



Farewell, Royal Blue Line

The last day of B&O passenger service east of Baltimore was a time to reflect on the route's storied past

By John D. Denney Jr.

TODAY IN PHILADELPHIA, only CSX freight tracks skirting the east bank of the Schuylkill River and a high-rise apartment building mark the spot at 24th and Chestnut streets where once stood one of the city's biggest passenger stations. Probably few Philadelphians even remember the Baltimore & Ohio's wonderful Victorian terminal, completed in 1888, with its commanding clock tower awash with turrets, parapets, and gables. Designed by prominent Philadelphia architect Frank Furness, it represented the power of the B&O and the prestige of its famed "Royal Blue Line." Even when B&O's once-grand passenger service started to falter, the old station still defied the competition across the river—the Pennsylvania Railroad's massive 30th Street Station—with a brilliant electric "B&O" sign illuminating the night sky.

When the B&O announced in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* almost reluctantly that effective Sunday, April 27, 1958, all passenger service would be discontinued east of Baltimore, the news came as a surprise to no

On April 23, 1958, days before the end of Royal Blue Line service, the New York-St. Louis *Diplomat* rolls into B&O's Philadelphia station. At the far left is PRR's massive 30th Street Station.



AARON G. FRYER





JOHN DZIOBKO

Budd RDC's from the 429-mile *Daylight Speedliner* service to Pittsburgh lay over at East Side Yard, B&O's Philadelphia hub, in late April 1958.



CLASSIC TRAINS COLLECTION

Jackson, Md., holly tree brochure, mid-1950's (above); Royal Blue Line public timetable cover, 1896 (right).



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one. Only about 500 passengers a day were using the venerable Philadelphia station. The once-busy route was losing more than \$5 million a year on its six remaining round trips between Jersey City (B&O's New York City connection) and Washington, forcing the tradition-minded B&O to finally drop the curtain on trains that had become a legend.

I have faint memories of when my parents took me as a 4-year-old to B&O's Fair of the Iron Horse in 1927. The Fair must have sparked a flame that never died—my love of trains—which perhaps was why we were under the old trainshed on that last Saturday in April 1958. But it wasn't my first visit to 24th and Chestnut. In previous years I had taken the B&O with my parents on weekend trips to New York City. It also was my departure point for a few railfan trips.

B&O's bold stroke

The Royal Blue Line was born when B&O inaugurated its super-deluxe *Royal Limited* in 1890, hailed as the finest day train in America. It covered the 223 miles between Washington and New York in 5 hours flat, including the ferry transfer across the Hudson River to Manhattan. The rolling stock represented the finest in carbuilder's art of the era, painted dark blue, with lettering and striping in royal Saxony gold. The dining cars, *Waldorf* and *Astoria*, offered the finest in gourmet dining, including the best in vintage liquors and champagnes. The train's well-heeled passengers received complimentary copies of the *Royal Blue* magazine. The Royal Blue Line became a legend, and the B&O lavished its best on its Washington-New York service. Several long-distance trains plied the route, such as the *National Limited* to St. Louis and the *Capitol Limited* to Chicago, but the *Royal Blue*, as the train came to be known, was its flagship until the end.

The B&O's 95-mile extension from Baltimore to Philadelphia was not completed until 1886, at tremendous cost. It was a bold stroke by B&O President John W. Garrett to com-

pete with the Pennsylvania for New York traffic. It involved digging the 7339-foot-long Howard Street tunnel under downtown Baltimore and erecting the classic Mount Royal Station in northeast Baltimore. The 6300-foot-long bridge required to span the Susquehanna River at Havre de Grace, Md., was the longest on the B&O system. A drawbridge had to be erected in Philadelphia to cross the Schuylkill.

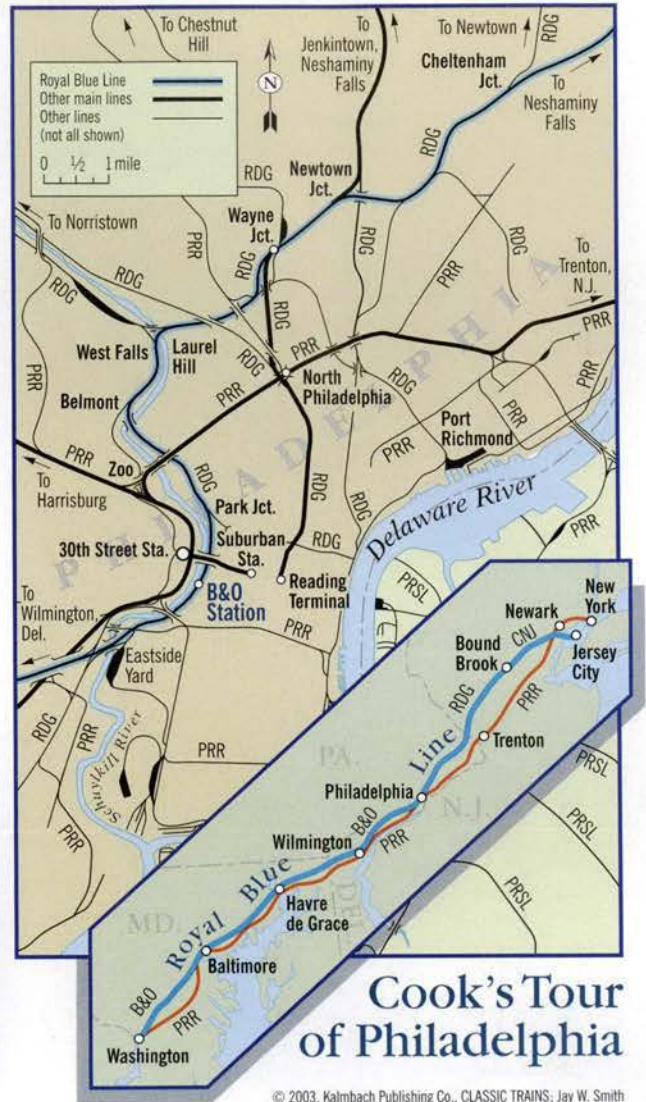
It was a fine, double-track railroad, but a lack of funds meant it ended at Philadelphia. East of there, B&O trains relied on the tracks, locomotives, and crews of two partner roads—the Reading Company to Bound Brook, N.J., and the Central Railroad of New Jersey beyond to Jersey City.

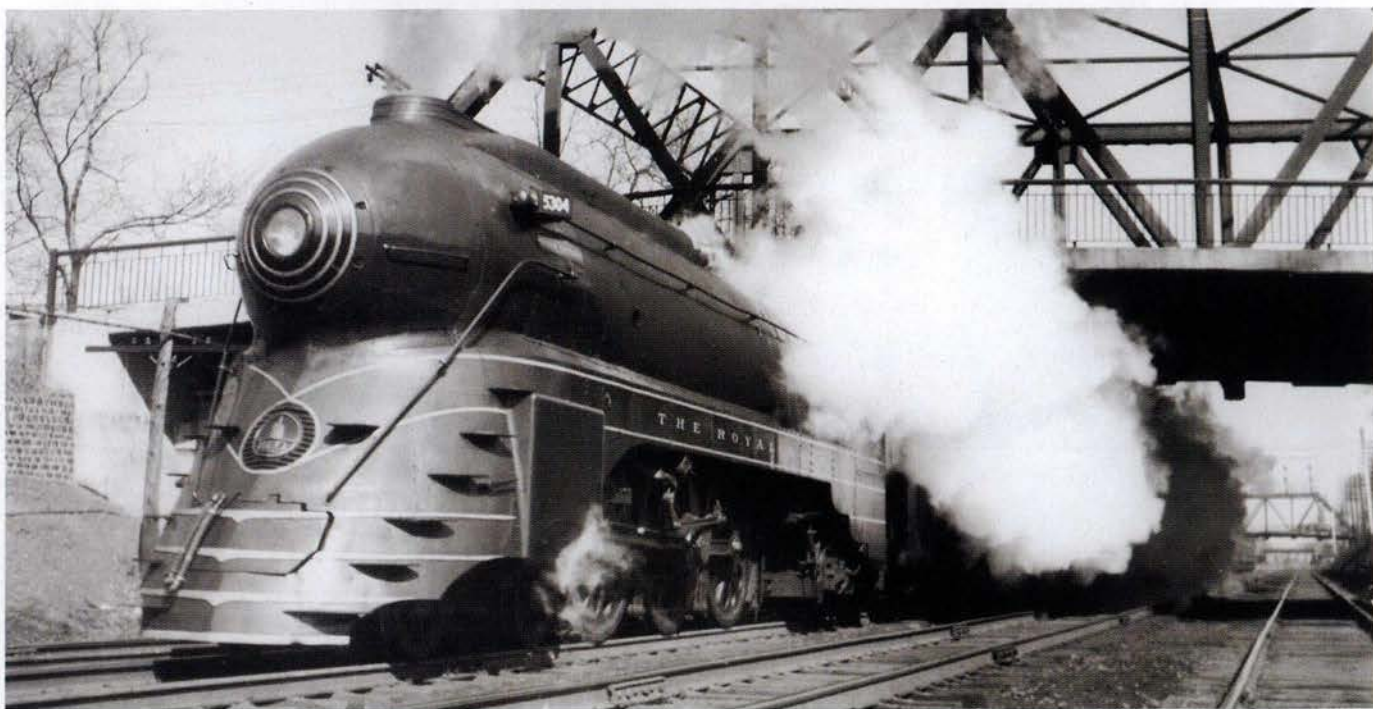
Though it never seriously challenged the PRR for dominance in passenger or freight business, the Royal Blue Line was B&O's showcase, a theater for many innovations. In 1895, the road opened the first mainline railroad electrification in the U.S. in the Baltimore tunnel. The company also experimented with the aerodynamic Adams Wind-Splitter

Touring Philly: Just after its Wayne Junction stop, a westbound B&O train (below) curves down off RDG's electrified line to Reading Terminal. At West Falls (bottom), the westbound *National Limited* crosses the Schuylkill River.

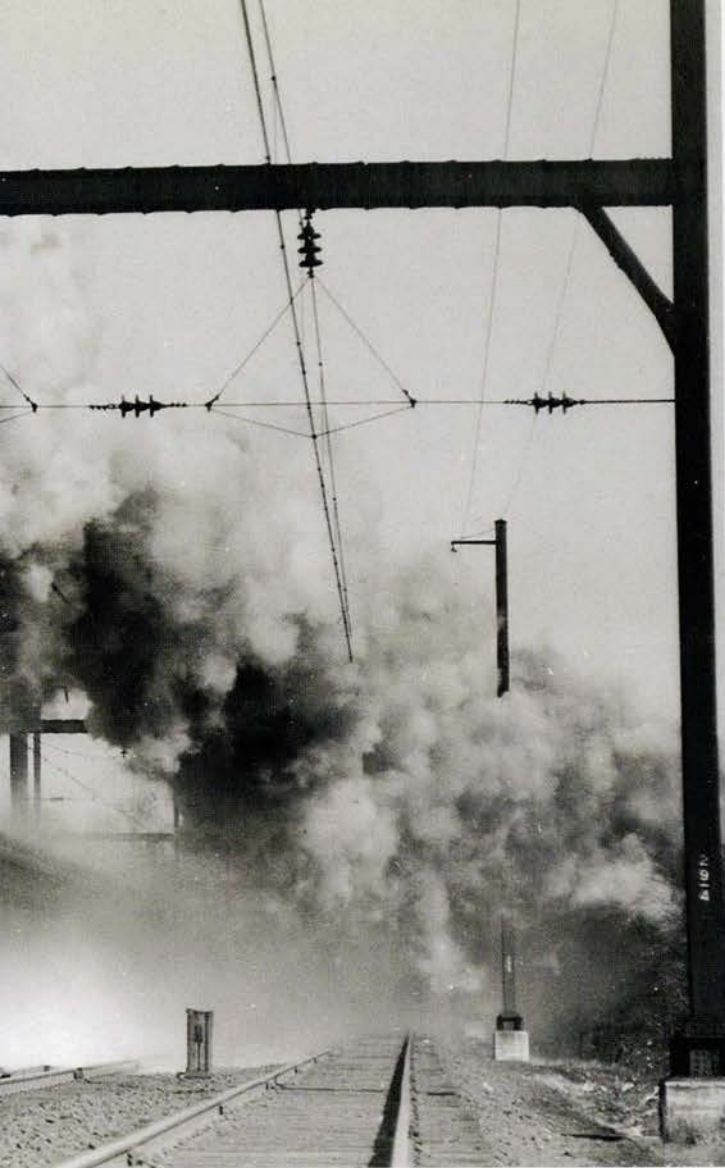


ABOVE, C. RAYMOND BRANDT; BELOW, RICHARD S. SHORT



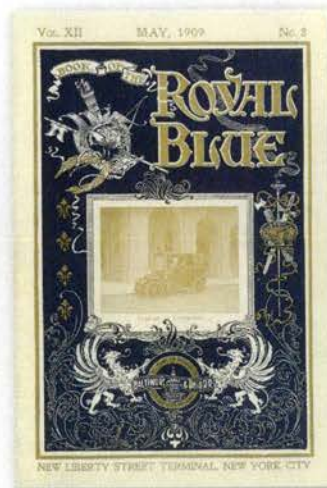


FRANK QUIN



W. R. OSBORNE

Book of the *Royal Blue* magazine cover, 1909 (below); dining-car brochure, late 1940's (right).



TWO ITEMS, JOHN D. DENNEY JR. COLLECTION



R. P. MORRIS

Royal Blue in steam: Pacific 5318 *President Garfield* (top), on the *Shenandoah*, takes water on the fly at Roelofs, Pa., 4 miles west of West Trenton on the Reading. Hudson No. 2 *Lord Baltimore* (above, at Elizabethport, N.J., in 1937) and the lightweight *Royal Blue* gave way to streamlined Pacific 5304 and rebuilt heavyweight cars, seen at left on the Jersey Central.

train in 1900 between Washington and Baltimore. The Wind-Splitter was ahead of its time—railroad streamlining would not be adopted for three and a half decades. In 1927, B&O introduced its famous President-class Pacifics. Named for the first 20 Presidents of the United States, they were the first B&O engines to run through from Washington to Jersey City.

By the mid-1930's, most of the shine was gone from B&O's

New York service. Daniel Willard, the B&O president who fathered the 1927 Fair of the Iron Horse and many innovations, tried to revitalize the Royal Blue Line with a new air-conditioned, lightweight, streamlined train. The *Royal Blue*, first train to actually bear that name, hit the rails on June 24, 1935. Pulling it was the *Lord Baltimore*, a lightweight, 84-inch-drivered 4-6-4 of British styling. Two years later the train was replaced by a heavyweight version pulled by a Pacific whose bullet-nosed streamlining was the work of the great designer Otto Kuhler. A few short years later, Electro-Motive EA diesels—the very first E units—would take over.

Wandering through Philadelphia

Royal Blue Line passengers got something of a "Cook's Tour" of Philadelphia. Leaving 24th and Chestnut, trains entered Reading trackage at Park Junction, then crossed to the west side of the Schuylkill on a concrete-arch bridge at Belmont, then went back to the east side at Laurel Hill. There was slow, cumbersome yard running, then a stop at Wayne Junction, a major transfer point for passengers out of Reading Terminal in downtown Philadelphia. B&O trains then rode Reading's New York Short Line cutoff to avoid the congestion of electric M.U. locals on the route via Jenkintown. Back on the Reading's main line at Neshaminy Falls, the Royal Blue trains dashed up to Bound Brook and Jersey City.



Final day, April 26, 1958: In Philadelphia, the exuberant exterior of B&O's 1888 station contrasted with the interior, modernized along more restrained lines. Down at track level, a westbound racetrack special (nearest camera) and an unidentified consist stood beside the Schuylkill River.

B&O motor coaches picked up passengers at trainside, drove onto the ferries, and delivered their charges to several stops in New York City. From Philadelphia, it took almost two and a half hours to reach the final bus stop in New York. The Pennsy, with its sleek GG1 electrics and midtown Manhattan rail terminal, put its Philadelphia passengers into Gotham in 90 minutes, speaking volumes why B&O was a distant second in the market. (B&O trains were more competitive during 1918-26, when, thanks to a U.S. Railroad Administration order to ease wartime congestion, they used Penn Station. When peace returned, Willard managed to negotiate an extension, but PRR put an end to that, and B&O slinked back to Jersey City.)

B&O never offered much local passenger service east of Baltimore. In later years, there was a nifty, steam-powered, coach-and-dining/parlor-car train out of Philadelphia in the morning, returning from Washington in the evening. This was later replaced with the *Daylight Speedliner* Rail Diesel Car train that ran from Philadelphia to Washington and on to Pittsburgh, one of the longest hauls for the self-powered Budd RDC equipment anywhere. There was also a short coach-and-baggage-car run that went from Washington to Philadelphia in the morning, laid over about an hour, and returned to Washington. We watched it one day at Newark, Del., and it seemed almost devoid of passengers.

The late 1930's saw two motor trains based at Singerly, Md., the B&O stop for Elkton. One car would make a morning inbound and an evening outbound commuter run to





At Jersey City, B&O buses delivered New York City passengers to the *National Limited*, due to leave from track 1 at 1:55 p.m. One of the buses' midtown Manhattan stops was B&O's ticket office at Rockefeller Center.



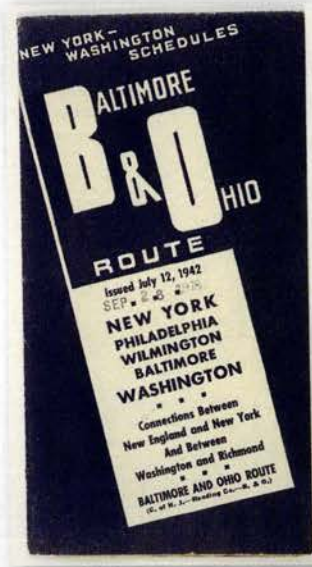
Philadelphia; the other would serve Baltimore.

Even if the B&O could not keep up with the Pennsy's fast schedules—and partly no doubt *because* of the speed handicap—it offered other amenities. B&O coddled its passengers, giving them the kind of service the bigger, busier road did not. Strategically placed in the lobby of Mount Royal Station, for example, near a huge steam radiator, was a group of old-fashioned rocking chairs that allowed ticket-holders to stay warm and cozy during the winter before dashing out into the drafty trainshed to board their trains. There was also a large holly tree along the line at Jackson, Md., that would be illuminated at Christmas. In keeping with the season, passenger trainmen wore sprigs of holly in their uniform lapels.

It was probably the expertise of B&O dining-car chefs with tidewater Maryland cuisine, however, that brought most pas-



New York-Washington public timetable cover, 1942 (below).



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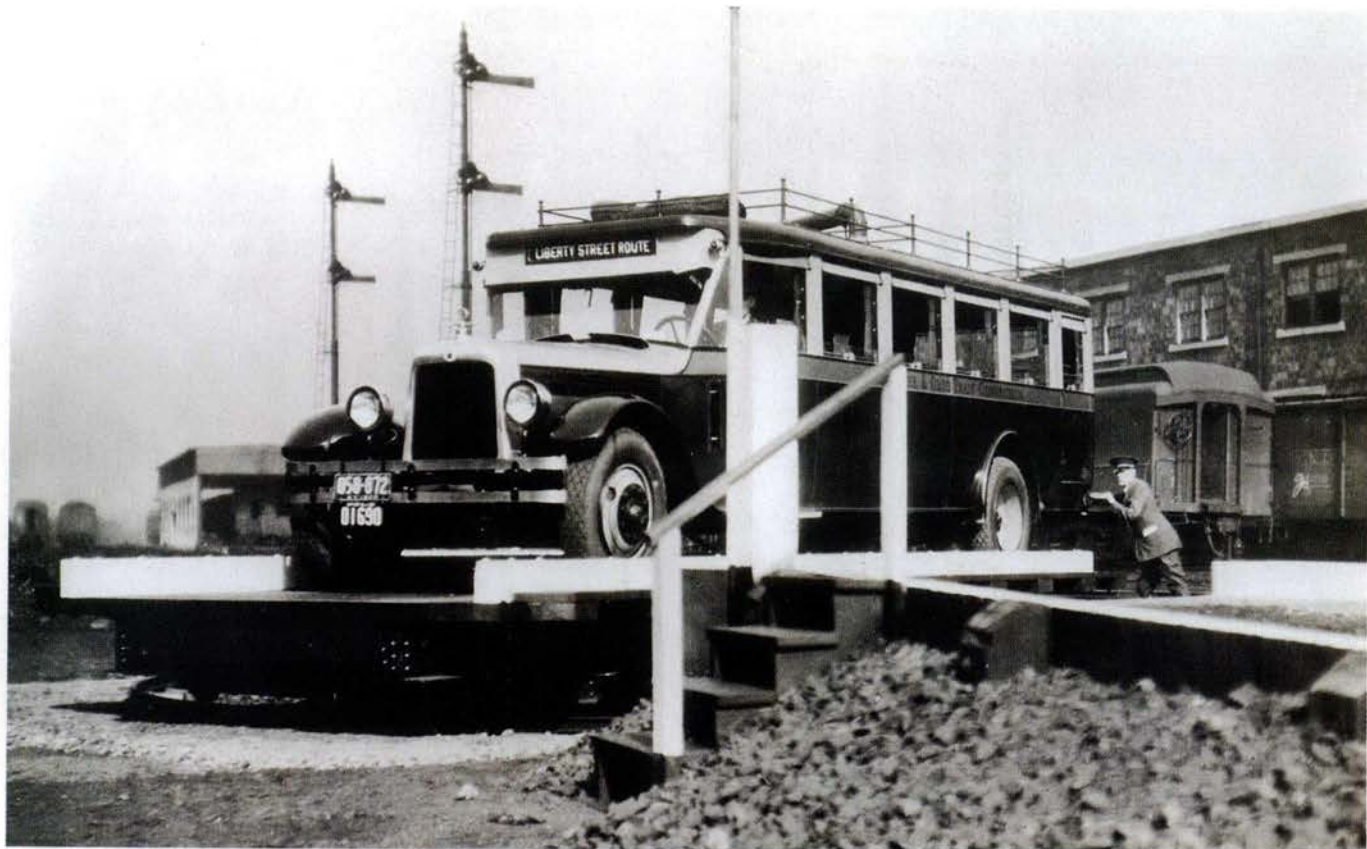


SIX PHOTOS, JOHN D. DENNEY JR.

sengers to the Royal Blue Line. It was cooking that took you back to the old days. There were country ham-and-egg breakfasts in the morning, and dinner menus heavy with fried oysters, Maryland crab cakes, Chesapeake Bay mackerel with hushpuppies, Sally Lunn muffins, and, during the Christmas season, B&O mince pie. The food was served on B&O's beautiful Centennial-pattern china, first produced in 1927.

Farewell to an old friend

It was cool and clear when we got to Philadelphia early on that last day, and I found it hard to believe the grand old station would be closing for good in a few short hours. Before leaving for New York on the last *Capitol Limited* east of Baltimore, we were able to photograph the last eastbound *National Limited* and the last westbound *Royal Blue*. On our ar-



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A lack of space for turning B&O's New York shuttle buses at CNJ's Jersey City terminal prompted an ingenious, yet simple solution: a turntable!

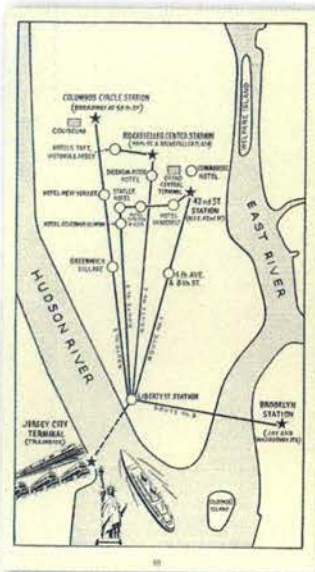
Flanked by a bus and Manhattan skyscrapers (right, top), an EA/EB diesel set eases the *Capitol Limited* out of Jersey City on September 5, 1950.

The *Royal Blue* herself (right, bottom) heads toward Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington over CNJ's main line at Greenville, N.J., in February 1952.

rival at Jersey City, we dashed off a shot of the *Capitol* under the trainshed for the last time, then rode the shuttle bus onto the ferry and all the way into Rockefeller Center. We made a brief visit there and returned to Jersey City early enough to see the last *Diplomat* easing away.

Shortly before 6 that evening, we boarded the last *Shenandoah*, train 7, for Philadelphia. There were a lot of toasts and camaraderie in the diner on that bittersweet final trip as we feasted on fried Chesapeake oysters. We did not stay to see the very last scheduled train to stop at 24th and Chestnut—the *Metropolitan Special*, which did not arrive until the wee hours of Sunday, April 27.

As we bade farewell to the *Royal Blue* Line that evening, we inquired of the stationmaster if perhaps we could get one of the train gate signs as a souvenir. He was busy at the time, but told me to leave my name and he would see what he could do, suggesting that I come back the following Monday morning, as his office would still be open. When I arrived, the station was quiet, but there were a few employees closing things out. I gave my name to one of them, and, true to the stationmaster's word, there were two train-gate signs in the baggage room with my name taped to them. One was for the *Marylander*, the other for the *Washingtonian*. To me, it seemed to represent the spirit of the B&O . . . its employees could always find time to take care of the little things. ■



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Map of Jersey City-New York City bus routes, and photos of bus service from B&O brochure, late 1940's.





TWO PHOTOS, EDWARD THEISINGER

