THE COMING OF THE RAILROAD TO WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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WHEN at the close of the Revolution settlement began pushing westward across the Alleghenies into western Pennsylvania, it brought with it a number of problems incident to the establishment of life on a new frontier, none of which was more pressing to the new communities than that of transportation. The hardy and vigorous — if somewhat shiftless — Scotch-Irish settlers were accompanied by that great trilogy of the Scotch-Irish folk, the long rifle, the Presbyterian church, and the distillery, and some more or less convenient way of traversing the mountain ridges had to be found if the rifles were to bark, the churches to be properly served by ministers, or, of paramount importance, if the corn whiskey of the stills was to reach a market. But of even more importance in the eyes of the East was the fact that here was the great natural entrepôt and commercial center for the country that lay beyond. This was a consideration that was recog-

1 This paper, with the title “The Development of the Pennsylvania Railroad, 1845–60,” was read at Grove City on July 15, 1932, during the historical tour under the auspices of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the summer session of the University of Pittsburgh. The author was an instructor in history at the Carnegie Institute of Technology from 1930 to 1932 and is now a graduate student at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Ed.
nized from the first and one that weighed more and more heavily as the years went by. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that by 1800 a number of western firms had well-established businesses freighting, first by pack train and later by wagon, from Philadelphia and Baltimore to the Ohio River or to one of its tributaries; nor to find that in 1805 a line of stages operating on regular schedule was inaugurated to carry passengers and express from Pittsburgh to Chambersburg, there making connections with the Philadelphia and Baltimore lines; nor that in the following year a turnpike was started, roughly along the lines of the present Lincoln Highway. However much of an aid these might be, they were clearly inadequate to the demands of the region. Moreover, as the Northwest and the Ohio Valley filled up rapidly after 1812, the possession of a cheap and easy route to them from the East became not only a thing to be desired but a necessity.

By 1820 the three great cities along the central seaboard, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, each had under discussion various projects to accomplish connections that were fondly expected to make each of them the great center of western trade. Pittsburgh, the terminus of two of these projects, was by no means indifferent to their success, but as Pittsburgh was then a young and struggling community with no surplus wealth to invest, her part was largely that of an interested bystander. New York pinned her faith to the accepted method of the day, the canal, and opened it for traffic in 1827. The immediate success of the Erie Canal put spurs to the activity of the Empire State's two great rivals. They however were faced with a much more difficult topography that precluded canal construction. Pennsylvania developed the unique system of railroad, canal, and portage that constituted her public works. Baltimore in 1828 began the construction of a railroad.

The Pennsylvania Public Works, constructed as a state project, were pushed rapidly and in 1834 were opened for business along the entire route between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. This done, the state in general and Philadelphia in particular sat down to await the stream of gold that was to pour into their coffers and to free them from taxation for-

3 Sipes, Pennsylvania Railroad, 7.
evermore. Alas for their expectations—the golden stream showed a distressing tendency to flow backwards. So much so indeed that within a very few years after the completion of the works murmurs were going up all over the state about the delays, the costs, and the rigors of transportation and more particularly about the graft, inefficiency, and corruption of public ownership and operation. Especially after the panic of 1837 and after the crash of the United States Bank of Pennsylvania in 1841 had bared some of the more lurid details of state financing with regard to the public works, did the clamor grow. In 1836, when the Bank of the United States at Philadelphia had applied to the Pennsylvania legislature for a state charter, it had been forced to pay four million dollars to the public works and in addition to guarantee the payment of such call loans as the state might require in the future, before securing the charter. Therefore when the bank collapsed many felt, and with some justice, that the public improvements had been directly responsible. Finally, Pennsylvania’s first real direct tax law, that of 1839, added fuel to the flames, especially in the rural districts, and gained converts to the movement to get the state out of the transportation business. Private ownership however was out of the question and with no alternative in view the movement quieted down for the time being.

In the meantime the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, the first twelve miles of which had been opened in 1832, was pushing steadily toward its goal. Difficulties of construction, technological experimentation, recalcitrant legislatures—particularly that of Virginia—and a bitter struggle with the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Company over the right of way through the Potomac Narrows, all tended to delay its progress. But even more pressing were the difficulties of financing, which were largely solved by recourse to subscriptions of Maryland and Baltimore City bonds, mainly marketed abroad, and at one time even to the issuance of scrip. Yet in spite of all its troubles the Baltimore and Ohio

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Railroad reached Cumberland on November 5, 1842. Then it paused for breath and more money.

It was during the next few years of waiting that Philadelphia found her transportation monopoly over the western half of the state seriously threatened. While these might be years of inactivity as regards construction, it was evident that the Baltimore interests were going merrily onward with the arrangements necessary to conclude their program. In 1837 a group of Pittsburgh citizens with William Larimer, Jr., and General William Robinson, Jr., at their head had secured a charter for the construction of a railroad from Pittsburgh to Connellsville, to be built with local capital. Now, in 1843, in spite of all watchfulness, these Pittsburghers secured in the legislature the passage of an act "for the Relief of the Overseers of the Poor" in Erie County, which contained provisions granting the Pittsburgh and Connellsville Railroad the right to extend its lines southward from Connellsville. Obviously connection with the Baltimore and Ohio could be the only object. Moreover there had appeared in western Pennsylvania from time to time certain interesting persons who had spoken of the beauties and the prosperity of the region and who had hinted of the advantages that might accrue to both the beauties and the prosperity if only the blight caused by the inadequacies of the public works could somehow be removed and had mentioned casually—very casually—that the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was then in Cumberland looking for the best route to the Ohio. And to the horror of all good Pennsylvanians—or at least all good Philadelphians—the westerners showed a distressing tendency to neglect the spiritual blessings of State Pride to lust after the flesh of Economics and consequently to lend a quite ready ear. An additional stimulus was given to the agitation when Pittsburgh learned that it was not the only string in the B. and O. violin. For the legislature of Virginia was urging the choice of one of its own Ohio towns and the city of Wheeling had offered some one million dollars cash as an inducement. Finally excitement in Pittsburgh reached a fever pitch when Chief

Engineer Benjamin H. Latrobe of the Baltimore and Ohio appeared on the Youghiogheny River to conduct a series of surveys to establish the best route from Cumberland to the forks of the Ohio. Thus it is little wonder that by the summer of 1846, throughout the state the interest in railroads, which had lagged rather badly since the disasters of 1837-38, should have a renaissance.

During the summer of 1846 railroad meetings were held in various parts of the state, the most important of which was the mass meeting of Philadelphia citizens in July at which it was decided to issue an address to the people warning them of the peril and to petition the legislature for a railroad to be constructed entirely in Pennsylvania and by Pennsylvania interests. Further, since the charter granted to the Baltimore and Ohio in 1829 had expired and it was known that the company would be applying for a renewal in the legislative session of 1846-47, the meeting agreed to memorialize the legislature that it refuse the petition of the southern rival. When the legislature met it was evident that the fireworks of the session would be provided by the railroads. Bills for both projects were introduced and pressed steadily day by day. "On the floor of the two houses, in the lobby, under the dome of the Capitol, in the hotel entries, along the board walk, at boarding-houses, at all hours of the day and night the friends of one or other of the measures button-holed the members in advocacy or assailement. The contest at times became very acrimonious, and the debates teemed with adjectives of praise or denunciation." This seems somewhat of an understatement rather than an exaggeration. "Pittsburgh, of course, was strongly in favor of the Baltimore bill. She held meetings urging the passage of the act and her representatives and senators in the Legislature were its

7 Reizenstein, Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, 44, 46. An account of the surveys is in the Report upon the Surveys for the Extension of the Baltimore and Ohio Rail Road ... to Wheeling and Pittsburgh (Baltimore, 1838). Discussions on the extension of the road to the Ohio River are in the Annual Reports of the president and directors to the stockholders for the years 1837-46.

8 Proceedings of the Meeting of the Citizens of the City and County of Philadelphia in Relation to the Great Pennsylvania Rail Road ... with the Address of the Committee to the People of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1846).

warmest supporters. The City Councils also petitioned the Legislature to pass the bill... The newspapers were violent in their advocacy of the measure." Witness the following from the Pittsburgh Gazette of Saturday, February 7, 1846: "If the bill is defeated through the machinations of Philadelphia the sudden upheaving of a volcano on the Allegheny would not astonish them more than the demonstration—the moral earthquake—they will hear from some twelve or fifteen counties in this section. Nothing like it has been known for many years. The whole population seems as if animated with one impulse and it is difficult for the prudent to restrain the outbreaks of indignation at every fresh evidence of the bitter hostility of Philadelphia to our interests in this respect." On February 23 the senate defeated the Baltimore bill by an almost straight sectional vote of sixteen to fifteen, but the resulting storm was so great that three days later it reconsidered and passed the bill, seventeen ayes to thirteen noes. Indicative of the feeling while the bill awaited the action of the house, a writer in the Gazette on March 15 "urged the secession of western Pennsylvania if Baltimore was denied the right of way. The same paper invited New York business men to come to Pittsburgh as, if the bill were defeated, Pittsburgh would cease all commercial intercourse with Philadelphia."\(^{10}\) In the meantime the Pennsylvania Railroad bill was progressing with little difficulty and on April 13, 1846, received the signature of Governor Shunk, much to the disgust of the western half of the state. Having secured its passage the Philadelphia interests allowed the passage of the Baltimore bill, which was signed by the governor on April 21, but it had been amended so as to make it little more than a sop to the wounded feelings of the West. It authorized the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to build through Pennsylvania from Cumberland to Pittsburgh, but it stipulated that if the Pennsylvania Railroad Company should be incorporated and three million dollars subscribed to its capital stock and one million dollars cash paid into its treasury by July 30, 1847, and if the company should place thirty miles of roadbed under contract for construction by the same date, the Baltimore and Ohio charter should be null and void.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Clark, in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 48:6-10 (1924).

\(^{11}\) The best statement of these conditions is in Governor Francis R. Shunk’s proclamation of July 27, 1847, in Pennsylvania Archives, fourth series, 7:189-192.
This was greeted by Pittsburgh people as an attempt to keep out the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and at the same time leave Pittsburgh dependent upon the state works, but they reckoned without the determination of the Pennsylvania's new board of directors. Samuel Vaughan Merrick was elected its first president and a vigorous campaign to raise the necessary funds was begun. "The citizens throughout the State were urged to invest their capital... with the assurance of a fair return on their investment until the road was opened to Pittsburgh, when it was felt regular dividends of 8% would be paid." The really concentrated campaign, however, was in Philadelphia, where strong appeals were made to civic pride and commercial interests, and a door-to-door canvass for even single and in some instances one-half share subscriptions was made. When civic pride and eight per cent interest proved inadequate lure, the promoters turned to the device that had been the great stand-by of its rival — that is, municipal subscriptions. The first resolution calling for the subscription by the city of Philadelphia to fifty thousand shares was defeated in common council by a tie vote. The check simply made the promoters more eager and, with the election of a new council slated for the fall, they determined to carry their fight to the electorate. The Whig party, while a minority, was almost assured of victory in the city in 1846 because of the division of the opposition between the Democrats and the Know-Nothings. When the Whig ticket was announced it was realized that most of those who had voted against the railroad had not been renominated and that their places had been taken by its supporters. A straight railroad ticket, mainly Whig, was also brought out in an attempt to make it appear that the regular Whig ticket was not also a railroad ticket. The Whigs carried the election as expected and in November the new councils subscribed two and a half million dollars to the railroad and issued city bonds to that amount. This was ultimately increased to four million. Unfortunately the courts had previously forbidden such subscriptions, but in 1848 the legislature granted the required authorization retroactively. By these means the

railroad was saved and on July 7, 1847, at Harrisburg, the ground was broken for the first construction.\(^{13}\)

These evidences of good faith on the part of the promoters seem not only to have allayed the suspicions of western Pennsylvania but also to have enlisted its support as well, for in April, 1847, President Louis McLane of the Baltimore and Ohio reported to his stockholders that the Pittsburgh and Connellsville Company had swerved about and not only refused any further aid but even refused to talk business to the Baltimore and Ohio unless the latter was prepared to assume the entire responsibility of constructing the connection to Pittsburgh without the expectation of receiving any assistance whatever from Pittsburgh. Hence Wheeling was chosen as the western terminus and construction was started that summer.\(^{14}\) As a further proof of their whole-souled support, the commissioners of Allegheny County on June 4, 1848, subscribed one million dollars in county bonds to the Pennsylvania Railroad. This was a grant that had been eagerly sought when the unexpected difficulties of construction and the necessity of paying a six per cent dividend in May of 1848 from the construction account to encourage investment had strained the company’s resources to the breaking point. This grant together with the subscriptions gathered from other counties along the line, an additional subscription from Philadelphia, various private purchases of stock, and the company’s first bond issue in October, 1852, proved sufficient to construct two of the three sections of the road; and, by an arrangement with the state for the temporary use of the portage from Hollidaysburg to Johnstown, the road could be opened. On December 10, 1852, it was ready for business.\(^{15}\)

Twice a day passengers left the terminal of the state works in Philadelphia and were carried over the line of the Columbia Railroad to Lancaster, where they were transferred to the cars of the Pennsylvania


\(^{15}\) Schotter, *Pennsylvania Railroad*, 20–22, 34.
Railroad and taken over the Harrisburg, Mt. Joy and Lancaster Railroad to Harrisburg, where the middle division of the Pennsylvania Railroad took charge. At Hollidaysburg the cars were turned over to the portage railroad for transporting across the mountains, and at Johnstown the Pittsburgh division of the Pennsylvania took charge. After some twenty-five hours of travel the weary passengers reached Pittsburgh. This arrangement, however, was but temporary, for in 1854 the mountain division was completed and the Pennsylvania withdrew its support from the state works.\(^{16}\) In the spring of the same year arrangements were made with the Columbia Railroad to permit the use of Pennsylvania rolling stock from Lancaster to Philadelphia, thus eliminating the transfer that had been necessary at Lancaster.\(^{17}\) Immediately a third passenger train was added to the schedule and the time between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia was shortened amazingly. “The mail train, stopping at way stations, left Philadelphia at 7:30 A.M., and reached Pittsburgh in 17 hours; the fast line left at 1 P.M., and arrived in 13 hours; and the express left at 11 P.M., covering the distance in 15 hours.” This last, the new train, was a great departure from precedent, especially since it marked the appearance of the sleeping car. This car was crude; it was small and its berths were more in the nature of bunks than beds. Its companion, the chair car, made its bow on the line in 1855, featuring individual seats but little comfort. There were compensations, however rough the trip might be; the scenery was undoubtedly beautiful, the meals taken at various division points were supposed to be of extra quality, and the privilege of being served by the conductor in his blue coat “with brass buttons, buff vest and black pantaloons” and the brakeman in a “full gray suit, the coat being a sack with four buttons and having three side pockets on the outside and one pocket inside,” must have been a rare treat.\(^{18}\)

The success of the railroad was not without its tragedies. To a number of towns and villages along the canal and portage and especially to Columbia, Hollidaysburg, and Johnstown it meant the loss of a very

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profitable business; to many hotels and eating places it meant the loss of trade; and to many men it meant unemployment. For with the coming of the railroad the public works were doomed. With their decline came failure or financial distress to a number of firms engaged in the transporting business. Among these latter was the firm of Clarke and Thaw, of Pittsburgh, owners of a line of new and fully equipped canal packets. William Thaw, however, after he had salvaged as much from the wreck as he could, joined the forces of the enemy and became the first traffic manager for the Pennsylvania lines both east and west of Pittsburgh and later one of the vice presidents of the company.\footnote{Biographical sketch of William Thaw, a manuscript in the possession of Mrs. William Reed Thompson of Pittsburgh.}

After attempting with disastrous results to compete with the railroad during the season of 1855, the state accepted the inevitable and decided to sell the public works. Obviously the railroad could be the only purchaser and a year was spent in negotiations. Finally in May, 1857, an act was passed authorizing the sale, and on June 25 the railroad on a bid of seven and a half million dollars became the owner. It continued to operate the canal and portage through the remainder of the season of 1857 at a heavy loss and then closed them for good. The portage was dismantled and its rails were used in the construction of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, then being completed. The granite blocks on which the rails had been laid were taken to Altoona and incorporated into the new shops of the railroad.\footnote{Worthington, *Finances of Pennsylvania*, 29; Governor James Pollock’s message to the assembly in 1858, in *Pennsylvania Archives*, fourth series, 7:935; Wilson, *Pennsylvania Railroad Company*, 1:152.} Thus the state works, constructed and operated at a cost to the taxpayers of not far from twenty-five million dollars, passed out of existence, leaving the state little but the memories of an experiment in transportation conducted not wisely but too well.

The success of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the attendant interest aroused by its construction served to bring on throughout the state an acute attack of that most dangerous of maladies — railroaditis. The epidemic found Pittsburgh an exceedingly ready and willing victim. Between 1850 and 1856 the city of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County
together subscribed to various and sundry small railroads the staggering total of four and a half million dollars, exclusive of the original grant above mentioned. This sum represented the outlay of a corresponding amount of six per cent bonds which the municipalities had turned over to the railroads in question and for which they had received certificates of indebtedness bearing uniformly eight per cent. The mathematics were elemental: the citizens were to pay six per cent and receive eight per cent, a clear profit of two per cent, as well as the great advantages offered by the railroads. Unfortunately the boom came to an end as all good booms must and the county awoke to the cold fact that the six per cent that it owed was coming due with monotonous regularity while the eight per cent that was owed to it was not forthcoming.

On June 3, 1857, the commissioners of Allegheny County announced to the public that “interest on certain railway bonds of the county required a levy of taxes for their payment because the railroad had failed to meet its obligations” and that the county was responsible for the interest on the bonds of the defaulting companies. They naively concluded, as is the way of county commissioners in such matters, that a four-mill increase would not be excessive. The people, or a large part of them, however, thought otherwise, and at a mass meeting at Lafayette Hall they decided to appoint a committee to consider the best way of stopping such things before they started. The committee, headed by Thomas Williams, decided that a less obliging set of commissioners might be of some aid in the matter and so formed a county anti-tax party, which received so much support that it succeeded in carrying its slate into office. More than that, since the Democratic party, usually able to carry the county by a small but safe majority, refused to yield to the popular clamor and spoke sagely of “careful consideration,” “conservative action during depressions,” and the dangers of repudiation, the protesters found themselves thrown toward the eager arms of the new Republican party, then making its first state campaign. This situation was undoubtedly an important factor in determining the Republican victory in the county that fall.

A detailed list of these subscriptions is in Fleming, History of Pittsburgh, 2:164. See also the report of the commissioners of Allegheny County in 1857, in Burton A. Konkle, The Life and Speeches of Thomas Williams, 1:302-304 (Philadelphia, 1905).

Konkle, Thomas Williams, 1:305-331.
The new commissioners took office on the first of January, 1858, determined to carry out their campaign pledges, and they immediately refused payment on the railroad bonds. The bondholders in exasperation appeared before the courts for a mandamus requiring the commissioners to make the necessary arrangements for payment. The case was carried to the state supreme court and there decided in favor of the bondholders, although Justice Grier in his opinion stated that had the constitutionality of the subscriptions been open for a decision in the court it would have held them void. Encouraged by this opinion and by their counsel, Thomas Williams, the commissioners refused to obey the mandamus and were incarcerated in the Allegheny County jail, where they remained, still refusing to obey, “until the creditors of the county made a compromise, by which, because of a reduced rate of interest [four per cent] the principal of the bonds was finally admitted.” This had been the aim of the group and “the only thing that could be done under the circumstances and the result was a saving of over a million and a quarter dollars to the community.”

The period from 1845 to 1860 was marked throughout the state by serious political disturbances. It was a period when old political ties were breaking and new alignments were being formed. It marked the decline of the Whig party as an important factor in state affairs, the emergence of the Republican party, and the disruption of the Democratic majority that had formerly controlled the state. It was also the period when the western half of the state arose to threaten seriously the supremacy of the eastern half and made itself a force to be reckoned with in the affairs of the state. There are many factors that must be considered in attempting properly to evaluate the causes of this upheaval but of these many factors probably none was more effective and certainly none is more interesting than the battle for the Pittsburgh gateway staged by two competing railroads.

Konkle, Thomas Williams, 1:374, 380. The case was Wood v. Allegheny County, 3 Wallace Jr. Reports, 267.