

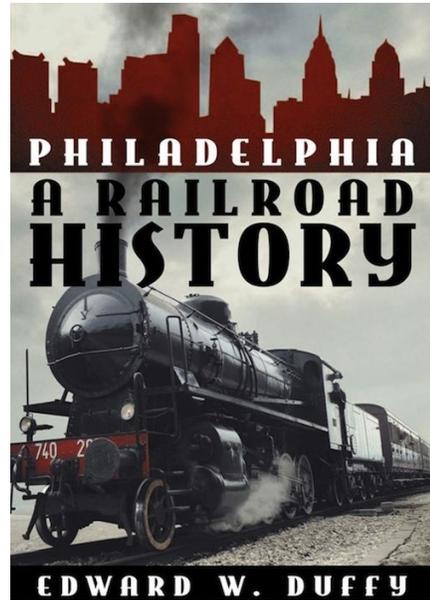
Philadelphia: A Railroad History

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Chapter 1 Excerpt

Driving north from Center City Philadelphia on Broad Street, after crossing the Vine Street Expressway and Callowhill Street, one sees an old railroad dining car on the right, incongruously parked by the sidewalk. How did it get here, and why? The answer lies in the story of what most recently has been known as the Willow and Noble Street Branch of the Reading Railroad, of which this dining car is one of only a few traces. Before railroads there were canals, and the Delaware and Schuylkill Railroad incorporates the stories of both, so this chapter will begin with an account of its earlier life as a canal.

During his lifetime and especially during his presidency, George Washington was a forceful advocate for construction of inland waterways to connect the various rivers of the settled portions of the country as a means of developing the new nation's resources. While Washington is remembered as one of our greatest political and military leaders, he thought of himself primarily as a competent, experienced architect, engineer and surveyor—that is, a “Mason.” Washington conducted voluminous correspondence offering his guidance regarding engineering projects such as construction of Philadelphia's Fort Mifflin, even during the most trying moments of the Revolutionary War, and he was universally respected for his engineering expertise. Among the prominent people that Washington convinced of the need for waterways was the Philadelphian Robert Morris (1734–1806), patriot and Revolutionary War financier. Canals were used extensively in Europe long before the American Revolution, and so it was natural that Washington's canal idea would catch on as soon as independence had been achieved and growing population and commerce required better transportation facilities.



In January 1791, a group of businessmen met to discuss various possible ideas for transportation improvements in the Philadelphia area, and from this meeting the Society for the Improvement of Roads and Inland Navigation was formed; Robert Morris was elected its president. Initially, the Society focused its energies on turnpike development, but in 1792, members of the Society formed the Delaware and Schuylkill Canal Navigation Company to construct a canal from the east bank of the Schuylkill River eastward across what was then the northern boundary of the city until the Delaware River was reached. Another canal segment was proposed along the Schuylkill River to link it with Reading by way of Norristown and with points north and west of Reading, eventually reaching the Susquehanna River in the vicinity of Columbia, Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia, in the 1790s the nation's capital and its largest city and seaport, was growing rapidly, having become the second largest English-speaking city in the world. As a result of this growth, it encountered three common problems of urbanization: mysterious epidemics, uncontrollable fires and scarcity of fuel. Development of a canal, it was hoped, could address these problems by creating a fresh, large and reliable source of water for consumption and firefighting, and by providing bituminous coal as an alternative to firewood.

The involvement of Robert Morris was fortuitous in that he owned a large estate over which he offered to create the canal's right-of-way. Now known as Lemon Hill, "The Hills" was located just north of the city in an area that had seen very little development as it had been retained by the Penn family for their own estate, "Springettsbury," which originally extended the entire distance from the Schuylkill to the Delaware. The Penns had given a portion of Springettsbury (named for William Penn's first wife, Gulielma Maria Springett) to Andrew Hamilton in 1735 in payment for his legal services, and Hamilton developed his own estate, Bush Hill, adjacent to The Hills.