



Once at risk, the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station is a historic gem

by Randy Jaye

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The Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station (also known as the Cornwall & Lebanon Depot) was built in 1885 at 161 N. 8th St. in Lebanon.

The flamboyant and aesthetically designed building was financed by the industrialist, ironmaster, and railroad president Robert Habersham Coleman (1856-1930), who was nationally known as the “Iron King of Pennsylvania.”

When Coleman commissioned the building’s construction he spared no costs. The impressive architectural and construction quality of the structure was very unusual for a small, 19th-century railroad company, especially one that only had 22 miles of tracks at the time.

The C&L Railroad Station was added onto the National Register of Historic Places on Dec. 4, 1974, for both its architecture and transportation significance.

The architect of the building was George Watson Hewitt (1841–1916), the dean of Philadelphia architects and well-known for his ecclesiastical (church-like) designs. George Watson Hewitt was in partnership with his brother, William Dempster Hewitt (1847–1924), in the prominent Philadelphia architectural firm G.W. & W.D. Hewitt, which was founded in 1878.

The firm’s best-known building is the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel at 200 S. Broad St., Philadelphia. Since its completion in 1904, the hotel has been a major Philadelphia landmark and a center of the city’s cultural, social, and business activities.

The building survives today as The Bellevue Hotel, a mixed-use property.

The unique design of Lebanon’s C&L Railroad Station

Lebanon’s Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station was designed in the Late Victorian Eclectic architectural style, mixed with Flemish, Romanesque, and Chateausque architectural styling. The Late Victorian Eclectic architectural style was popular in the U.S. from around 1875 to 1920.



Various exterior views of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station. (Photos provided by Patrick Freer, Jr.)

The station building was constructed with brick, slate, architectural terracotta (a form of masonry made from molded clay), and detailed with brownstone.

The various forms of architectural styling include the stepped jagged-profile gables on the east, south, and west facades (a revival style from 17th-century Flemish architecture), various sized rounded arched windows (Romanesque), and the masonry window transoms, openwork metal-cresting, and steep-sided roof and protruding roof gables (Chateausque).

The original configuration of the building was rectangular with a protruding wing on the south side.



Postcard showing the Cornwall and Lebanon R.R. Depot (prior to the south side wing extension), circa 1911. (Author's collection)

In 1912, the south side wing was significantly expanded to accommodate offices for the Adams Express Co. This building addition seamlessly matched the original 1885 architectural styling and materials.



Postcard showing the C&L Railroad Station with the added south side wing extension which was housing the Adams Express Co., circa 1920. (Author's collection)

A brownstone water table approximately four feet high surrounds the perimeter of the building.

One of the most unique industrial-age features of the building are the fancy ornamental porch roof iron support brackets that include struts and spoked wheel designs.



Southeast view of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station in 2022, with focus on the ornate iron roof brackets. (Randy Jaye)

A prominent large round clock is centrally located on the east facade slightly above the second floor level. Directly above the clock is the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Co.'s logo ('C and L R.R.') molded in terracotta within a triangular brick-capped peak protruding feature of the building.



Full east side view of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station in 2014. (Randy Jaye)

A large iron framed shed with a gable roof stood alongside the north side of the building and extended over the railroad tracks. It sheltered passengers and railroad cars from the elements. This structure was demolished sometime in the 1930s.

Brief history of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad

On May 25, 1850, the North Lebanon Railroad was founded by George Dawson Coleman and William Coleman and opened for business in 1855. This railroad connected the ore mines in Cornwall to the Union Canal towpath in Lebanon. In 1870, the North Lebanon Railroad became the Cornwall Railroad.

In 1881, Robert Habersham Coleman attempted to purchase the Cornwall Railroad from his cousin William Coleman Freeman. The sale never happened, and a business and personal rivalry between the two men ensued.

In 1883, Robert Habersham Coleman incorporated the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad creating direct competition for hauling ore and passengers between the Cornwall Railroad and his newly founded C&L Railroad.

The C&L Railroad traveled from Lebanon to Cornwall, then southwest to the Conewago Station in Lancaster County. It passed through a beautiful secluded wooded area in the mountains along the Conewago Creek.

In 1883, Robert H. Coleman decided to create a train stop with a picnic area, which became known as Mount Gretna. Not long afterwards, Coleman built an amusement park, dance hall, hotel, pavilions, playground, skating rink, and stores. Mount Gretna became a popular summer destination.

In 1885, Coleman dammed the Conewago Creek to create Lake Conewago, which added swimming and boating activities to the pleasure resort.

Starting in 1891, Robert H. Coleman began suffering a series of financial setbacks, which led to his bankruptcy in 1894. He lost the controlling interest in the C&L Railroad, and relinquished many other assets that were sold due to his bankruptcy.



West view of the iron framed shed and two idle trains at the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station, circa 1900. (Public domain)

In 1913, the Pennsylvania Railroad (also known as the “Pennsy”) began purchasing C&L Railroad stock, and by 1918 completely owned the company. The Pennsy then created its Lebanon division.

The C&L Railroad Station (1918 to Present)

Passenger train service at the C&L Railroad Station ended in the 1930s. After railroad offices moved out of the station building the structure was used for different commercial purposes.

The Pennsylvania Railroad leased the building to Joseph J. Dooley around 1940 to operate a wholesale southern fruit business.

In 1944, Isaac Plasterer (1878-1959), a well-known local banker, owner of the Plasterer Hotel, auto and farm implements dealer, and trail-blazing bus route

operator, leased the building to house the North Eighth Street Bus Terminal for Lebanon Auto Bus Inc. The bus company moved out of the building in 1954.

In 1957, the Scibellis family leased the building from the Pennsylvania Railroad and opened Robel Frocks Inc., a dress manufacturing firm that employed 170 people at its peak. In 1964, the Scibellis family bought the C&L Railroad Station building.



Northeast view of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station circa 1973, while it was home to Robel Frocks Inc. (Public domain)

On Feb. 26, 1974, the Lebanon County Redevelopment Authority filed a declaration to take possession of the C&L Railroad Station building under the right of eminent domain and condemn it as part of the Southside Disaster Renewal

Program (a flood damage prevention project created due to significant area destruction caused by Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972).

The Redevelopment Authority planned to purchase the building from the Scibellis family, and then restore it and rent it to another company, or possibly (and most likely) demolish it. The Scibellis family fought back as they wanted to keep and restore the building at their own cost.

Robert Scibellis said in an April 25, 1974, Lebanon Daily News article, “We met with the Redevelopment Authority and one of the Authority’s employees referred to the building as a ‘railroad architectural monstrosity.’” In the same article, Lebanon City Councilman Nofie Catalono called the Redevelopment Authority “undemocratic and unjust.”

Additionally, Catalono said, “I will as a city councilman fight to the bitter end the Lebanon County ‘Destruction’ Authority for the simple reason that I think the public should know what is going on here.”

The Historic Trust of Lebanon County also joined the battle to save the C&L Railroad Station building from the wrecking ball, and assisted in getting the structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places later in 1974.

Public outcry, lawsuits and appeals, and a commitment to building maintenance and repairs was enough for the Redevelopment Authority to decide that the Scibellis family could retain title to the building and restore it. The historic C&L Railroad Station building was saved in what many believed was a narrow escape from demolition.



Watercolor print featuring the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station by the noted artist, teacher, and writer Randolph de Bayeux Bye (1916-2003). (Author's collection)

In 1980, E. Peter “Pete” Strickler (1924-1997), businessman, civic leader, and president of Strickler Insurance Agency Inc., purchased the building from Robel Frocks for \$90,000.

Strickler and his family always admired the building and wanted to restore it. The Strickler Insurance Agency Inc. also needed a bigger building for their business operations.

The architectural firm of John Milner Associates, specialists in historical building restoration, was hired to design the building's restoration. Arthur Funk & Sons Inc. of Lebanon performed the physical restoration tasks.

Exterior restoration included re-pointing all of the bricks, installation of a new sidewalk, repaving of the parking area, new landscaping, replacement of the iconic round Roman numeral clock on the east facade, replacement of the windows (which included retaining a border of the original glass), and the installation of new Victorian-era style exterior pole lights.

Interior restoration was quite elaborate and included the refinishing of the original maple wood floors, oak paneled ceiling, and the carved oak wainscoting. New ceiling fans and brass globe wall fixtures were installed. Wood and glass dividers were installed in the work area, and a new stairwell to the second floor was installed within the original vault area.

All of the woodwork in the former ticket office was restored. A solid oak counter was installed that blends into the original oak wainscoting. The two Victorian-era fireplaces at the east and west sides on the first floor required master masonry restoration work, which brought them back into original and operational condition.

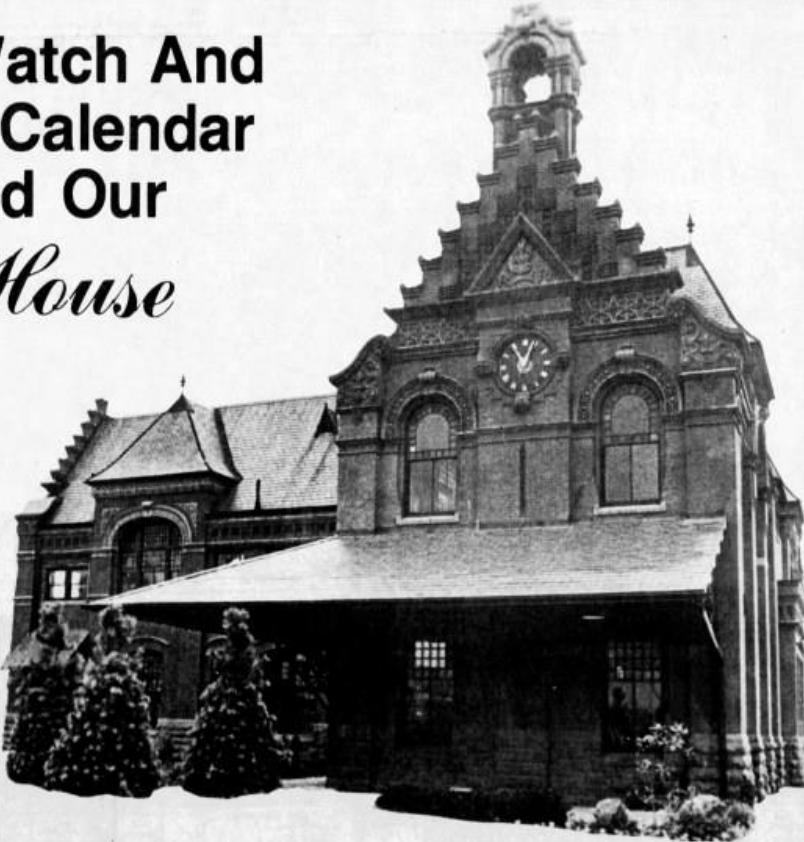
On Dec. 11 and 12, 1982, after an expensive two-year restoration project, Strickler Insurance Agency hosted an open house to show off their new offices in the newly renovated C&L Railroad Station building. (Strickler never disclosed how much money was actually spent on the building's restoration project.)

**Set Your Watch And
Mark Your Calendar
To Attend Our
*Open House***

Saturday,
December 11th
and
Sunday,
December 12th
1 p.m. to 5 p.m.



This is your chance to officially tour the beautifully restored Strickler Insurance Station now that work has been completed by Arthur Funk & Sons, Inc., general contractor. You are always welcome at Strickler Insurance during regular business hours, but we're sure that you'll want to take advantage of this special opportunity. Set aside Saturday and Sunday to enjoy a visit to our historic, new location.

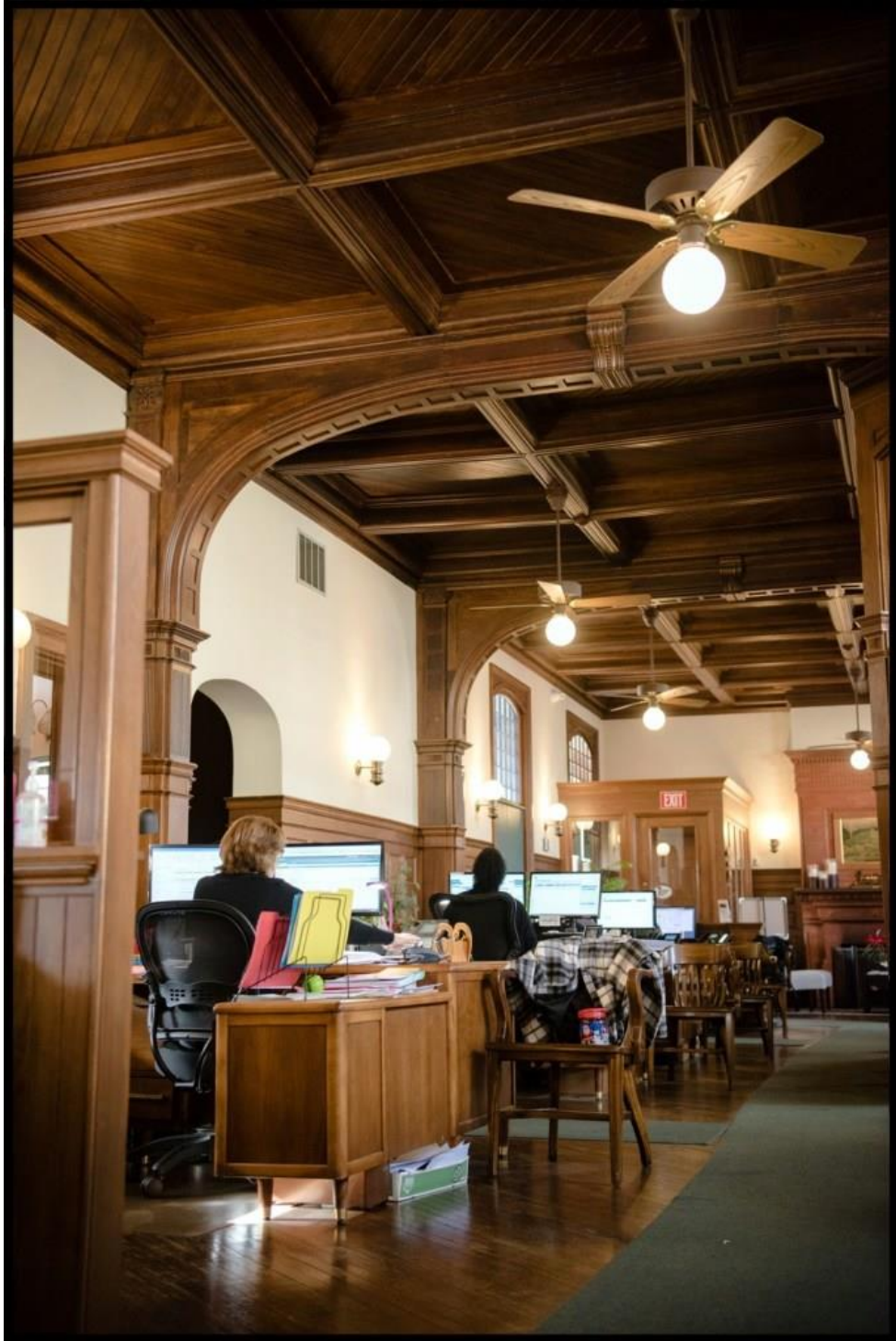


Strickler Insurance Agency, Inc.

161 North 8th Street
Lebanon, Phone 273-2641

Dec. 10, 1982, advertisement in the Lebanon Daily News for a Strickler Insurance Agency Open House at the restored Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station.

Currently, the Strickler Insurance Agency still owns and maintains the historic C&L Railroad Station. The company's current president, Patrick Freer Jr. said, "We have no intentions ever of moving or selling. We love the building and its history."



*Interior view of the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station featuring ornate ceiling woodwork.
(Photo provided by Patrick Freer, Jr.)*

Lebanon's numerous surviving historic structures

In addition to the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad Station, Lebanon is lucky to have numerous historic structures that have survived to the present day including: The Cornwall Railroad General Office Building (1300 Chestnut St.), Dehuff House (239 Chestnut St.), Donaghmore Mansion (1430 Chestnut St.), D.K. Wissler Building (215 Cumberland St.), George Washington Tavern (1000 Cumberland St.), Lebanon Farmers Market (35 S. 8th St.), Lineaweafer Victorian House (428 Chestnut St.), Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Station (250 N. 8th St.), and the YMCA Building (901 Willow St.).