



Let's take a look at Lebanon's historic Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station

by Randy Jaye

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The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station is located at 250 N. 8th St. in Lebanon. It was built in 1900 by Wilson Brothers & Co., a prominent Victorian-era architecture and engineering firm headquartered in Philadelphia. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places on July 17, 1975, for its architectural and engineering significance.



The sign hanging on the west side of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon. (Randy Jaye)

The architect of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station was Joseph Miller Wilson (1838-1902). Wilson gained significant notoriety prior to co-founding Wilson Brothers & Co. while working for the Pennsylvania Railroad, from 1860 to 1876, designing bridges, commuter stations, and other railroad structures.

One of Wilson's most impressive (turned infamous) building designs was the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad Passenger Terminal in Washington, D.C., which opened in 1873. This train terminal was the site where President James A. Garfield was shot and mortally wounded in an assassination on July 2, 1881. Garfield died two and a half months later, only 200 days after

becoming president. The terminal was closed in 1907, and mysteriously ordered demolished by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908.

The unique design of Lebanon's P&R Railroad Station

Lebanon's Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station was designed in the Shingle architectural style, which was popular in the U.S. from around 1880 to 1900. The Shingle style emphasizes roofs with roof lines as a dominating feature, verandas (a roofed open gallery or portico attached to the exterior of a building), an abundance of varied windows and doors, and includes horizontal facades that appear to hug the ground.

Shingle-style architecture was unquestionably American (originating in the New England area), but it did borrow features from other architectural styles including Queen Anne, Richardsonian Romanesque, English Tudor, and Colonial American.

The P&R station consists of two separate sections connected by a large overhanging roof. The entire roof is covered with slate shingles. The exterior walls are finished with modern multi-beige colored Pompeian-style bricks and highlighted with limestone trim.

The east section measures approximately 55.5 feet by 32.5 feet, and is one-and-one-half stories high. It features a bellcast hipped gable roof with a two-story protruding octagonal tower on its northeast corner. It also features five protruding bellcast hipped gable dormers. This section was originally used as a baggage room, telegraph office, and yardmasters' office.

The west section measures approximately 80.5 feet by 32.5 feet, and is one-and-one-half stories high. It includes a large octagonal tower that rises approximately 80 feet above the station, and which is surely the station's most striking feature. The tower includes an interesting array of windows:

eight Gothic-style windows with lugsills near the top, four centrally located slit style windows, and three rectangular style windows near the bottom. The brickwork at the top of the tower includes cut limestone trim in a striped design. The tower has an octagonal bellcast roof.



Postcard showing the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon, circa 1905. (Author's collection)

This section also features six protruding bellcast hipped gable dormers (two on the north side, one on the west side, and three on the south side). The west section was originally used as women's and men's waiting and rest rooms, and a ticket office.

The east and west sections are separated by an open-air waiting area that measures approximately 65 feet in length and is covered by a gable roof.



Postcard showing the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon, circa 1925. (Author's collection)

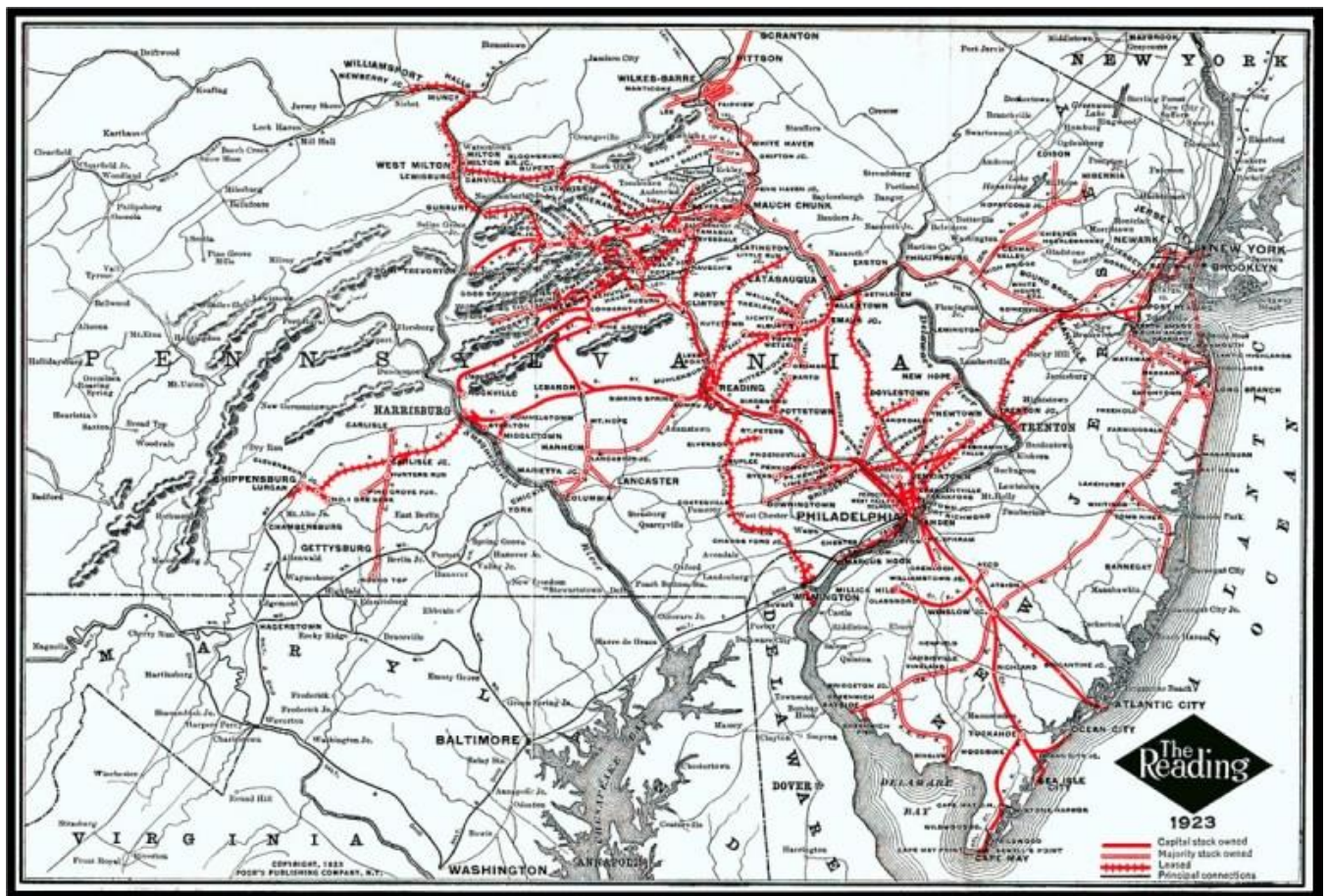
Brief history of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company

In 1833, the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company (P&R) was chartered. It opened in 1842 with a main business objective to haul anthracite coal to Philadelphia. Originally, it spanned 93 miles from Philadelphia along the Schuylkill River through Reading to Pottsville. The P&R Company was a major testament to Pennsylvania's industrial heyday.

Lebanon Daily News archival article showing the Reading Railroad's earlier station at 8th and Skull Streets, circa 1895. (Lebanon Daily News, June 29, 1963)

From 1850 through most of the next 100 years, the P&R Company expanded by purchasing, leasing, or merging with almost 100 smaller railroad companies. One of the most important routes was the Lebanon Valley, which ran from Reading through Lebanon and accessed Harrisburg, Shippensburg, and Gettysburg.

Lebanon was also a hub that connected southerly to Lancaster and northerly to Pine Grove and the Coal Region (the region of northeastern Pennsylvania that is recognized for the largest known deposits of anthracite coal in the world). The Lebanon Valley route, from Reading to Harrisburg, included stations at Sinking Spring, Wernersville, Robesonia, Womelsdorf, Missimer's, Landis's, Myerstown, Lebanon, Annville, Palmyra, Spring Creek (now Hershey), Hummelstown, and Rutherford's.



Reading Railroad system map, circa 1923. (Public domain)

In 1923, all the companies that were previously acquired by P&R merged into the Reading Company. Eventually the railroad would extend to New York City; Cape May, New Jersey; Wilmington, Delaware; Scranton, and Williamsport.

After World War II ended, several factors led to the demise of the Reading Company, including the dramatic decline in demand for anthracite coal, the expansion of the interstate highway system, high taxes, the completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and the 1968 merger of the Penn Central Transportation Company (Penn Central).

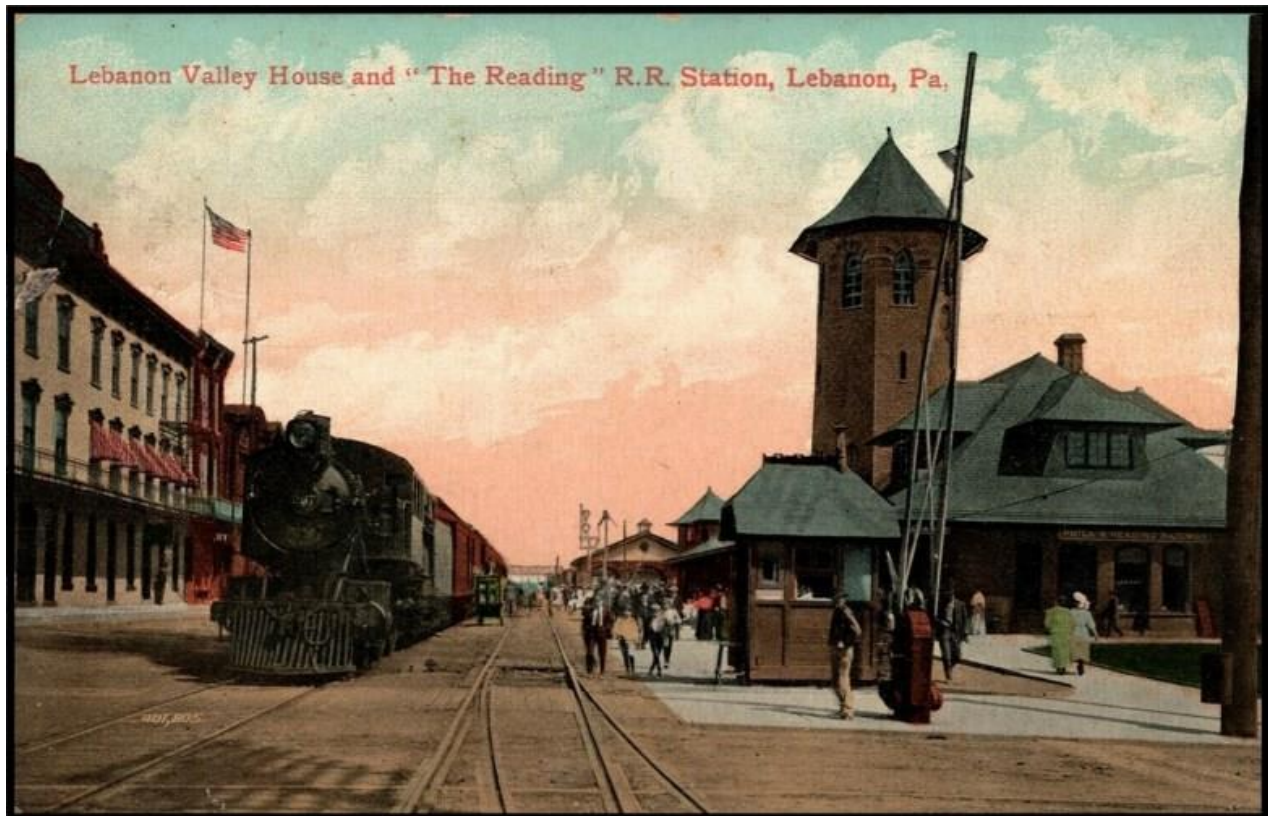
In 1971, the Reading Company's stock was sold by its parent Chessie System Inc., which led to its bankruptcy.

On April 1, 1976, most of the Reading Company railroad assets were transferred to Consolidated Railroad Corporation (Conrail).

The beginning and end of passenger train service in Lebanon

On June 30, 1857, the Lebanon Valley Railroad started operating passenger train service between Reading and Lebanon. This was the beginning of an unprecedented era that enabled the Lebanon area to grow from an agricultural community into an industrial and manufacturing center.

As a side note, it was the success and expansion of swift and efficient railroad transportation in the 19th century that led to the demise of the Union Canal (the inland engineered towpath for water transportation that operated in southeastern Pennsylvania from 1828 into the 1880s).



Postcard showing the Lebanon Valley House, left, and the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon, circa 1908. (Author's collection)

On June 30, 1963, exactly 106 years after it started, the last passenger train, operated by the Reading Company, stopped at Lebanon's Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station. This marked the end of an important era in Lebanon's history.

In the heyday of passenger train service as many as 12 trains would stop in Lebanon per day. Santa Claus would even make his annual pre-Christmas stop in Lebanon aboard a passenger train.

The decline of passenger train service to and from Lebanon was summarized in a June 29, 1963, Lebanon Daily News article that reported: "As automobiles became more plentiful and highways better, fewer and fewer passengers stepped into the ticket window and fewer and fewer trains began to stop at the local station."

In a June 1963 interview with the Lebanon Daily News, the Reading Company's assistant trainmaster, Richard J. Gruber, said, "I doubt that on the average in the last year there has been more than 10 cash customers a day between Harrisburg and Reading." For the last year or so prior to June 1963 the Reading Company was only scheduling one daily run of passenger train service each direction on the Lebanon Valley route (this resulted in only two stops per day in Lebanon).

As the last passenger train prepared to depart from Lebanon's Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station on June 30, 1963, there were no ceremonies or large crowds of people on hand to witness the occasion. Only a small number of railroading enthusiasts joined a few regular customers aboard the last passenger train as it chugged away from Lebanon.

The writing was on the wall for several years and most people living in the area during the early 1960s were not shocked when passenger train service in Lebanon came to a screeching halt.

From 1963 to present

The P&R station building fell into a state of disrepair in the years following the end of passenger train service. Several ideas to use, restore, or repurpose the building were discussed. Many people in the area were concerned that the historic building could be demolished if it was not put to practical use.

In 1970, a 17-acre site, which included the P&R station building, was purchased from the Reading Railroad Company by the Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority for a Railroad Urban Renewal Project.

In 1972, the Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority allowed the Lebanon Valley Youth for Christ to open a coffee house with entertainment and refreshments in the west section of the station.

In 1975, the Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority entertained proposals to convert the station into a restaurant with a railroad motif. The City of Lebanon also proposed converting the station into an ice rink.



Interior views of the west section of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon, circa 1960. (Public domain)

In 1976, the Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority named the First Aid and Safety Patrol ambulance unit as a possible developer to convert the station into an ambulance facility. This proposal would have required the open area between the east and west sections to be converted into a garage.

In 1977, the best possible scenario for the building occurred as the Farmers Trust Bank purchased the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station. The company spent time and money to restore it to as close to its original configuration as possible.

In 1979, the Farmers Trust Bank opened the restored building as its railroad station branch.



Postcard showing the restored and repurposed Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon, circa 1979. The railroad station was used by the Farmers Trust Company from 1977 to 2002. (Author's collection)

In 1984, the Lebanon Valley Chamber of Commerce moved into the east section of the building. The Farmers Trust Bank continued to occupy the west section of the building.

In 2002, the Lebanon Valley Farmers Bank (formerly the Farmers Trust Bank) closed its historic railroad station office and put the building up for sale. The Lebanon Valley Chamber of Commerce was forced to move out of the station and into the former Chemical Fire Co. building on 728 Walnut St.

In 2003, the H.H. Brown Shoe Co. of Womelsdorf purchased Lebanon's Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station to serve as offices for product development, marketing, and sales for eight brands of footwear.

In 2007, the H.H. Brown Shoe Co. closed many of its Pennsylvania operations, citing competitive pressures from imported footwear as the main reason. The P&R station building was once again put up for sale.

In 2010, the P&R station was purchased by the Lebanon Valley Family YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). This organization was originally founded in 1898. The purpose of this nonprofit institution is "to improve the quality of life in our community by offering programs, services and facilities that promote strong families, good health, fitness, wellness, community services, child and adult development with equality for all. We encourage a sensitivity to the physical, mental and spiritual enhancement of all persons regardless of age, sex, race, religious affiliation or economic status."

According to the Lebanon Valley Family YMCA's CEO, Phil Tipton, the P&R station building is currently used for many purposes.

The east side section of the building houses the organization's payroll department, child care administration, and fundraising activities. The west side hosts special events, a community lunch center (during summer months), and serves as a meeting place for various nonprofit organizations.

Tipton also said that the YMCA is dedicated to maintaining the historical integrity of the P&R station building. Currently, the organization is having all of the exterior woodwork inspected to determine what pieces need to be replaced, repaired, and repainted.

The good news for the historic P&R station building is that it is currently in excellent hands under the ownership of the YMCA. Additionally, the organization intends to keep ownership of the P&R station building for the foreseeable future.



Modern-day northwest exterior view of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station in Lebanon. (Randy Jaye)

Lebanon County’s surviving historic structures

The Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station is one of a long list of surviving historic structures in the City of Lebanon that include: the Chestnut Street Log Cabin, Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station, Josiah Funck Mansion, Kettering House, Light's Fort, Mann Building, Old Salem Lutheran Church, Salem Memorial Chapel, Samler Building, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Stoy House, and the Tabor Reformed Church.

Do not believe the many fallacious stories that circulate around central Pennsylvania that say all historic structures in the Lebanon area have been demolished. These stories are senseless and the stuff of old wives' tales, pure ignorance, and misinformation. The facts are crystal clear and foolproof to determine that there are hundreds of historic structures still standing in Lebanon County, 30 of which are on the National Register of Historic Places.