



History of the Downtown Train Station



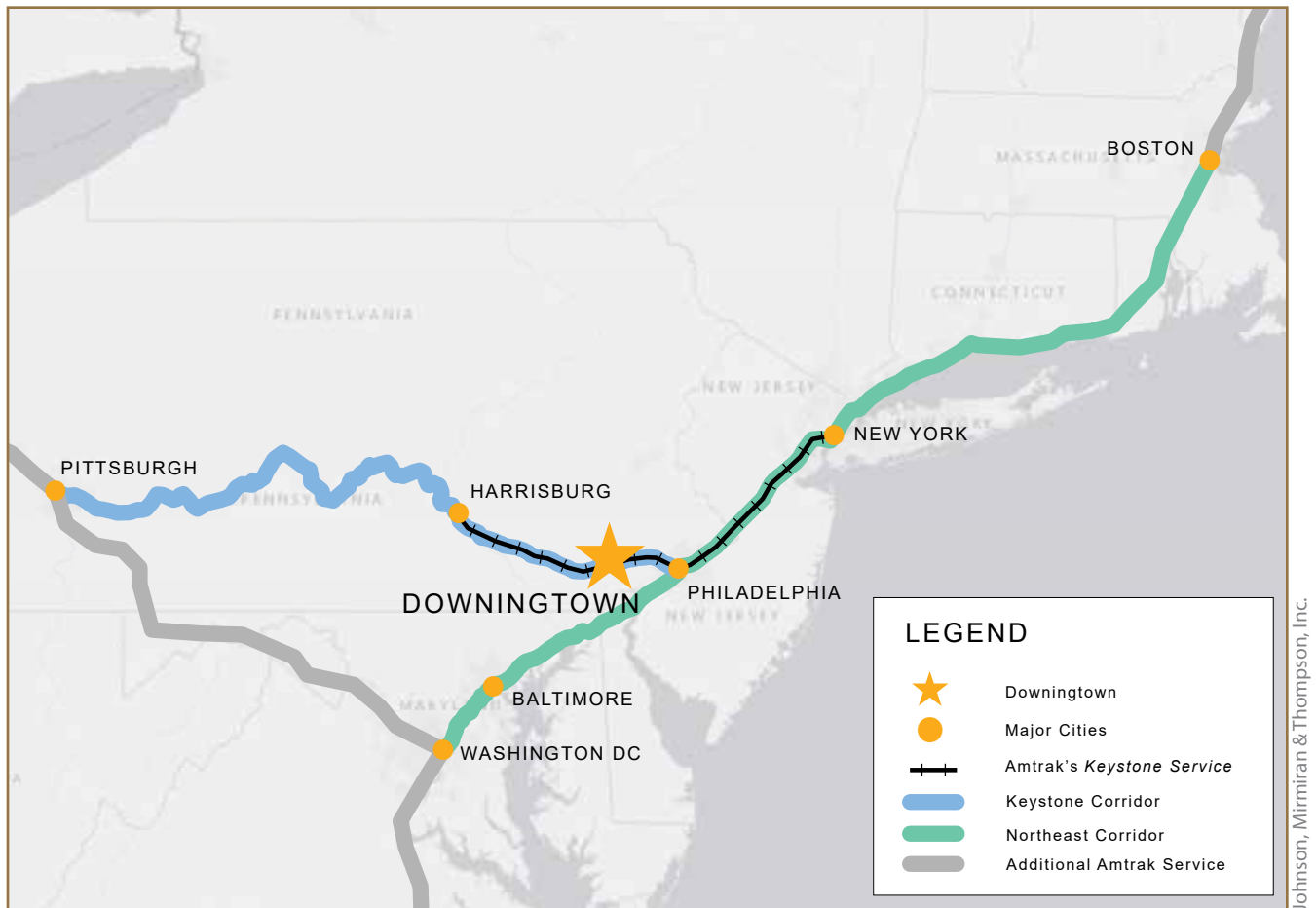
Cover images:

- 1898 Sanborn Map Company fire insurance map of Downingtown, courtesy of the Library of Congress
- 1892 Downingtown Station building, courtesy of Downingtown Area Historical Society
- Pennsylvania Railroad logo
- Postcard image of Downingtown Station, circa 1910, courtesy of Downingtown Area Historical Society
- 2020 photo of eastbound passenger shelter
- 1892 station building viewed from Viaduct Avenue, courtesy of Downingtown Area Historical Society



This booklet was prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) in cooperation with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to help preserve and publicize the history of Downingtown Station amid Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements.

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▲ 2020 map of Amtrak's Keystone Corridor between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, where it intersects with the Northeast Corridor.

Introduction

In the nearly three centuries since its settlement, Downingtown has developed into one of the Greater Philadelphia Region's major suburbs, in large part because of its strategic location along major transportation routes.

When it was first settled by Europeans in the early 18th century, the area was Pennsylvania's rural western front. It was an ideal place to establish mills due to its location along the East Branch of Brandywine Creek, which provided ample waterpower. As mills became established in the area, a small village known as Milltown was

formed. As these mills expanded over time, so too did Milltown.

In 1761, John Downing opened a tavern on the east side of Brandywine Creek to serve millworkers, residents, and travelers. His establishment became known as the Downing Mill Inn. Shortly thereafter, John's father, Thomas Downing, developed a series of mills along modern-day Lancaster Avenue. The mills contributed significantly to the town's expansion, and by the time of the American Revolution, Milltown was known locally as Downing's Town. Downing's mill

complex continued to thrive beyond the Revolution, and after the War of 1812, the village formally changed its name to Downingtown in honor of the prominent business family.

Having been established along one of Pennsylvania's earliest trade routes, Downingtown evolved in step with the region's transportation infrastructure. The town and its industries thrived as efficient transportation—first roadways, then rail—linked Downingtown to Philadelphia, Lancaster, and beyond.

Early Transportation

The First Routes

The earliest transportation networks across modern-day Pennsylvania were developed by the Lenape, Susquehannock, and other Native American tribes who used their knowledge of the landscape to establish efficient paths across the region's diverse terrain. These paths formed a web across the state, providing access to the region's most remote and rugged areas.

Arguably the most significant of these routes was the Great Warriors Path, also known as the Great Minquas Path, which ran from the Susquehanna River, near Conestoga, east toward modern-day Philadelphia. Native Americans used the Great Minquas Path primarily for trade. After the arrival of European colonists, both groups used the route for the fur trade, which was one of the earliest and most profitable economic ventures in the early Colonial Period.

The Great Minquas Path corridor still serves Pennsylvanians—U.S. Route 30 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike (I-76) both follow its general route between Philadelphia and Lancaster. The point where the path reached the East Branch of Brandywine Creek became the location of the small settlement called Milltown, which would later become Downingtown.

Early Improvements to Major Routes

Although routes such as the Great Minquas Path supported early trade, they were often rough, rocky, and narrow—navigable only on foot. As early as 1700, Pennsylvania's colonial government approved the construction of "king's highways" to provide more accessible routes for heavier traffic. These roadways were a uniform 50 feet wide to accommodate wagon traffic. The highways were funded partly by the colony and part-

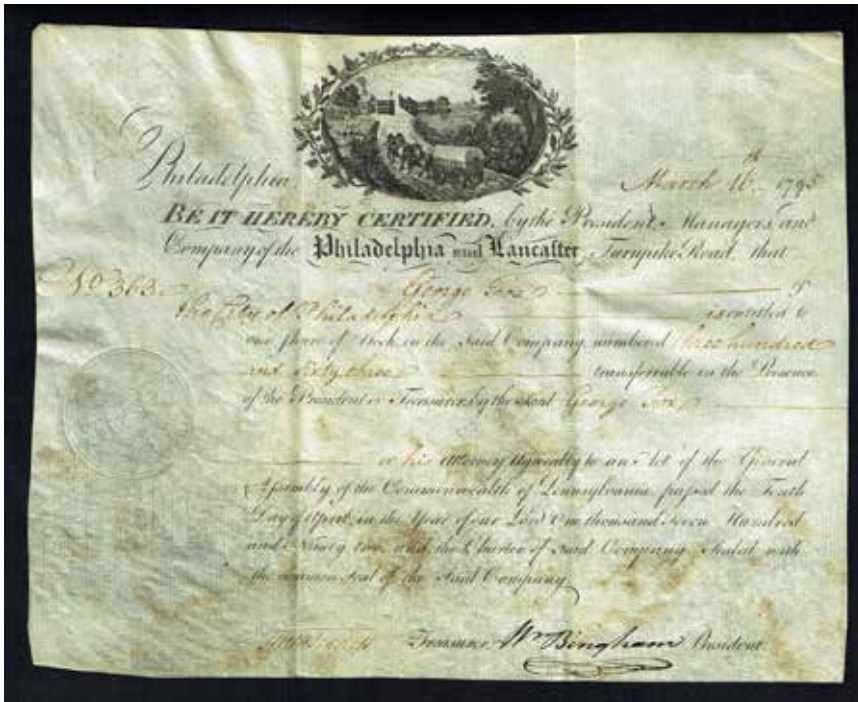
ly by users—travelers had the option to pay a toll or help construct and maintain the road. The first of these highways was completed in 1706 and connected Philadelphia and Chester.

Without major thoroughfares such as the king's highways, smaller western communities lacked access to larger urban centers such as Philadelphia. In 1731, the Pennsylvania Legislature received a petition from the city and county of Lancaster requesting an improved road to enable residents to bring their goods to market in Philadelphia. The Great Conestoga Road, which opened in 1741, was the result. The new road accommodated the transportation of significantly larger volumes of people and goods between Philadelphia and Lancaster, following a route similar to that of the Great Minquas Path through Downingtown.

By the 1790s many of Pennsylvania's earlier major roadways needed

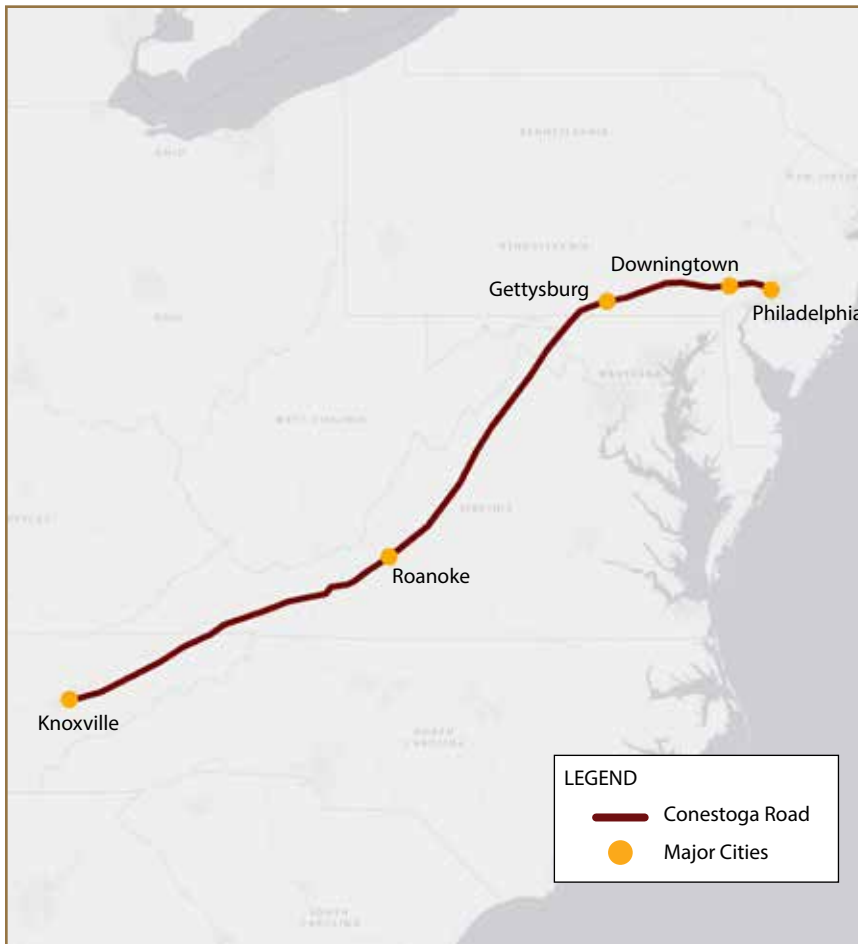
▼ Map of the Great Minquas Path. This segment of the path—a crucial trading route in colonial Pennsylvania—spanned between the Delaware River and the Susquehanna River at Columbia, where it turned north along the river.





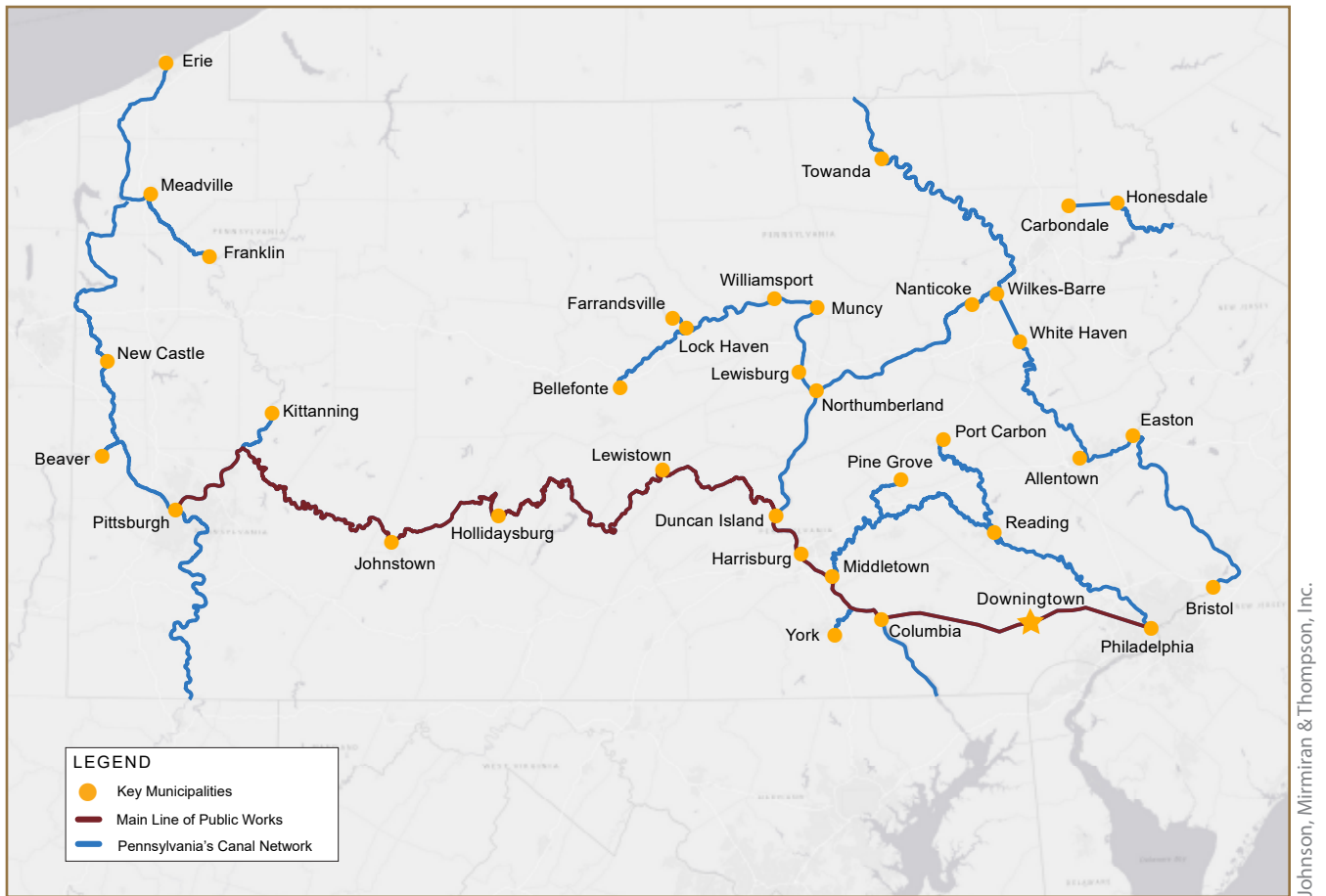
◀ Scan of an original share of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Company signed by company president William Bingham in 1795.

Below: Map indicating the route of the Great Conestoga Road between Philadelphia and modern-day Knoxville, TN. U.S. Route 30 generally follows the same alignment between Philadelphia and Gettysburg.



repairs. The American Revolution had been costly, leaving states, including Pennsylvania, with significant debts that limited their ability to sufficiently invest in needed roadway reconstruction.

Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin recommended that the state charter and incorporate a private company to charge tolls and generate revenue for roadway improvements between Philadelphia and Lancaster. This resulted in the formation of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Company, which sold shares to the general public. Demand for stock in the company soared, raising capital for development of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike, which opened in 1794. Given Downingtown's location between Philadelphia and Lancaster, it was among the earliest towns to benefit from this initiative. Following completion of the turnpike, stage-coaches traveling between Philadelphia and Lancaster began stopping at Downingtown en route. Turnpike traffic, in turn, increased the number of taverns and mills in Downingtown.



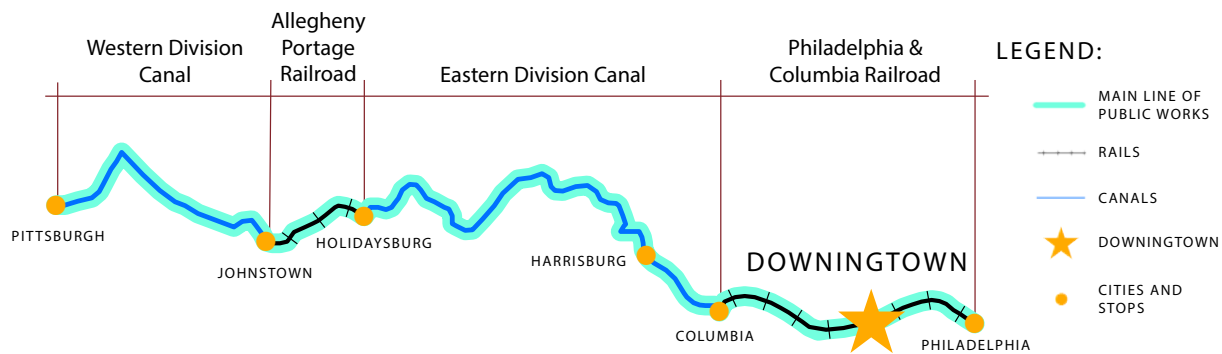
The Main Line of Public Works

▲ Map of the Pennsylvania Canal System. The Main Line of Public Works, constructed between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, was the backbone of the system.

By the early 19th century, growth in trade, agriculture, and early industry reached such a volume that even major turnpikes could no longer sufficiently meet the needs of travelers and traders. The Pennsylvania Legislature received petitions calling for improved modes of transportation across the state so that Pennsylvania's businesses could compete with New York State merchants who were benefitting from the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825. Proposals called for a new system of canals to connect smaller towns to larger urban centers, and particularly to connect Philadelphia with Pittsburgh.

Connecting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh was an important goal, but the state's mountainous terrain

made it too difficult to build a single canal across the entire state. The solution was a system that used railroads where canal construction was not possible. In 1826, the Pennsylvania Legislature approved an initiative dubbed the "Main Line of Public Works," a canal-and-rail connection between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. As with the turnpike company, shares were sold, allowing investors to buy into the Main Line of Public Works and fund transportation improvements. The result was a cross-state route that provided ample opportunities for connecting numerous municipalities with larger markets for goods movement and passenger travel. The Main Line of Public Works was approved in 1828 and opened in 1834.



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▲ Map of the P&C Railroad as part of the Main Line of Public Works. The P&C Railroad reached its western terminus at Columbia. Passengers and freight had to transfer between rail cars and canal boats three times before reaching Pittsburgh.

Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad (1829–1857)

In 1829, construction began on the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad (P&C), one of the Main Line of Public Works' earliest railroad lines. The P&C was constructed along a corridor nearly identical to the route established by the Great Minquas Path and the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike. The railroad began at the intersection of Broad and Vine streets in Philadelphia and passed through Paoli, Gap, and Downingtown toward its terminus in Columbia.

In 1829, railroads were in their infancy and were therefore difficult to construct and operate despite significant organization and planning. By 1830, construction of the

P&C was nearly abandoned after the Pennsylvania Legislature declined to allocate additional funds for the project. However, the initiative was tremendously popular, and the legislature ultimately provided funding to allow construction to continue. By September 1832, the P&C opened its first 20-mile stretch between Philadelphia and Paoli. The remaining 62 miles to Columbia were completed by 1834. Of the line's 82 miles, 32 miles were in Chester County, with a stop in Downingtown.

Completion of the P&C was a significant accomplishment in the early days of railroading. In fact, at that time, horse-drawn railcars were

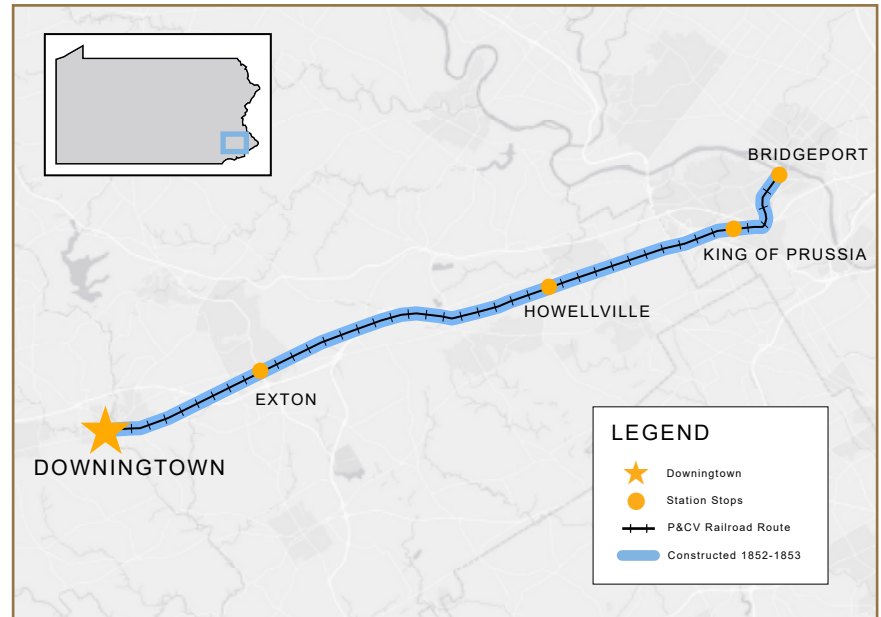
a common sight. Locomotives would not become the primary propulsion method until about 1836.

The Main Line of Public Works' completion in 1834 achieved Pennsylvania merchants' long-time goal of connecting Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. However, the journey remained slow and complicated. West of the P&C's last stop in Columbia at the Susquehanna River, the canals often froze in the winter, cutting off the western portions of the state from trade. Although the P&C's rail service effectively linked Downingtown with Philadelphia, access to western communities remained limited.

The Philadelphia and Chester Valley Railroad (1835–1858)

While the Main Line of Public Works provided communities such as Downingtown with new opportunities for travel and trade, many communities elsewhere in Pennsylvania remained disconnected from larger urban centers. This was the case in the Great Valley region of Chester County. The Great Valley (also known as the Chester Valley) extends from Chester County northeast to the Schuylkill River in Montgomery County. In 1834, several local residents gathered in Howellville to discuss petitioning the Pennsylvania Legislature to develop a new railroad connecting the region to Philadelphia. They proposed a railroad through the Great Valley that would link the P&C Railroad with the Philadelphia, Germantown, and Norristown Railroad (also known as the PG&N, est. 1831) at the Schuylkill River.

In response, on April 13, 1835, the Pennsylvania Legislature granted a charter to the Norristown and Valley Railroad Company to construct a railroad between Downingtown and Bridgeport, where it would connect to the PG&N Railroad. Although the Howellville supporters were eager to travel to and trade in Philadelphia, farmers in the western end of the valley were less than enthusiastic. In part, they did not feel the urgent need for a new railroad given their proximity to the existing P&C Railroad. Further, they were not satisfied with the payments received for the construction of the new railroad



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▲ Route of the Philadelphia and Chester Valley Railroad between Bridgeport and Downingtown, where it intersected with the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line.

through their property.

During the economic depression of 1837, construction stalled and in 1842 the legislature extended the completion deadline to 1845. When the line still had not been completed by 1845 the Norristown and Valley Railroad's charter lapsed, and construction halted.

However, public interest encouraged the legislature to revive the project as the Philadelphia and Chester Valley Railroad (P&CV). Work on the railroad was finally completed in 1853, nearly 20 years after it began. The following spring the P&CV executed an agreement with the PG&N to op-

erate direct through service between Downingtown and Philadelphia. It was a particularly popular passenger route, providing area residents with an efficient trip to and from Philadelphia. When the agreement expired in 1858, the P&CV Railroad pursued a better deal with the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad.

Shortly thereafter the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad assumed control of the PC&V line, providing the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad much-sought-after access to the Pennsylvania Railroad at Downingtown.

The Pennsylvania Railroad (1848–1968)

Although the Main Line of Public Works and the subsequent Pennsylvania Canal System were important advances in transportation across and throughout Pennsylvania, the growth of industry soon strained the limits of the cumbersome canal–rail system. While the P&C Railroad had expedited the transportation of people and goods and brought booming prosperity to communities including Downingtown, the overall Main Line of Public Works proved economically burdensome to the Commonwealth. The inadequacy of the canal portions of the network and the transfers between canals and railroads hindered overall efficiency and profitability.

In 1846 the Pennsylvania Legislature chartered the Pennsylvania Railroad Company (PRR) to develop an all-rail route between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The PRR grew by constructing new lines and leasing or purchasing smaller railroads, improving them as they were incorporated into the PRR network.

A major expansion of the PRR network came in 1857 with the purchase of the Main Line of Public Works, including the P&C Railroad, for \$7.5 million—approximately \$20 million in 2020 dollars. Shortly thereafter, the PRR integrated the P&C Railroad into its network as the eastern segment of its Philadelphia–Pittsburgh line. The section running between Philadelphia and Harrisburg became known as the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line in recognition of its roots as the Main Line of Public Works. The PRR's consolidation of the Main Line finally established a direct rail route between

Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. As it did with numerous other acquired rail lines, the PRR improved the P&C line, which quickly became a significant link in the PRR's New York–Philadelphia–Pittsburgh–Chicago route. The PRR electrified the line in stages, with the section between Philadelphia and Paoli being electrified in 1914 and electrification reaching Harrisburg by 1938.

Other PRR rail lines also ran through Downingtown. The PRR extended its Trenton Cutoff (which had been built between Morrisville and Glenloch in 1892) westward to Thorndale via Downingtown circa 1906. The Trenton Cutoff was primarily a freight line allowing freight bound for New York to avoid delays in Philadelphia by accessing the PRR's line to New York at Morrisville.

A third rail line originated in Downingtown. The East Brandywine and Waynesburg Railroad Company (est. 1854) connected Downingtown to Waynesburg (now Honey Brook), 28 miles northwest. In 1888, the East Brandywine and Waynesburg Railroad was purchased by the Downingtown and Lancaster Railroad Company, which extended the line approximately 9.5 miles to Lancaster. The corridor was vital to the agricultural and industrial development of the communities it served. It also stretched between Downingtown and Lancaster, which by 1857 were both stations on the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line. The PRR purchased the Downingtown and Lancaster Railroad in 1903, incorporating it as the Pennsylvania Railroad's New Holland Branch.

▼ Map showing the reach of the Pennsylvania Railroad's network circa 1918. Red indicates lines owned outright by the PRR in 1918; light purple indicates lines the PRR used under leasing agreements with another railroad.



Downingtown's Historical Station Buildings

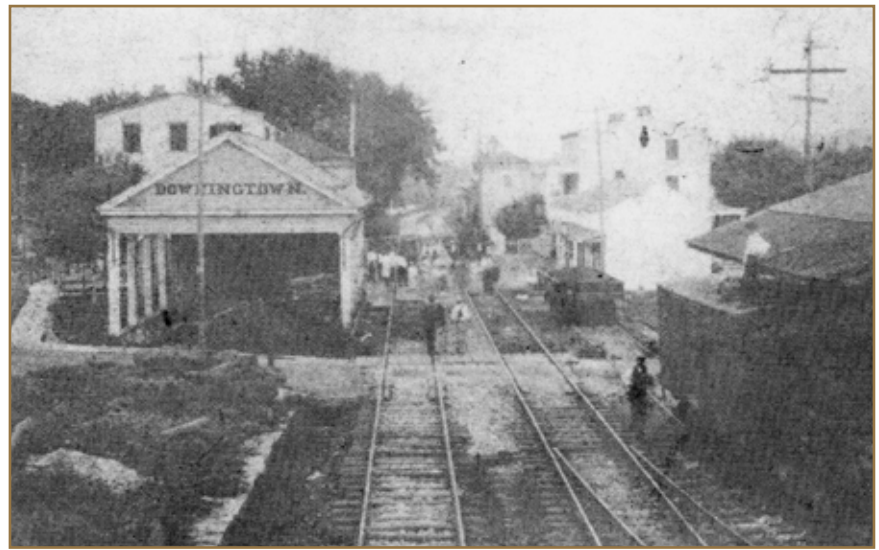
Like many other towns in Pennsylvania, Downingtown was a railroad stop long before it had a dedicated station building. Nearby taverns and hotels often served as informal stations for passengers in the early years of Pennsylvania's railroads. In Downingtown, as early as 1834, passengers would wait for trains at a tavern located on the north side of the tracks, northwest

of modern-day Bradford Avenue. In 1851, the tavern was owned by Henry Eicholtz.

In 1862, a dedicated station structure was built on the south side of modern-day Lancaster Avenue, on the north side of the tracks adjacent to the PRR House Hotel. The station consisted of a single-story brick depot with a covered, open-air passenger

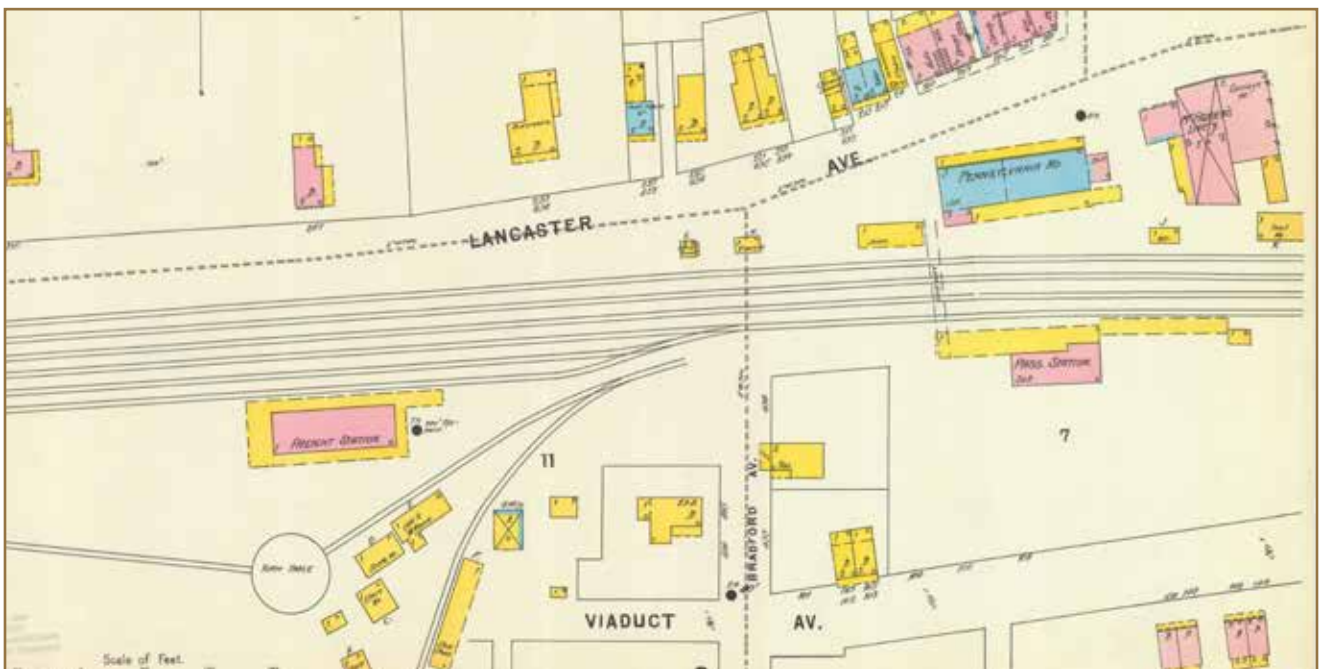
shelter on the west side of the building. This depot served westbound passengers. On the eastbound side, a one-and-one-half-story frame "eating house" and a three-story railroad hotel served passengers. A single-story brick freight depot was located to the far west of the passenger depot along the eastbound tracks.

► Photo of the 1862 frame station at Downingtown (left). It was located approximately where subsequent westbound shelters at Downingtown stood for the next 150+ years.



Penn Central Railroad Collection, Pennsylvania State Archives

▼ 1886 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map showing the first Downingtown Station, with associated railroad hotel, "eating house," and freight depot.



Sanborn Map Company/Library of Congress



Downingtown Area Historical Society

▲ Looking east at the 1892 Downingtown Station building, circa 1910.

In 1892 the original station was demolished and replaced by a new station building on the south side of the tracks at 159 Viaduct Avenue.

The building was a three-story brick structure inspired by the Queen Anne style, featuring a cross-gable slate roof with two chimneys, a central dormer on the north and south sides, and iron cresting (ornamentation) along the ridge of the roof. The station's first floor offered public lavatories, while the second floor (at track level) featured a waiting room, ticket office, and baggage room.

Like many 19th century train stations, Downingtown's station building included accommodation for the ticket agent and his family. The first floor included a private kitchen and living space. The second floor offered a sitting room and one bedroom, while the third floor provided four additional bedrooms with bathing fixtures.

On the north side of the tracks a simple wood passenger shed sheltered westbound passengers. In the early 20th century, travelers could purchase newspapers at the shed. An underground tunnel provided access between the eastbound and westbound sides of the tracks.

▼ View of the south side of the 1892 station building. The tunnel to the westbound platform is visible, left.



Downingtown Area Historical Society

PRR's Influence on Downingtown Industrial Development

Downingtown's location along the East Branch of Brandywine Creek contributed to its early prosperity, and it flourished as a center for water-powered mills. Just as the completion of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike had benefited Downingtown's growth in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the arrival of the railroad did the same in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Downingtown's mills flourished and new industries were drawn to the town, which provided a strategic business location situated between the major urban centers of Lancaster and Philadelphia.

Downingtown's location at the intersection of the PRR's Main Line, New Holland Branch, Trenton Cutoff Extension, and Philadelphia and Chester Valley Railroad situated its citizens and businesses at a nexus of regional transportation lines, connecting them

to a wide range of destinations.

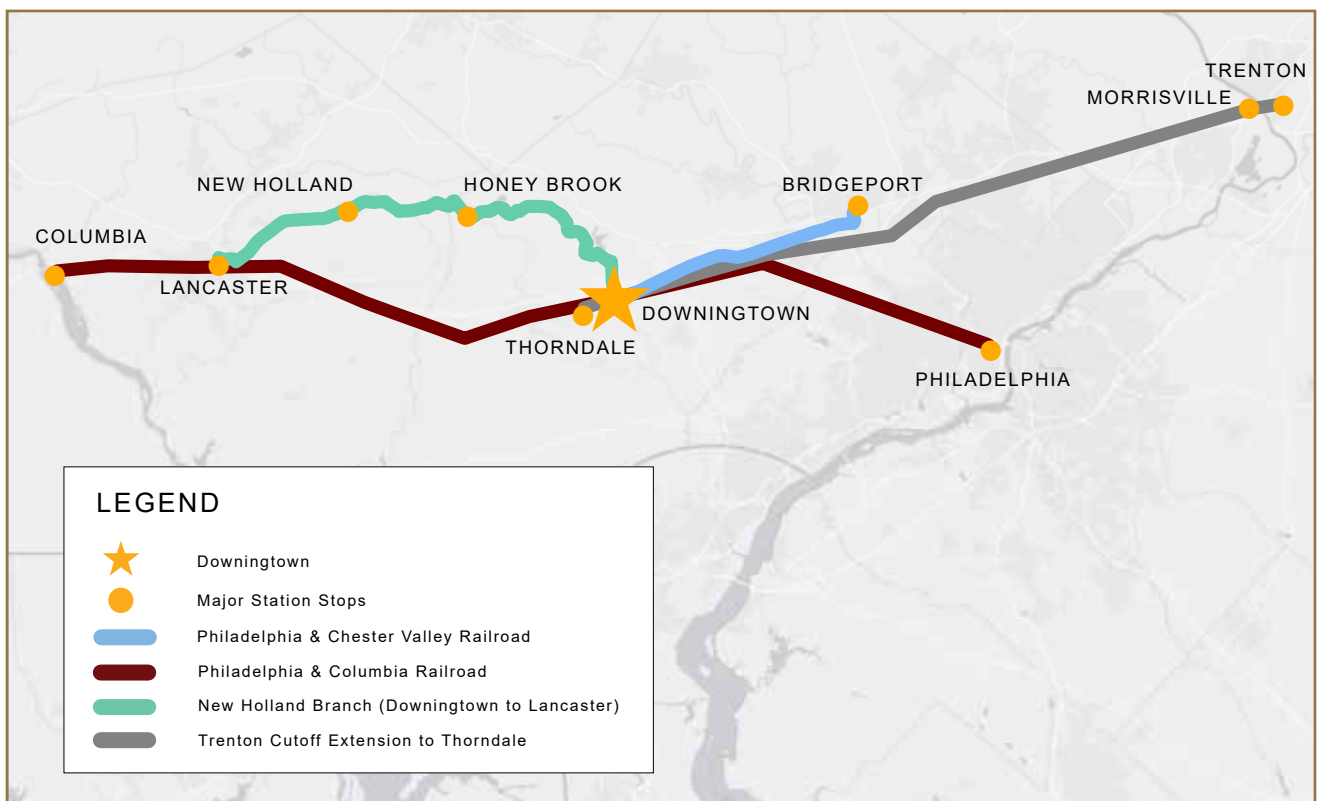
By the late 19th century, several manufacturing enterprises were active in Downingtown. Most of these were located along the Brandywine and in close proximity to the PRR's lines in town. The Frank P. Miller Paper Company was established in Downingtown on the west side of Brandywine Avenue. By 1887, its steam mill was producing 10 tons of product per day. Output increased to 30 tons per day by 1909. The company benefited from its location along the PRR's Main Line and constructed a covered railroad platform on a short spur off the line where products could be more easily loaded for transport by rail.

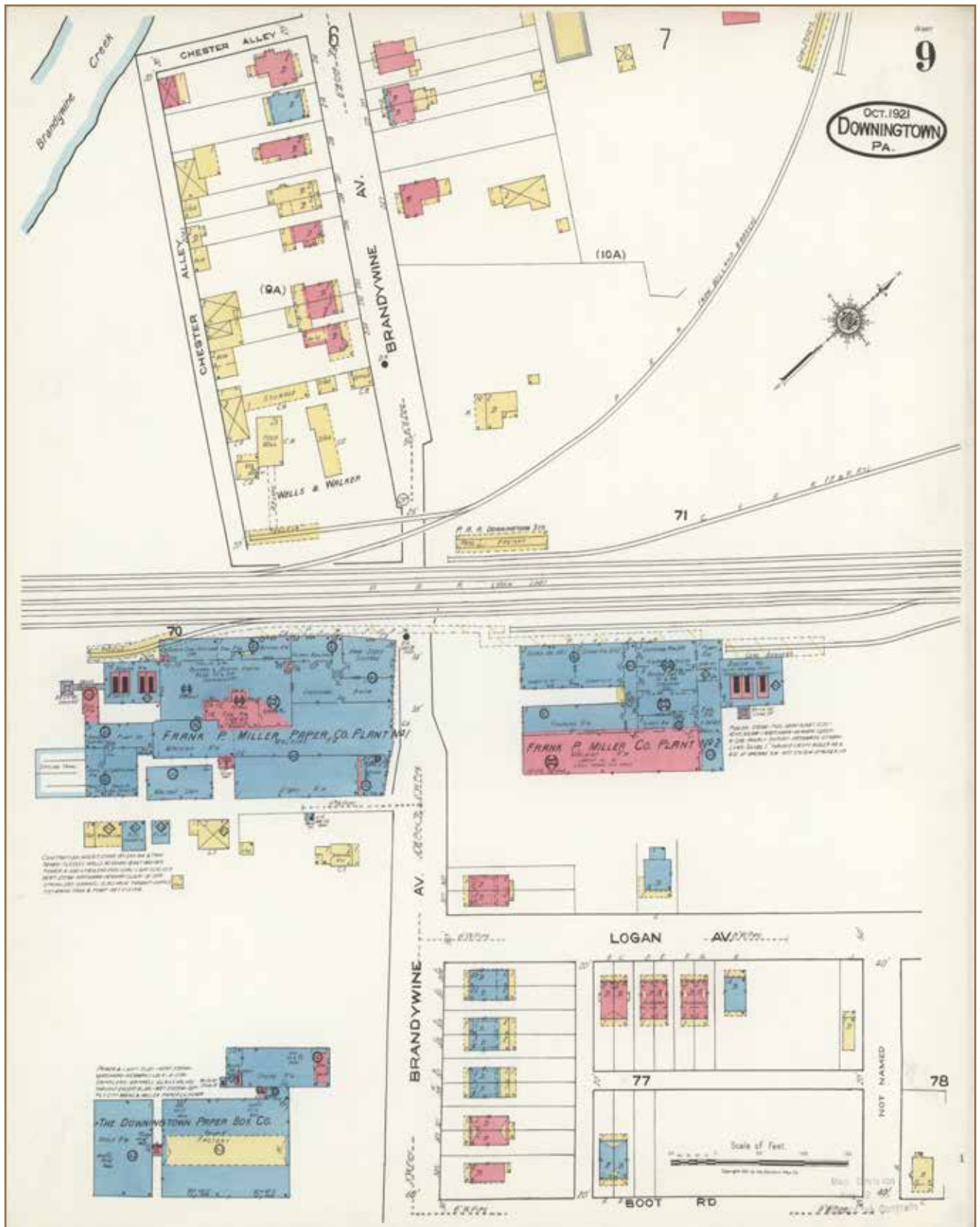
Other enterprises took advantage of Downingtown's easy access to the PRR by building rail spurs. These included the Downingtown Manufacturing Company (which produced

paper mill machinery), and the Downingtown Paper Box Company. Other Downingtown manufacturers of the period used the New Holland Branch to access the Main Line and routes beyond. These included the Wells and Walker Lumber Company, the S. Austin Bicking Paper Mill, James Florey's Brick Works, the G.T. Guthrie Planing Mill, the Downingtown Stove Company, Shellmire's Gristmill, the Downingtown Iron Works, and the Downingtown Woolen Mills.

In addition to freight, the railroad opened up opportunities for passenger travel. As a convenient stopping point located halfway between Philadelphia and Lancaster, Downingtown saw the construction of several new hotels, restaurants, and an opera house during the 19th century.

▼ Map depicting the convergence at Downingtown of the P&CV, P&C, Trenton Cutoff Extension, and New Holland Branch.





▲ Sanborn Map, 1921, showing the location of the Miller Paper Company plant south of the railroad on both sides of Brandywine Avenue, as well as the Wells & Walker Lumber Yard north of the railroad.

PRR Decline and the Launch of Amtrak (1968–1976)

Despite its successes and support of thriving businesses and industries for a century, by the 1950s the Pennsylvania Railroad Company was struggling to survive. A major factor was the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which launched the Interstate Highway System and transformed U.S. transportation. Demand for passenger rail service declined sharply with Americans' widespread purchase of automobiles. Similarly, the rise of freight trucking companies, which could offer more flexible, cost-effective transportation for many types of goods, significantly reduced the PRR's freight business.

Those market changes on the heels of the financial difficulties of the World War II years forced the PRR to reduce service. In 1950 the company began abandoning portions of the New Holland Branch. The PRR removed eight miles of track east

of Honey Brook, which effectively disconnected Downingtown from the western end of the branch that led to Lancaster. By the end of the 1960s, the entire line between Downingtown and New Holland was abandoned. By 1980 much of the remaining tracks were removed. As a result, there are virtually no visible remnants of the railroad branch that had been so important to Downingtown agriculture and industries for more than a century.

In a further effort to remain solvent the PRR in 1968 merged with its longtime rival, the New York Central Railroad, becoming the Penn Central Transportation Company (Penn Central). Nevertheless, the Penn Central filed for bankruptcy in 1970.

The railroad industry had been central to the U.S. economy for more than 100 years, and with Penn Central and other railroads in steep decline,

Congress took action. With the Regional Rail Reorganization Act of 1973, Congress sought an assessment of the rail system's weaknesses by the United States Railway Association. The association's recommendation was that a government-funded private freight rail corporation, to be known as the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail), be created from major portions of the Penn Central and other regional railroads, including the Chester Valley branch of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. Congress followed this recommendation and committed to investing up to \$2.1 billion in Conrail securities to be paid back over time from railroad revenues. The Penn Central and the other failing northeastern U.S. railroads forfeited all of their assets on April 1, 1976—mainly to Conrail, but several passenger lines, including the Main Line, were transferred to a new entity known as Amtrak.

Modern Passenger Rail Service (1976–Present)

The Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 had established the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) to take over the intercity passenger lines of the nation's failing private railroad companies. In 1976, Amtrak assumed ownership of the Main Line through Downingtown. Amtrak's *Keystone Service* and *Pennsylvanian* trains continue to link Downingtown with nearby metropolitan areas and Amtrak's nationwide rail network. According to Amtrak's ridership data, in Federal Fiscal Year 2019, 81,326 passenger trips were made from Downingtown, generating \$1,772,262 in ticket revenue.

Another government corporation, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), was established by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1963 to coordinate public transportation in the Greater



▲ Passengers boarding an eastbound Amtrak train at Downingtown, circa 1980.

Philadelphia Region. Around 1971, SEPTA began coordinating regional transportation service on segments of railroads previously owned and operated by the Pennsylvania Railroad.

SEPTA's Paoli/Thorndale commuter line operates along a section of Amtrak's Keystone Corridor and the former Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line, with a stop at Downingtown.



Downingtown Area Historical Society (2)



Mark Harootunian, courtesy of Downingtown's Alert Fire Company, No. 1

▲ Left, top and bottom: Downingtown Station in the late 20th century. Right: Downingtown Station fire, 1992.

Loss of the 1892 Building

In the early hours of February 24, 1992, a fire broke out inside Downingtown Station. By the time the fire-fighters arrived, flames leapt from the building's windows and the interior of the building could not be saved. With the station's interior structure compromised, the upper two levels

had to be torn down and were cleared away within days.

Shortly after the rubble was cleared, new passenger shelters were erected that were still in use in 2020. The eastbound platform shelter was constructed on the foundation of the old station, with the original tunnel

providing access to the westbound platform on the north side of the tracks. The shelters provide some protection from the elements, but the station is not easily accessible to people with disabilities.

▼ View of the Downingtown Station eastbound passenger shelter in 2020.



▼ View of the back of the shelter, looking northeast. Note the remaining masonry foundation of the old station, and the tunnel to the westbound platform at left.



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Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

▲ Rendering of the proposed station on Brandywine Avenue.

A New, Accessible Station

PennDOT plans to construct a new, fully accessible Downingtown Station just east of Brandywine Creek at Brandywine Avenue.

The proposed site is on part of the former site of the Frank P. Miller Paper Mill complex and will anchor the largest private investment in Downing-

town's history. Planned private-sector development includes hundreds of new residential units and thousands of square feet of retail space immediately south of the proposed station. Nearby, a new retail district will emerge where Frank Miller's paper mill once stood.

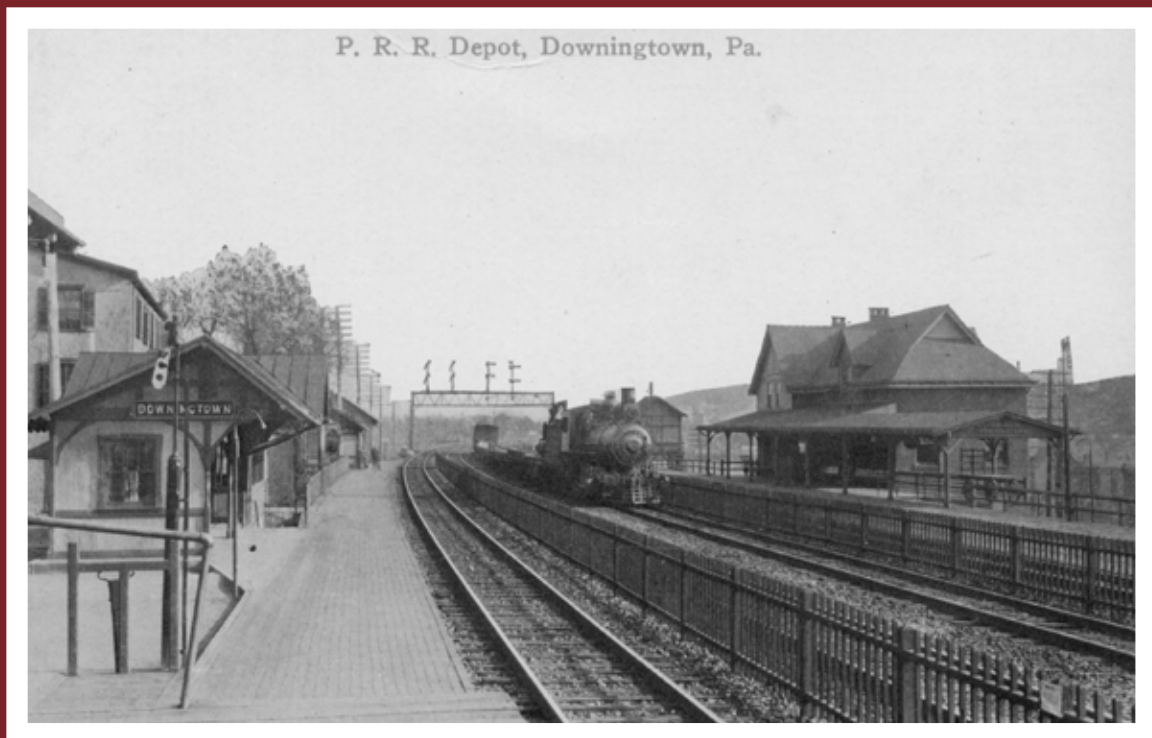
Downingtown's modernized, accessible train station will be central to the community's next phase of growth, building on a strong history of rail connections that have fostered prosperity for nearly 200 years.

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Postcard of Downingtown Station, looking east, circa 1910.