was delighted to see that our consist was made up of new Silverliner V cars. These cars have forward-facing windows, and I sat up front for an “engineer’s view.” For a while, the scenery alternated between inner and outer suburbia, with gently rolling hills and forested areas. At Neshaminy Falls, I spotted the beautiful waterfall on the left.

Later, the train stopped at Woodbourne. There is a CSX yard here and track access to the Trenton Cut-Off, a Norfolk Southern line that crosses our line overhead. My son and grandson live nearby and love to railfan here.

N.J. Electrification ends after this yard. There is a single track diverting to the right and heading north that is the former Reading line to Bound Brook Junction, where it joins with the former Central Railroad of New Jersey line that continued on to Communipaw and ferry service to New York City. Today it is used only for freight service.



The restored head house of the former Reading Terminal. Although trains no longer call at this impressive building—they now go through the new tunnel that links former RDG suburban lines with the former PRR Suburban Station and 30th Street Station—Reading Terminal is still a center of activity in downtown Philadelphia. It is full of various commercial endeavors, notably Reading Terminal Market, a foodie heaven where one can chow down on a Philly cheese steak or hundreds of other fresh market foods.





I returned to Jefferson station in center city on the same train. Arriving at Jefferson station, I went outside to photograph the former Reading Terminal head house and the train shed. I also went into the Reading Terminal Market to take a few pictures and look around. This is a great place to sample “Philly” cuisine: cheesesteaks, roast pork sandwiches, and more!

## **Fox Chase Line**

The Fox Chase line travels through some urban areas after diverting at Newtown Junction. This line used to continue on to Newtown (service ended in 1983) in Bucks County, but the line now ends at Fox Chase and the rails of the line to the north have been removed. The line was electrified in 1966, and Reading used mostly diesel-locomotive-hauled and Budd RDC consists on the line through to Newtown. Fox Chase is a busy station and this is the location of the famous Fox Chase Cancer Center. I reboarded the same train for the

After passing through the center city stations and leaving 30th Street Station, I now traveled on the former Pennsylvania Railroad's line to Chestnut Hill West, on the same train. The train traveled past the Zoo tower and Zoo interlocking area onto Amtrak's Northeast Corridor traveling toward New York City. At North Philadelphia Station, our line diverted to the northwest. There was a small angled platform that served as this line's connection to North Philly station. For some distance, our line parallels the SEPTA and former Reading line on the left to Norristown. The area is very pleasant looking and quite hilly. Arriving at Chestnut Hill West's attractive station, we now had time for a lunch break and a short walk to the former Reading Railroad's Chestnut Hill East terminal.

I walked up the steps to street level and busy Germantown Avenue. I walked a half block to the left then walked north along Bethlehem Pike. I stopped at a favorite hoagie (sub) sandwich outlet, Primo, for a big lunch. Then I ambled the short distance on Bethlehem Pike to the Chestnut Hill East terminal. The two lines are just under a mile apart at this point.

Departing the terminal, the train traveled through a deep cut. Emerging from the cut, the line was elevated for much of the route. We traveled through scenic wooded areas. At Mount Airy, the neighborhood started becoming kind of seedy, with many older, formerly nice houses now starting to decay. This became more pronounced after stopping at Germantown. Shortly, I noticed the urban blight of North Philadelphia. Our train soon arrived at the busy Wayne Junction and then I detrained at Jefferson station.



Classic diesel-era Reading Lines. In the waning pre-Conrail years of Northeastern railroading, a Reading excursion train pauses at Norristown, Pa., on the main line between Philadelphia and Reading, Pa., for a photo opportunity. [george strombeck](#)

## **Norristown Line**

This is SEPTA's Manyunk–Norristown Line. I felt this line had the prettiest views of all six former Reading lines. This was once the main line to Reading, Pa. After departing Jefferson station, we stopped at Temple University station and North Broad station. After departing North Broad, the line passed under Amtrak's Northeast Corridor and departed to the left, then went through blighted urban areas for a while.

East Falls, Wissahickon, and Manvunk are gentrified areas with great views of

After Manyunk we stopped at Ivy Ridge, which was a pretty neighborhood within the Philadelphia city limits. After departing Ivy Ridge, the line paralleled close to the river and high up on a ridge. At Spring Mill, I spotted college scullers (rowing teams) practicing their racing drills on the river. The scenery here is magnificent, with views of the river, and a rail line elevated enough to allow views across the water to the west. I had occasional glimpses of the former Reading line on the other side of the river. This line is now a freight line operated by Norfolk Southern and CSX.

Conshohocken is a beehive of offices, businesses and activities. We traveled under the Trenton cut-off. This was a former Pennsylvania Railroad line that traveled east-west from the Downingtown area to Trenton. The line was electrified, but only used for freight service, except for emergencies. Once, the Broadway Limited from New York City to Chicago had to be routed on this line because of a derailment in Philly.

Approaching the Norristown area, the scenery quickly became quite urban. The train began a slow approach on rocky track to the Norristown Transportation Center. I detrained there, even though there were two more stops at Main Street and Elm Street before the SEPTA service ends.

I walked across the street from the commuter-rail station, past the long-distance bus depot and to the bilevel terminal for the Norristown High Speed Line. This is the former Philadelphia & Western (P&W) interurban line, later operated by the Red Arrow Lines and finally SEPTA. The line used to run from 69th Street Terminal in Upper Darby to Norristown and on to Allentown in a joint operation with the Lehigh Valley Transit lines.

I took the escalator up to track level and boarded the two-car light-rail

to swipe my driver's license in the fare box at the door. Departing Norristown, our train made about six stops before arriving at Radnor. Here, I walked the half mile uphill to reach the Radnor commuter-rail station on the SEPTA Paoli–Thorndale route.

Shortly after I arrived at the Radnor station—very much out of breath—the westbound train pulled in. It was a short 24-minute westbound trip to my home stop at Exton. It was a 16-hour day and I was exhausted, but I did complete the entire former Reading network still operated by SEPTA in just one day!