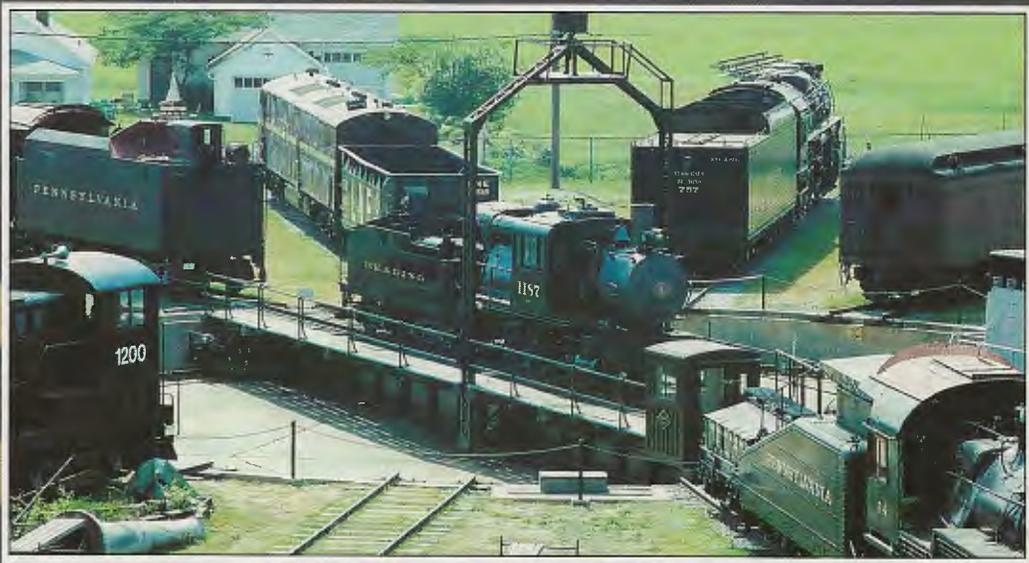


# RRR

WHERE  
**HISTORY & MAGIC**  
CONVERGE

by  
James Alexander Jr.



THE RAILROAD MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA



Visitors traveling east of Strasburg on Route 741 in idyllic Lancaster County suddenly encounter a wondrous array of locomotives hard by the road—steam engines, diesels, even an electric. One huge locomotive rests on a massive hundred-foot long turntable. A sign announces *Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania*, beyond which a massive building stands as a memorial, a veritable shrine, to one of the Commonwealth's most significant industries and cultures—railroading.

The importance of railroading not only reaches back in time, but to those of thoughtful inclination it embraces the present and the future, and touches all corners of the Keystone State. More than one hundred and forty thousand visitors traveled to the museum last year. Some arrive humming Amtrak's commercial jingle, "There's something about a train that's magic!"

The "magic" first came to the Strasburg area in 1823, when Colonel John Stevens (1749-1838) passed through. Travel in the fledgling nation was difficult at best; a trip from Philadelphia to Baltimore, for example, took five days, and commerce of any significance was largely limited to travel

by coastal waters. Stevens came by horse-drawn coach because railroads had not yet been built in America. He came because he believed that there should be, *there must be*, railroads. His dream was eventually fulfilled with the development of a mighty industry that shaped the life and fortune of a nation.

Colonel Stevens, like many who contributed to the development of the Keystone State, was neither born nor lived in Pennsylvania. A patriot of the American Revolution, Stevens lived mostly in Hoboken, New Jersey, where initially he devoted his energies to the application of steam engines to power commercial boats. His early work paralleled that of inventor and engineer Robert Fulton (1765-1815), and in 1809 his steamboat *Phoenix* was engaged in regular commercial transport between Philadelphia and Trenton. Later hailed as a "genius of steam" and as "the father of American railroading," Stevens himself never actually built railroads, but his was the first voice in America to strongly proclaim their need and their feasibility.

In an alcove of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania stands a strange vehicle, apparently part farm wagon and part boiler-driven steam propulsion system. It is a replica of the first steam loco-

tive built in America to run on rails—a circle six hundred and sixty feet in circumference—on John Stevens' Hoboken estate, now the site of the Stevens Institute of Technology. Built in 1825, it was intended to encourage the construction of railroads in Pennsylvania. Fifteen years earlier, Stevens had turned over operation of his steamboat lines to his sons, and shifted his attention to the use of steam for propulsion on land. A visionary who saw the need for railroads, he spent much of his personal fortune advocating their construction.

Colonel John Stevens attempted to dissuade New York's Governor DeWitt Clinton (1769-1828) from constructing the Erie Canal. Canals, he maintained, would not be efficient, and would be frozen when the farmers most needed them to move their threshed grain to market. His argument in 1812 underscored his belief that railroads should network the entire country.

*So many and so important are the advantages which these States would derive from the general adoption of the proposed steam railways, that. . .the necessary surveys, [should] be made in all directions, so as to embrace and unite every section of this extensive empire. It might then. . .be truly*



*...said that these States would constitute one family, intimately connected. . . in bonds of indissoluble union.*

Unable to block the Erie Canal, and lacking capital to build a railroad in New Jersey, Stevens turned to Pennsylvania, which was also considering construction of a series of canals. His locomotive was designed to propel itself by a rotating cogwheel—not unlike that in use today on New Hampshire’s famous Mt. Washington Railway—because he needed to show the feasibility of railroads in climbing the hills and mountains that had blocked westward development.

Recognizing the great potential in exploiting Pennsylvania’s seemingly boundless natural resources—timber, minerals, and fertile farmland—Philadelphia financial leaders competed fiercely with the ports of Baltimore and New York for commercial traffic. Should Pennsylvania follow New York’s initiative in creating the Erie Canal-Hudson River route to open up the interior? Not so, argued Stevens. He joined with a group known as the Pennsylvania Society for Internal Improvements to argue for railroads rather than canals.

*A railroad. . . will insure to the farmer a fair*

*price for what he brings to market. . . Diverging from a centre like the rays of the sun, railroads will diffuse light, heat, and animation to every extremity of the Commonwealth.*

In 1823, “on the memorial and representation of John Stevens,” Pennsylvania’s state legislature enacted a charter establishing the “President, Directors, and Company of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company.” The line, extending from Philadelphia to Columbia, Lancaster County, was to be erected “under the superintendence and direction of John Stevens.” While still attempting to raise capital in 1823, Stevens made the preliminary survey of the route and, in so doing, passed through the Strasburg area, making the first exploration of a route for a railroad in the western hemisphere.

Stevens failed to convince financiers to support construction of the proposed route, even though he demonstrated that a locomotive could climb the hills where canals could not. And he did not limit his vision to laying the proposed route which would link Philadelphia and Columbia.

*. . . when this great improvement in transportation shall have been extended to Pittsburgh, and thence into the heart of the extensive and fertile State of Ohio, and*

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*Mammoth train shed of the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Broad Street station, Philadelphia, after a disastrous fire in 1923.*

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*also to the great western lakes Philadelphia may then become the great emporium of the western country. The improvement will unquestionably be extended from Philadelphia across New Jersey to the city of New York.*

Colonel Stevens’ ideas would eventually become reality. The Pennsylvania Railroad, under a new charter in 1846, was to become a giant among American railroads, representing the consolidation of more than six hundred smaller lines, extending from its Philadelphia headquarters to New York, Washington, D. C., Chicago, and St. Louis. Its main line followed much of the route surveyed by Stevens, and it passed through the Lancaster County village of Paradise, at a place called Strasburg Junction, where a short line known as the Strasburg Rail Road was chartered in 1832. At the other end of the Strasburg Rail Road is the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, opened in 1975.

But what, two decades ago, was there to house? Why did the Commonwealth



*There's much to see and do at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania!  
Visitors can explore vintage locomotives, including a GG1 (top) and a K4  
(right), and children are encouraged to take part in "hands-on" activities.*

of Pennsylvania need a railroad museum? Answers lie in more than a century of railroad growth and activity that affected the Keystone State and its residents as no other industry had.

It was the massive web of railroads, mostly of compatible rail width, that gave the North a major advantage over the Confederacy during the Civil War. Railroads enabled the Union to bring its industrial might to the battlefield. In the weeks before the Battle of Gettysburg, fought in July 1863, there was an almost continuous line of trains on the Western Maryland Railroad carrying Union troops and supplies from Baltimore to Westminster, Maryland. Operating under federal military authority, the railroad became a major line of supply for the Army of the Potomac. For several long days after the battle, it transported prisoners, the wounded, and the dead. Less than six months later, President Abraham Lincoln traveled by train to

Gettysburg to deliver his famous address on Thursday, November 19. Two years later, his body was carried over a series of railroads to its final resting place in Springfield, Illinois.

In time, Pennsylvania was to be crossed by dozens of railroads, reflecting its keystone location and providing the arteries of its industry and commerce. The Pennsylvania Railroad was joined by—and often competed with—the Baltimore and Ohio, the Reading Company (a major hauler of anthracite), the Bessemer and Lake Erie (serving the steel industry), the Lehigh Valley, the Norfolk and Western, and even parts of the Pennsylvania Railroad's arch rival, the New York Central. Many short lines sprang up to connect remote villages and isolated towns, as well as to serve mining interests, factories, and the lumber industry. On the main lines thundered expresses such as the famous *Broadway Limited*, which carried passengers from New York, through Pennsylvania, to Chicago, while other trains seemed to stop at every hamlet and siding to pick up passengers, milk from dairy farms, raw materials, and finished products.

Settlements immediately sprang up along the railroads, and it seemed that nearly every town or borough had its own depot which became the bustling center of news, commerce, and informa-

tion. Cities, including Philadelphia, Reading, Pittsburgh, Scranton, and Harrisburg, became hubs for major railroads. Thousands of Pennsylvanians worked for the railroads during their heyday. Railroad towns such as Altoona, in Blair County, grew into major manufacturing and repair centers to service the burgeoning industry. At Altoona, the Pennsylvania Railroad built hundreds of its own locomotives. In Philadelphia, the

locomotives—in some cases the last of their kind. The company also built full-size replicas of two of the earliest locomotives—an operating model of the *John Bull*, which had been shipped from England in 1831 to launch the Stevens family's Camden and Amboy Railroad, and a replica of John Stevens' 1825 prototype locomotive.

After the World's Fair, the equipment gathered by the Pennsylvania Railroad was relegated to storage, mostly at the company's engine house in Northumberland. In the 1960s, facing financial collapse and eventual merger with its former rival, the New York Central, to create the Penn Central, the Pennsylvania Railroad began seeking a permanent home for its treasures. Company officials endeavored to set conditions; they emphasized that the equipment was to be

cared for and preserved.

Although several rare locomotives made their way out of the Keystone State, most of the equipment, fortunately, came to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania as the core of the facility's extensive collection. But in no way is this museum the Museum of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Simply put, it is the museum of railroading in Pennsylvania, which includes all railroads, manufacturers of locomotives, and allied service vendors. It safeguards the records, the memories, and the dreams of hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians touched by the expansive industry. It is the focal point of a saga that is recalled throughout the Commonwealth by trains that still travel the remaining trackage, in the faint impressions of abandoned rights-of-way through both wooded valleys and urban neighborhoods, and by abandoned passenger stations and watch towers that still grace remote rural crossroads.

Strasburg has emerged as the quintessential mecca for former railroaders and their families, industry historians, and railroading enthusiasts. The Strasburg Rail Road, just opposite the museum, is nationally known for its preservation of steam equipment and rolling stock, and draws thousands of visitors yearly for its forty-five minute



Baldwin Locomotive Works became the world's largest, turning out hundreds of giant locomotives each year.

By 1915, Pennsylvania's railroads peaked at 11,693 miles of trackage. In little more than a dozen years, however, the thirties would witness the beginning of the end of the Golden Age of Railroading in America as other modes of transportation had arrived, often with government subsidy. Ironically, a section of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, opened in 1941, was built on land originally acquired for a railroad right-of-way (see "America's Dream Highway" by Dan Cupper in the fall 1990 issue of *Pennsylvania Heritage*). Airplanes carried passengers, mail, and even freight. The very nature of society was changing, and railroads suffered from the change.

In one of its proud but final expressions, the railroad industry, through the Eastern Railroads Conference, sponsored a major exhibition at the New York World's Fair in 1939-1940. Such exhibits were not new for railroads, which had participated in many world's fairs and international expositions. As the participating railroads assembled equipment to display at the New York World's Fair, officials of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which lacked any formal program for preserving "relics," searched for visually impressive and historically important

steam train excursions to Paradise and back. The Train Collectors Association operates a Toy Train Museum nearby, displaying various model railroad layouts. Entrepreneurs have been quick to establish various commercial enterprises in the area—such as restaurants, hobby shops, and motels—to capitalize on the popularity of railroading. But it's at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania that the magic of trains can best be appreciated. How the magic is perceived depends on what notions visitors bring with them.

"Old-timers" bring with them memories of having worked for the railroad, and they look for familiar locomotives, tools, and ephemera. Visitors who remember riding the rails, or hearing locomotive whistles piercing the night many years ago, flock to the museum to rekindle fond memories—and to assure themselves that it was all real. Scholars and historians arrive weekly to examine the museum's precious archives of railroad records, memorabilia, photographs, drawings, and maps. Others, usually young families with children in tow, come to explore the strange and unusual, to see firsthand what they have missed. For each of these visitors, there is a sense of purpose—and fulfillment—in visiting the museum. Many return time and again. But it is to the young that the museum targets its message, and for whom the magic will mesmerize.

Museum curators and guides understand that, in time, they will not see many visitors who remember the days of steam locomotives, and they will encounter even fewer whose families were directly affected by railroads. Guides especially welcome visits by youngsters who are fascinated by the legacy these vintage locomotives represent and museum volunteers take great pride in being able to explain railroading in a context that reiterates the importance of the industry to the state, the nation, and the world.

The Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania recently opened a new exhibit space, Railroaders' Hall, and now has ninety thousand square feet of protected space in which to display much of its prized rolling stock. Freed of

yearly scraping and painting of rusting engines and cars that had been displayed outdoors and exposed to the elements, the museum's staff and volunteers now devote more of their energy and time to telling and retelling the stories of these locomotives and emphasizing the legacy they reflect.

Museum guides and volunteers realize that it is the stories, more than the iron and steel behemoths, that ultimately preserve the legacy of railroading. The legacy is undeniably fascinating and is presented to young and old alike with varying degrees of sophistication. Such presentations ultimately lead to an understanding not only of the physical wonder of the Industrial Age, but the appreciation of the strength of human character. They also offer an unusual (and refreshing) perspective on how railroads today are important, albeit often ignored. And the stories carry important lessons of the relationships among private enterprises, communities, and individuals, in both social and economic settings.

The Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania has been a leader in making use of interpretive tools to tell such stories, ranging from well written signage and museum labeling to highly

A series of alcove exhibits invites visitors to consider the early history of railroads in Pennsylvania, to see the replica of John Stevens' prototype locomotive, and to learn the importance of the mining industry to Pennsylvania. Moving on, they encounter a complete freight train, so that instead of focusing on individual pieces of equipment, they can understand how freight was moved in by-gone days—as well as today. Thirty-eight percent of the country's freight is still moved by rail!

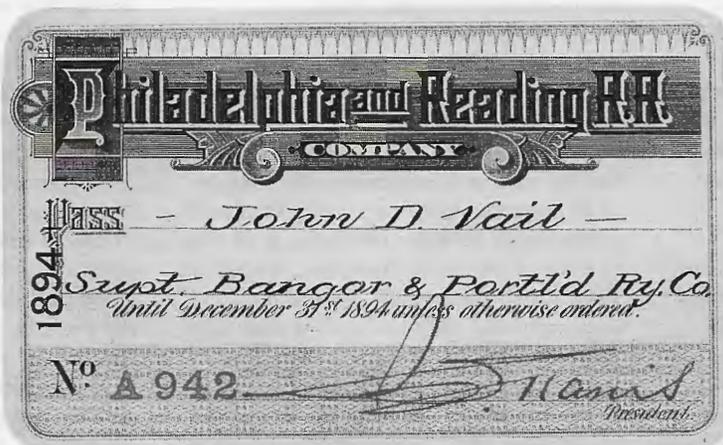
The museum, naturally, showcases locomotives of historical significance, including Number 460, also known as the "Lindbergh Special," a speedy Atlantic class locomotive that raced an airplane in 1927 to deliver films of aviator Charles Lindbergh's triumphal reception in Washington, D. C., to theaters in New York. In the near future, a re-creation will show how the train beat the plane by processing the films en route. The fact that even today Amtrak's high speed Metroliners successfully race the air shuttle between New York and Washington will also be highlighted.

Visitors can also inspect the cab of the famous K4 Pacific Number 3750, one of only two survivors of more than four hundred of this class of high speed

passenger locomotive. This locomotive pulled the funeral train of President Warren G. Harding, who died in office in 1923. Visitors peering into the cab of a GG1 electric locomotive learn the importance of clean electric locomotives to urban areas today, in contrast to the pollution caused by the country's sprawling highway system.

In addition to its exhibits and rolling stock, the museum has unveiled a Young Railroaders' Discovery Center, the centerpiece of a formal

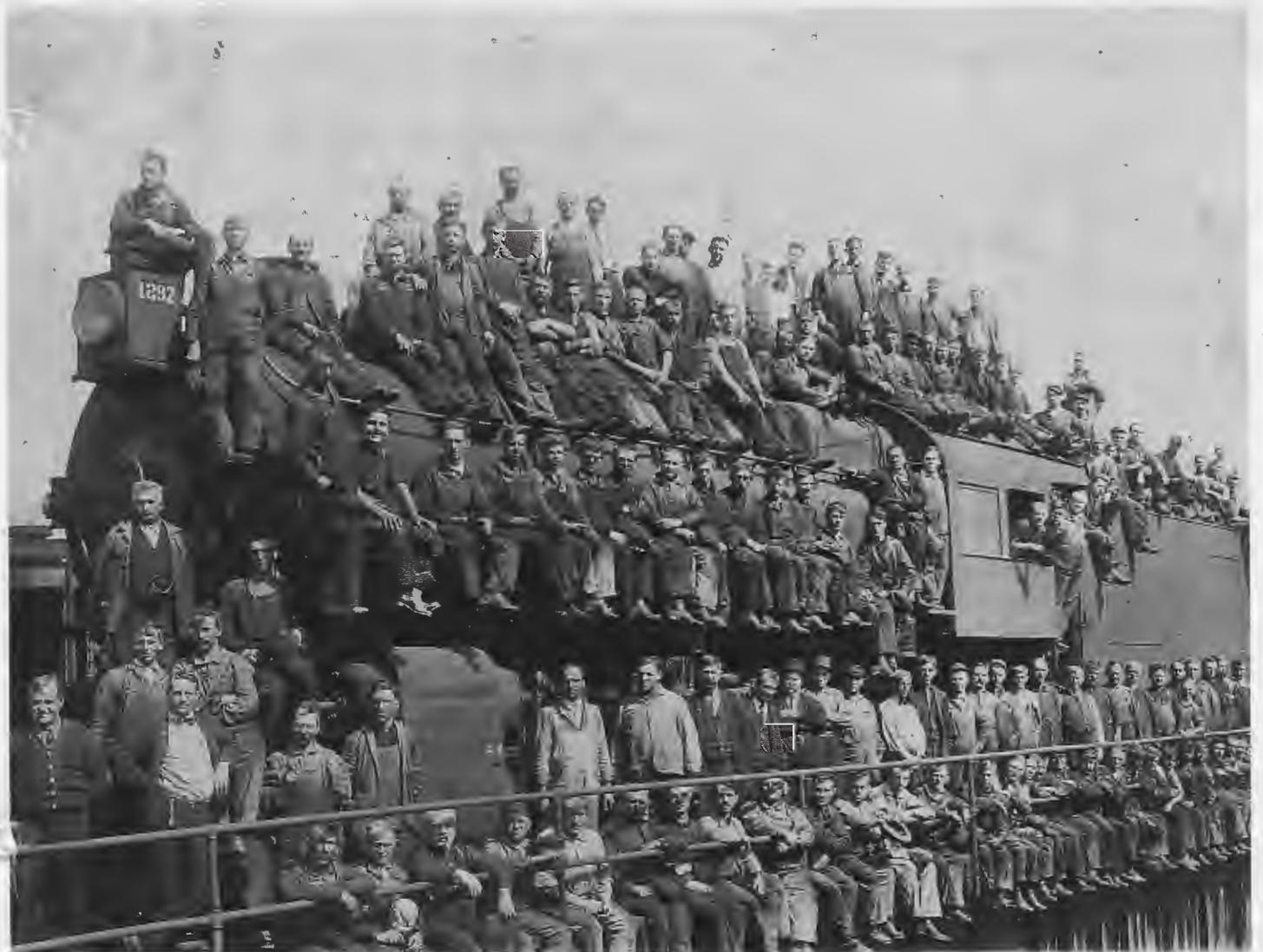
training program designed to introduce school groups and individual students to model and authentic locomotives and cars, thematic tours, period entertainment, lectures, and special projects. The center was created by the Friends of the Railroad Museum, a support organization which boasts of more than nine hundred members. To enhance its changing and permanent exhibitions, the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania conducts a number of popular programs and activities each year, including Penny Day, for fans of the old



trained and proficient docents, and from changing and permanent exhibits to videotape presentations and interactive displays. One of the most significant capabilities afforded by the recent expansion is the ability to group equipment into thematic zones in which visual stories are easily recounted. Upon entering Railroaders' Hall, for instance, visitors are literally dwarfed by a 1915 passenger train at a re-created depot. Visitors are invited into the depot, where a video describes the roles such depots played in the past.



*The Broadway Limited (left), one of the country's famous—and fastest—passenger trains. President Lincoln's funeral train (above) passes through Harrisburg in 1865. Railroads employed tens of thousands of workers, such as a Pennsylvania Railroad crew, photographed in Northumberland in 1913 (below).*





*Women and minorities undertook important chores in railroading's early days (above). Engine (below) built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works. Working replica of the John Bull (left).*



Pennsylvania Railroad; Reading Railroad Days, a weekend designed for Reading Railroad buffs; Circus Weekend, to remind visitors that the big top once traveled on special trains; and "Home for the Holidays," which recalls train trips made at Christmas.

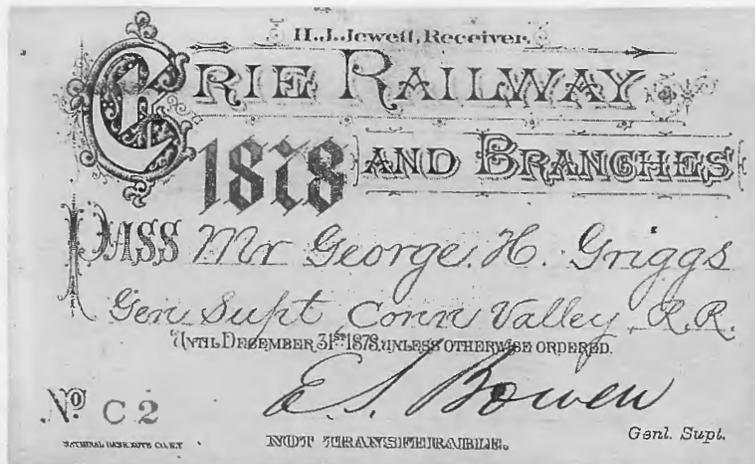
Perhaps Robert L. Emerson, director of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, best summarizes the role of the museum—and the people who help make it an educational and enjoyable experience. "We aren't a place that just preserves old relics," he says. "We are in the business of interpreting an important part of our heritage, and of thinking about the broader relationships between transportation systems and our cultural and economic lives as a whole. The magic ultimately lies in this understanding."

With a respect and a reverence for the past, the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania looks to the future with a confidence inspired by countless stories of an industry—and, yes, an era—that helped shape the Pennsylvania that residents and visitors know today. As each day dawns in Strasburg, and as the doors of the museum are opened, Emerson and his dedicated staff and group of tireless volunteers ready themselves to perform their magic. For young and old. For all or one. And, in many ways, for themselves.

Visitors who want to experience the magic can visit the Railroad Museum daily, except on certain holidays and on Mondays during the winter months. Information about the museum, as well as special activities and events, is available by writing: Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, Post Office Box 15, Strasburg, Pennsylvania 17579; or by telephoning (717) 687-8628. Admission is charged. Individuals with disabilities who need special assistance or accommodation should call the museum in advance to discuss their needs. Persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired who wish to contact a hearing person via Text Telephone may use the Pennsylvania Relay Center at (800) 654-5984.

In addition to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

administers two popular visitors attractions in Lancaster County. **Landis Valley Museum** (see "Landis Valley Museum: The Legacy of Two Brothers Lives On!" by Laura Knowles Callanan in the spring 1995 issue of *Pennsylvania Heritage*) in Lancaster, a complex of more than two dozen buildings and structures, offers a peek at the lives and work of those who settled in the region, beginning in the eighteenth century. In



Ephrata, the **Ephrata Cloister** is one of the country's earliest—and certainly most unusual—communal villages, best known today for its original music, fraktur, and books.

Lancaster County is home to a number of historic sites and museums. Located in the City of Lancaster, the **Heritage Center Museum of Lancaster County** showcases more than two centuries of fine and decorative arts, as well as furnishings, made, used, or owned by countians. Founded in 1886, the **Historical Society of Lancaster County** collects, preserves, and interprets objects and artifacts documenting the county's history. The **Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society** documents and interprets the historical background, religious beliefs and expression, culture, and genealogy of Mennonite and Amish groups originating in southeastern Pennsylvania. **Wheatland**, a particularly fine example of Federal-style architecture, was the home of President James Buchanan (1791-1868) after he returned to Lancaster upon leaving the White House in 1861. The eighteenth-century mansion of General Edward Hand (1744-1802), **Rock Ford Plantation**, is also a popular Lancaster attraction.

Other attractions in Lancaster County include the eighteenth-century

**Hans Herr House** in Willow Street; **Wright's Ferry Mansion** and the **National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors Museum**, both in Columbia; and the **Robert Fulton Birthplace** in Quarryville.

To obtain information about these historic sites and museums, as well as other attractions in the area, write:

**Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 501 Greenfield Road, Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17601; or telephone (717) 299-8901. ✚

*James Alexander Jr. is a member of the board of directors of the Friends of the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, and serves as associate editor of the organization's quarterly journal Milepost. A graduate of Middlebury College and the University of Pennsylvania, he is a government administrator. In addition to his many contributions to Milepost,*

*he has published articles in Railpace, Locomotive and Railway Preservation, and Trains, in which his account of the history of railroad turntables appeared in July.*

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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