

All Aboard! Railway Stations Provide a Window to American Life 100 Years Ago

Introduction to the Lesson

(Image1 L3 Advertisement)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

It is the summer of 1908. You are in your uncomfortable starched traveling clothes, waiting with your family to go on vacation to visit your grandmother. As your family's baggage is being unloaded from your carriage Betsey, your family's carriage horse stomps and fidgets. You stand outside of the station with your sister as your parents are busy seeing to your luggage. There is action everywhere. Wagons drive by with goods piled high. You hear men call to one another as they unload baskets of peaches and crates of seafood from the tracks above. Suddenly you see your friend and his dad turning the corner to the Passenger station. He tells you that he's just going to Greenville with his dad to see about buying a horse at a farm there.

Soon your parents have gathered their things and you are ready to go into the station. Inside there is a newspaper boy selling his wares. At the ticket windows your father will buy your tickets and the family will split to the men's and lady's waiting rooms while you wait for the train to come. Fashionable people are gathered in their Sunday best to travel. Mother packed a lunch for everyone, as there is no dining service on the train. Nobody wants to eat on the train because of the soot and dirt that comes in the windows. Suddenly you hear a train whistle and you know that your train has arrived.

The Wilmington Amtrak Station and Offices and the B&O Passenger station are two of the last remaining Victorian railroad station buildings in Delaware. Once every small community in the state had a station and the railroad was the fastest and most convenient way to travel or carry goods from one place to another. Through studying these buildings, students will compare the railroad industry of today with that of one hundred years ago.

This lesson will illustrate how the railroad industry has changed from its heyday at the turn of the 20th century to its present-day use 100 years later. Students will understand its economic significance to industrial cities such as Wilmington, Delaware and its effect on the more rural surrounding areas.

About this Lesson

A. Citation

This lesson is based on the National Register of Historic Places registration file for the Wilmington Amtrak Station and Offices and the B&O Passenger Station along with primary and secondary sources found in local historical archives. It is written by Leslie Hubbard of LMH Consulting for the Frank Furness Railroad District.

B. Where it fits into the Curriculum

This lesson is designed as an addition to American history units life in the Victorian Era and the Industrial Age in comparison with that of today. Students will learn about the social history of America's Mid-Atlantic region and understand how important a role the railroad played in daily life at the turn of the 20th century.

C. Student Objectives

- Students will gain an understanding of how the train industry was a major contributor to the economic success of Wilmington Delaware, an east coast industrial city and how that role has changed significantly in the past 100 years.
- Students will be able to give three examples of differences between present day travel and travel at the turn of the 20th century.
- Students will compare and contrast the lives and jobs of people who worked on the railroad at the turn of the century.
- Students will study the train station in their own community, compare it to the Wilmington Amtrak Station and the B&O Passenger Station, in order to understand the role it has played in their community's history.

D. Materials for students

The readings, maps, and other primary sources are designed to be photocopied or projected in PowerPoint for classroom use. The photographs appear twice: in a low resolution version with text and activity instructions and alone in a high resolution version for educational purposes.

Students will use:

Computer and internet access

Paper, writing supplies

Art supplies (optional)

E. Visiting the Site

The Wilmington Amtrak Station and offices and the B&O Passenger Station, is located on the Wilmington Riverfront. Together with the Rail Viaduct, they comprise the Frank Furness Railroad District. You are invited to visit the Wilmington Amtrak Station everyday. The Pennsylvania Railroad Offices and the B&O Passenger Station are both inhabited by ING Direct and are not open to the public; however you can view them from the outside.

Teaching Activities

A. Getting Started

(Image 2 L3 BO Station)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

(Image 3 L3 Amtrak vert)

Courtesy of Joan Hoge

Both of these are buildings that have been or are currently used as train stations, yet they are very different. The B&O Passenger Station was first used as a station for commuter trains headed for the suburbs, then as a freight station. The Wilmington Amtrak Station is currently used by travelers going all over the east coast.

1. How are these two stations alike and different?
2. When you look at the buildings, what clues do you get that tell you that they are train stations?
3. How can you tell which one was used long ago, and which is used now?

B. Setting the Stage

Before the railroad came to Delaware, traveling from one place to another took a long time and was hard to do. People traveled by horse and carriage and ferry. Once the railroad was built, traveling became easier. Trains went faster and were more comfortable to ride. Riding the train became a stylish way to travel. Passengers got dressed up and rode in fancy train cars with chandeliers and velvet seats.

Trains not only provided travel for people but also for goods. For the first time, peaches and blue crabs could arrive fresh from southern Delaware to the restaurants in Philadelphia and New York. On the east coast, lots of people worked for the railroad. It was a good place to work because the pay was good and workers were given free pass books for their families. This was the chance for families to travel long distances for good jobs and schools.

Train travel changed a lot once cars were invented. As more people could afford to their own car and drive it where they needed to go, they didn't need the train so much. Farmers and factories began using trucks to carry their goods. People used the highways more often than trains. The railroad became more popular for commuting to work and school than for traveling on vacation. Today the railroad is still used for moving freight and people around the United States. In 2004 over 25 million people rode on Amtrak, the largest passenger travel company in the US and 1.844 billion tons of freight was shipped on America's seven railroad freight systems.

C. Locating the Site

(Image 4 L3 DE Map Mid-Atlantic)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

1. Delaware is located near many big cities. Wilmington is located at the northern tip of the state. What large cities are close by?
2. As you look at the map, can you tell why the railroad was so important to the southern part of Delaware in the 19th century?

D. Determining The Facts

Reading 1: The Railroad Changes Delaware

Wilmington Delaware was like hundreds of small industrial cities around the United States. It was the town that people visited to catch a train or send their goods from the country to the big cities. The first train line in Delaware was opened in 1832. In the 70 or so years after train tracks were built all over the state. Every town and suburb had a station. In the days before cars were popular, the railroad allowed people to visit friends and family in neighboring towns, something that would have been rare in the years before. For the first time, peach farmers and crab fishermen could get their goods to the big cities. They were links with ferries to Washington DC, Philadelphia and New York City. During that time, Wilmington's population grew from around 20,000 in 1860 to over 110,000 in 1920. The railroad made Wilmington a growing, busy city instead of a country town.

Today, thousands of people use the main passenger line from New York to Washington DC every day to get to work and school. Freight is moved along different rail lines. It is still an important way to move large goods like cars and construction supplies. But what once was a place to catch the train to visit family or take a vacation all over the world, is now a place to commute from. The railroad allows lots of people to live in a less expensive small city and work in big cities where pay is better. Like much of the United States, Wilmington's economy still thrives on the railroad, just for different purposes.

Questions:

1. How did people who lived in Delaware travel to the big cities before the railroad came to Wilmington?
2. How did the railroad change the lives of Delaware's citizens?
3. How is the railroad used today in Delaware?
4. Compare Delaware's railroad story with that of your community. How are they the same or different?

Reading 2: Memories of the Wilmington Railroad

Excerpts from the Every Evening Paper, Wilmington DE 1947, "The Railroad Red Cap and His Predecessor" found in the Frank Collection, Historical Society of Delaware

"As there were no automobiles and no motor buses at that time, practically all travelers even those going to and from stations only a few miles distant used the railroad.

That being so, although Wilmington was much less populous that it is today-in 1887 Wilmington had about 45,000 inhabitants-the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad Depot, as the French Street station was known, was as busy, relatively, as it is now.

The old station was a sort of democratic spot half a century ago. It was there that local people had the opportunity to see and chat with downstate friends coming to Wilmington or passing through, as all such travelers had to use the railroad at least as far as Wilmington if they were bound north.

As the conductors, brakemen, engineers, firemen and other trainmen on the Delaware Railroad know practically everybody down the state, they were interesting sources of information concerning happenings anywhere within hailing distance of the railroad. These trainmen, because of their extensive acquaintance and their friendly manner, were among the most popular citizens of Delaware.”

Questions:

1. The person who wrote this was remembering a railroad of fifty years before. How do you think he felt about the railroad? Do you think people feel the same way about the railroad today?
2. Why was the old French Street station called a democratic spot? The French Street station was replaced by the Wilmington Amtrak Station in 1907. Was this something particular to the French Street Station or was it something that was true of most American railroad stations?
3. Why were the railroad workers important to people in town? What could they be compared with today?
4. If a reporter interviewed people about the railroad today, what do you think they'd say?

Reading 3: Abraham Lincoln Rides the Train to Wilmington

Mr. Lincoln was carried through this city on one of the first sleepers ever built. It was during the war, and the coach was built by the P., W., & B.R.R. Company in its own shops here.

Mr Duncan remembers Mr. Lincoln very well, when he traveled between Philadelphia and Baltimore. He has seen him standing at the rear platform of the train addressing the people at the P., W. & B station. Tremendous crowds used to be present. Mr. Lincoln was very like his pictures. He spoke slowly and distinctly; he had a clear although not a full and round utterance.

Excerpts from the Rail Roads Here in 1855” -published in the March 1, 1888 edition of the Every Evening found in the Frank Collection, Historical Society of Delaware

Questions:

1. Mr. Duncan was a conductor on the Delaware Railroad in the mid 1800s. Why would he have remembered Mr. Lincoln so well?
2. Why would Mr. Lincoln used the train to travel between cities? Why would he have stood on the rear platform?
3. Many famous people have used the train to meet the people. Can you name some others? Why would they use the train in certain events? For what kinds of events would they find the train useful? Why?
4. Do famous people still use the train for travel? Why might they use the train over another kind of transportation today?

E. Visual Evidence

Visual Evidence 1: Delaware Passenger Routes In 1889

(Image 5 L3 Routes)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

(Image 6 L3 Schedule)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Questions:

1. How many towns in Delaware had stations in them in 1889? Do you think there are that many today? Why?
2. Why do you think that people used the railroad so much? What were they using it for? Would it be the same today?
3. If you were a city planner, and it was your job to decide how many stations your local town would have, would you vote to have more or less than there were in Delaware in the 1880's? Why?
4. Go on the internet and find a train schedule from your local railroad. Compare it to this map. Other than the place names, compare it to the schedule shown here. How are they the same? How are they different?

Visual Evidence 2: Traveling in Style

(Image 7 L3 Railroad car interior)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society

Questions:

1. This engraving was used in an advertisement for Jackson and Sharp, a company that manufactured railroad cars in the late 1800's and early 1900's. What do you think the company advertising agents were hoping to tell people about their railroad cars?
2. What would it have been like to ride in one of these cars? Do you think it was as comfortable as it appeared? Why?
3. Do you think that train cars of today are similar to this one? How do you think they are different? Why?

Visual Evidence 3: Working on the Railroad

(Image 8 L3 19th cent conductors)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society

(Image 9 L3 Track laborers)

Reproduced courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society

Questions:

1. These people all worked for the railroad in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. From the picture, what do you think their job was? How can you tell?
2. When you imagine their jobs, what do you think they were like? Can you describe them? What do you imagine were the benefits of working for the railroad at that time? What about now?

3. Today there are people who do these jobs as well. Their lives are very different from those in the picture. Can you imagine how these jobs might have changed in the last 100 years?
4. What are some careers in the railroad today? Do a quick websearch using the words "Railroad Careers" in the search line. List the careers you find. Are any of these the present day version of the ones shown in the pictures above? How would they be the same? How would they be different?

F. Putting it all Together

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Railroad was the backbone of American travel and freight. Towns and cities relied on the railroad for all aspects of their economy from their tourist trade to retail shipping. For many smaller towns, the railway was the only link with the outside world. This was the golden age of the railroad. As technology grew more sophisticated and newer forms of transportation developed, the train business changed dramatically. These activities will help students compare the railroad of yesteryear with that of today and imagine how new technologies might influence the railroad of tomorrow.

Activity 1: Visit Your Rail Station

The two buildings that this lesson is based on are both train stations that were active at the turn of the century. One was, and still is, a city metropolitan station, the other a commuter station and then later, a freight station. Like all public buildings, rail stations all have similar elements. They have ticket windows, waiting areas, food vendors, restrooms, etc. In class discussion, brainstorm a list of these elements with your class. Create a class checklist. Take a class trip to your local passenger train station. As you explore the station, see if your class can find all the things on your list. Add any elements that weren't on your class's list. For instance, some stations have book lending programs so commuters can borrow books to read on the train. Others might have a museum exhibit or retail stores inside.

Now, create a class checklist of things that you might find at a freight depot. Contact your local freight company to see if your class can visit your local freight depot or ask a representative to visit your class to tell about the freight business. As you visit or listen to the speaker, see if your class can find out about all of the things on your list. If you have a speaker, you might have to ask questions to prompt him/her to discuss the specific elements. If there are things that the students hear about or see that are not on the list, add them.

In class discussion, compare the two types of stations. You might find using a Venn diagram is helpful for this. Discuss the importance of the railroad in your town. Who uses it? Is it a popular way to travel? Why? What kind of freight is shipped on railroads in your area? Is the train a link between other kinds of transportation? Is it used for commuting? What would it mean to your town if the railroad were to go out of business? What would happen?

Activity 2: All Aboard!

Using all of the information that the students have collected in the readings and visual evidence explorations, discuss with the students how passenger rail travel has changed over the last 100 years. Ask the students to make guesses about what train travel might be like even 25 years into the future. These changes are ones that they will probably witness in their lifetime. Students should write a short story of a person their age traveling on the railroad. They should include details about the train itself, the station and the services that are provided to travelers. They should illustrate their story and print it for distribution. Ask them to refrain from signing their stories.

When they hand in their story, assign a number to it that corresponds with the student's name on a master list. This will insure anonymity in peer evaluation. Design an easy assessment rubric for the students to peer evaluate the stories. Divide the class into groups and give each group an equal number of stories to evaluate.

Ask each group to read all the stories and fill out the rubrics. Students should discuss the stories and choose the best or most creative of each set of stories, keeping track of their results. Finally, ask each group to report their results to the class. Tabulate the results and discuss the top rated stories. What about them is interesting or creative? Does the class think that the author's predictions are possible? Will rail travel be as important to America's citizens 25 years from now?

Activity 3: The Railroad in Popular Culture

There have been many stories, songs and movies that are centered around the railroad. There are people who have made their hobby to learn about trains and collect railroad memorabilia. Ask your students to search the web to collect stories and tall tales about the trains and the people who worked them. A few sources are listed in the Supplementary Resource section of this lesson. See how many they can find. As a class discuss the ones that were found.

See if there is one that is specific to your own state. Choose it or another one that is particularly interesting to the class to research. Most stories or songs in popular culture are based on a factual event. Often, with a little digging, you will find the background to the story or song. For instance the story of Casey Jones is based on a real life story of an engineer who tried to beat the clock to get to the station on time in Memphis Tennessee.

Ask each student to choose one of their findings and find out the backstory on it, then present it to the class. After the presentations, ask the students why they think these events were special enough to be sung or told about. Why were they told and why did the railroad hold such interest and intrigue for people? Is this still the case today? Do we revere the railroad as much as we did years ago? Why or why not? Then, ask the students to create a piece of visual or performing art of their own about the railroad today. It might be a painting, a poem, reading, dance, or song.

Hold a Railroad Appreciation Day to celebrate these works of art. Students can present their pieces to be shown at the school. You can invite parents or members of your local

railroad enthusiasts group to attend. You might even get some of them to talk about the railroad or about trains at the event.

G. Supplementary Resources

[Http://www.americanfolklore.net/railroad-stories.html](http://www.americanfolklore.net/railroad-stories.html) Railroad stories from all over the country

<http://railtales.com/> Railroad Stories, some based on true events

Railroad worker resources with pictures from other US areas.

<http://depts.washington.edu/labhist/laborphotos/> Pacific Northwest

<http://cpr.org/> Transcontinental Railroad

<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1038.html> Chicago

<http://www.irishshrine.org/> Baltimore

Rail History

<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess/rails-history.html>