The First Train over the Pennsylvania Railroad at East Liberty, December 10, 1851.

[From a photograph in the possession of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania]
"SUCCESS TO THE RAILROAD"¹

E. DOUGLAS BRANCH

Some lines of Joaquin Miller’s, brimming with the nostalgia that all lovers of history know, come to mind:

When
Adown the shining iron track
We sweep, and fields of corn flash back,
And herds of lowing steers move by,
I turn to other days, to men
Who made a pathway with their dust.

Now I want to invert that approach, to make a pathway of verbal dust back to the shining track, when the iron rails were gleaming with their pristine newness—when locomotives first ran on Pittsburgh tracks, and Pittsburgh was first linked with the East by railway.

Early in the summer of 1830 Peter Cooper’s one-cylinder masterpiece, the “Tom Thumb,” carried the proud directors of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad the thirteen miles from Baltimore to Ellicotts Mills, and

¹ An address delivered at a luncheon meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on December 10, 1936. Dr. Branch is the author of Westward; the Romance of the American Frontier (D. Appleton and Company, 1930), The Sentimental Years, 1836–1860 (D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), and other works of American history; as a research professor of history in the University of Pittsburgh he is now engaged in writing a history of transportation in western Pennsylvania. Ed.
back. But we must wait until 1851 for our "first" (we can hardly count the two locomotives built in Pittsburgh in 1835 by McClurg, Wade and Company for the Portage Railroad that carried the canal-boat stuffs from Johnstown to Hollidaysburg); and that may seem a long while. In 1804 an anonymous genius was writing to local newspapers in behalf of a double-tracked railroad for horse-drawn vehicles between Pittsburgh and the East; in 1813 Oliver Evans was prophesying that "people will travel in stages moved by steam engines, from one city to another, almost as fast as birds fly, fifteen or twenty miles an hour." The commonwealth was only tentatively committed to a public-works system involving "the construction of a railway overcoming the [Allegheny] summit by means of stationary engines or self-acting planes" when dissenting enthusiasts were urging a continuous railway across the mountains. But the Allegheny Mountain seemed too formidable a hump; no one had sure ideas of maximal railway gradients; the whole idea of locomotive railways was too new. "Before any reflecting man permits his head to be set agog with the Rail Road mania," advised a Pennsylvania editor in 1830, let him consider: if the rails are of iron, wouldn't they be in danger of breaking under the weight of the cars? For iron becomes brittle in hard freezing weather. And at the breaking up of the frost, wouldn't the foundations of the railroad become unsettled? The canal commissioners pondered such matters, and chose the established ways: "It will be found that canals are from two, to two and a half times better than railroads for the purposes required of them by Pennsylvania.... The advocates of railroads generally, have greatly over-rated their comparative value." Neville B. Craig of the Pittsburgh Gazette approved that decision and added what he thought was a practical reason: "Pennsylvania has advanced too far with her system of improvement to abandon it now, upon a mere suggestion, that rail roads are better than canals."


4 W. Hasell Wilson, Notes on the Internal Improvements of Pennsylvania, 27 (Philadelphia, 1879); Harrisburg Chronicle, quoted in Pittsburgh Gazette, February 16, 1830; Pittsburgh Gazette, December 27, 1831.
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But that "mere suggestion" was reiterated until it became a din—and by the most powerful voice in the commercial order: competition. When the Youghiogheny slackwater navigation was ceremonially opened at West Newton in 1850, one of the speakers uttered a formidable axiom worth quoting here, for it states an economic-psychological characteristic that was amply and fruitfully demonstrated in the 1840's and '50's: "It is a characteristic feature of the American character, that when one portion of her people, by extra exertion and means, place themselves in the van of improvement and progress, that portion which has been left in the rear will consent to occupy that position no longer than is necessary to enable them to combine their forces, when by this united effort they start forward with a speed which scarcely ever fails to bring them alongside, and often in advance, of all opposition."

Philadelphia once received the largest portion of the eastward-moving trade, because of Pennsylvania's priority in the construction of graded turnpikes. But the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 diverted that trade and carried with it the wealth that gave New York its commercial ascendency. And the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, opening its first thirteen miles in 1832, was pushing through obstacles of construction, of finance, of jealous legislatures, toward its goal—a terminus on the Ohio River, likely enough at Pittsburgh. Spurred on by these events, within nine years of the opening of the Erie Canal, Pennsylvania had completed its state-owned system of communication between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—that quaint, ingenious chain of canals; the Portage Railway, with its ten inclined planes over which trucks were hoisted or lowered by stationary engines, and stretches of level railway to link the planes; and, between Philadelphia and the canal basin at Columbia, a continuous railway. The system proved not a winning play in this competitive game.

The merchants' greatest objections to the Pennsylvania system were the time and tedium of the journey and the necessity of transshipments. The transporter at Pittsburgh shipped his merchandise first on a canal boat; after 104 miles he had to transfer it to the Portage Railroad; at

\[ ^5 \text{Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, November 8, 1850.} \]
\[ ^6 \text{Solomon W. Roberts, "Reminiscences of the First Railroad over the Allegheny Mountain," in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 2:370-393 (1878);} \]
\[ ^5 \text{Wilson, Notes on the Internal Improvements of Pennsylvania.} \]
the end of 36 miles replace it in a canal boat, and after 172 miles restore it to a railway which brought the merchandise to Philadelphia. Even the clever device of section-boats that made the journey by unsegmenting and rejoining their parts (like an earthworm alternately deciding and undeciding to reproduce) could not obviate these objections to a degree of competitive success. And the closing of navigation by ice in winter, the sometimes high rates of toll, the overstaffing of the system with political job-holders, and “boondoggling” in maintenance and repair, were other scallions in the shippers’ bouquet for the Pennsylvania system.

Pittsburgh, like many another town, would have launched a railway or two in the 1830’s if the high enthusiasms of 1836 had not been dashed into the cold water of 1837; the recovery from the slough of that depression was a pedestrian laboring up an ascent too steep for railroad-building. Projects—for a railway to the foot of Laurel Hill, or to Chambersburg (whence a road to Philadelphia was in successful operation in 1837); for a railway to Beaver and on to Cleveland; for aiding the Baltimore and Ohio to reach Pittsburgh, by a road from Cumberland through Connellsville and down the Youghiogheny and Monongahela valleys—were discussed often,⁷ but with the half-heartedness bred of half-empty pockets.

The Baltimore and Ohio end-o’-track was at Cumberland late in 1842. The next year adroit Pittburghers, who had obtained a charter for a Connellsville-to-Pittsburgh railway in 1837, smuggled past the watchfulness of the Philadelphia legislators permission for their prospective road to extend southward—that is, toward joining the Baltimore and Ohio. But both the finances and the full legislative authority for the Maryland road to run its trains into Pennsylvania were yet lacking. In 1846, then, the fastest passenger traffic between Pittsburgh and the East was by stagecoach or steamboat link with Chambersburg or Cumberland. The Good Intent’s “Fast Line for Philadelphia, of splendid new Troy built coaches,” left Pittsburgh daily, ascended the mountains “with six

⁷ *Daily Pittsburgh Gazette*, April 23, 1836; November 29, December 20, 1837; *Daily Advocate and Advertiser* (Pittsburgh), April 17, May 18, 21, 23, 1838; February 9, 1839.
horser and Postilion” to each stage; at Chambersburg the passengers entrained for Philadelphia, where, the advertisements wishfully stated, they would be delivered just forty-eight hours out of Pittsburgh. The “Monongahela Route” offered two daily departures of “splendid and fast running steamers” for Brownsville; there the passengers took stage-coaches for Cumberland. Freight, typically taking the canal from Pittsburgh, moved much more slowly. By 1846 only about one-fifteenth of the western commerce that found its way to the East was transmitted through the Pennsylvania Public Works. Of the rest, about half sought its market through New Orleans; most of the remainder enriched New York and Boston.

The example of the latter two cities in liberally supporting railway projects was not lost upon Pennsylvanians. As the Pittsburgh Gazette put it, “We shall place the conduct of the people of Boston and New York in the matter of their railroads upon no higher ground than an enlarged and sagacious selfishness, mere worldly wisdom—and worldly wisdom is a most excellent thing in its place—and yet we may very properly apply to it, and to its opposite, the words of Solomon: There is that giveth and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty.” In 1846 the people and the legislature of the commonwealth decided to give and to increase.

But decision upon the means was not amiably arrived at, because of an apparent conflict of sectional interests. For Pittsburgh the most expedient course would have been to beguile the Baltimore and Ohio (then flirting earnestly with Wheeling) to the Forks. Philadelphia interests naturally preferred a railway constructed entirely in Pennsylvania or at the least an arrangement leaving Pittsburgh dependent upon the state works for its eastern connection. The fireworks in the legislature were
mimicked and multiplied in town meetings and cracker-barrel arguments. Pledges of nonintercourse with Philadelphia merchants were circulated in Pittsburgh, and local business men courted popularity by publishing the fact that on their spring buying trips they planned to remain no longer in Philadelphia than was necessary to take passage for New York. At one fiery meeting in Pittsburgh a motion was put to inquire into the expediency of abolishing "the obsolete law of state treason," that the boundaries of eastern and western Pennsylvania might be "peaceably settled." One doleful publisher set up, ready for his paper when the news should come of the final defeat of the Cumberland-to-Pittsburgh project, this announcement for the shipping list: "DEPARTED, for Wheeling, Parkersburg, and Fishing Creek, the good old steamer, THE PROSPERITY, of Pittsburgh."11

But Pittsburghers were happily disappointed when the Pennsylvania Railroad, created by this legislature, proved to be no subtle cheat but a vigorous corporation determined to fulfill the letter of its charter. Construction was begun at Harrisburg on July 7, 1847. In its beginnings the Pennsylvania was carried forward by Philadelphia money for the greater part; the city councils subscribed four million dollars to the railroad. With these evidences of good faith, Allegheny County pledged one million dollars to the Pennsylvania; and Pittsburgh turned its attention to its own rail project.

This enterprise looked westward—the Ohio and Pennsylvania, chartered in 1848, a road designed to strike directly into the heart of the rich wheat region of Ohio, to pass through Mansfield, Massillon, and Alliance; making a junction with railroads already under construction in Ohio, to link Pittsburgh with Cincinnati and Cleveland; and, pointing westward again, to become one of a chain of railways joining Pittsburgh with St. Louis or Chicago. Pittsburgh had found the Ohio Canal, cutting northeastwardly across Ohio, turning the direction of western trade and travel toward Lake Erie and thence to the Erie Canal, too formidable a competitor. And the challenge of competition was ringing in another sector: Baltimore interests, not grievously perturbed by defeat in the Penn-

11 James S. Craft, Letter to Garrick Mallery (Pittsburgh, 1846).
sylvaria legislature of 1846–47, had begun the pushing of their railroad over the Alleghenies. Wheeling had pledged half a million dollars to secure the terminus and was spending a quarter of a million more in building a vast bridge over the Ohio River to attract the young railroads of central Ohio to that point of crossing. As Solomon Roberts, chief engineer of the Ohio and Pennsylvania, exhorted the men of Pittsburgh, "Shall the Iron City be the only one that makes no Iron roads? ... Let your coal and iron, the boast of Pennsylvania, and the two main springs of modern civilization, answer in the negative." 

The people, the municipal and county councils of this region, made emphatic answer. On July 4, 1849, ground was broken and construction commenced. Two years later, on July 3, 1851, the first locomotive on the road had its trial run; and on July 30 occurred the ceremonial opening of service to New Brighton. When the train carrying about four hundred invited citizens and visitors left the depot at Federal Street, Allegheny, the Gazette tells us, "Some young mad caps on horseback, urged the animals which they rode to the top of their speed, endeavoring to keep up with the iron horse, which of course quickly distanced them, and long before the outer depot was passed, they were far behind." The train stopped about ten miles down the Ohio, where a tavern was conveniently located for the guests, while the engine took on wood and water. Past the tavern a little distance, the train jogged by a number of workmen on the road; "and the honest fellows"—to quote the Gazette again—"could not restrain the feelings of pleasure they felt, at seeing the practical realization of their labors, but huzzaed loud and lustily." Then to Economy, where the devout inhabitants of that village were ready with a giant wreath to hang upon the engine; and on to New Brighton for the inevitable dinner and speeches. ... On April 8, 1853, the Ohio and Pennsylvania was completed, to Crestline. But the railroad had already more than proved its worth, not only as a carrier of Ohio wheat and dairy products and of Pennsylvania merchandise in exchange therefor, but also

12 Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, April 25, 1849; Roberts, in Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 2:390 (1878).
13 Pittsburgh Daily Gazette, July 10, 1849; February 25, 1850; Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, July 2, 4, 21, 31, 1851.
in guiding and fostering settlement. "Crowds of passengers, and car loads of freight, now crowd the road," stated an editor in 1853, "in places where a two horse coach would have starved four years ago."^{14}

That same challenge of competition which speeded the building of the Ohio and Pennsylvania was also the goad of the Pennsylvania Railroad's progress. The Baltimore and Ohio, at the beginning of the working season in 1851, was under contract for its entire length to Wheeling; from Cumberland westward five thousand men were at work on it, and twenty-two thousand tons of rails were coming over from England for it. The Erie Railroad was being rushed across New York to reach Lake Erie by that May, which achievement meant that the stockholders would receive a three million dollar bonus from the state. The arrangement of the Pennsylvania Railroad with the commonwealth to use the Portage Railroad across the Allegheny Mountain was, as the directors well knew at the beginning, only a stop-gap device. To compete with the unbroken lines north and south, nothing but an unbroken line of rail could protect or satisfy Pennsylvania. The crossing of the thirty-six miles of Portage Railroad consumed sufficient time for a complete trip between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia on a continuous railway; and the use of the inclined planes cut off entirely one of the largest prospective sources of the company's revenue, the transportation of livestock from points west of the mountains to the eastern grazing counties of the state or to the urban markets. And, as the directors of the Pennsylvania said in their annual report for 1850, "That object [a route comparable with the best of the rival routes] can never be attained, while any link, however small, shall remain under the ever-varying management incident to the incessant changes of state and local politics."

Construction work meanwhile was active on the other divisions of the Pennsylvania—between Huntington and Hollidaysburg, from Johnstown westward, and from Pittsburgh eastward. On December 10, 1851, just eighty-five years ago, the railroad ran an excursion from Pittsburgh to end-o'-track at Turtle Creek—Brinton's Station, the terminus was called—twelve miles away. Reproduced in the frontispiece is a photo-

\^{14} Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, April 9, 11, 13, October 10, 1853.
success to the railroad

graph of that train, with its distinguished cargo of mayors, members of the select and common councils of Pittsburgh and Allegheny, officers of the railroad, members of the board of trade, and the local gentry of the press. It was an auspiciously bright and warm day; the photograph shows patches of snow reflecting their brightness into the camera, but it also shows men without their greatcoats, and tykes running about in shirt-sleeves. Could one of the youngsters at the fringe of the group be the future superintendent of the Pittsburgh Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad—Andrew Carnegie?

On the next day, December 11, regularly scheduled traffic on this little stretch of the Pennsylvania Railroad began. And under way, too, was perhaps the greatest contribution of the railroad to commerce: emancipation from the tyranny of the weather. Pittsburgh, of course, had a bustling merchandising life without the railroad. Along the canal basin was a cluster of commission houses, serving the several boat lines that plodded along the Pennsylvania system. And the Monongahela bank was the rich, romantic shelf of the steamboat trade. It was a sloping wharf about two hundred feet wide, stretching for more than a mile; and along its length were dozens of drays carting merchandise; "mudsills," as the river-front roustabouts were called, tugging at crates and bags; boats arriving or departing, screaming their steam signals; tourists grouped in little tableaux of muslin, tweed, beaver hat and bonnet, portmanteau and lunch-hamper; the blacklegs (that is to say, the professional gamblers) presumably waxing their mustaches: these were pictorial facets of the valuable gem of commerce radiating from Pittsburgh—freight, produce, and so on, from the upper Monongahela and the Allegheny, from the eastern seaboard, from western farms; and, predominantly in the westward traffic, goods of Pittsburgh manufacture. Bar, sheet, and rod iron and steel; tons upon tons of nails; glassware and window glass; hollow ironware of all sorts and shapes and sizes; stoves, furnaces, safes, doorlocks, knobs and hinges; window-fastenings, patent scales, axes, hoes, shovels, mattocks, plows, wagons, carts, wheelbarrows, pleasure-carriages; stone and earthen ware; carriage springs, axles, steam engines,

15 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, December 9, 11, 1851.
and a motley of other articles, from fire bricks and manure forks to marble tombstones and "premium churns"—besides the vast trade in coal and lumber. But what price all this stuff of traffic when nature dispatched its own flagmen, the cold or the drought, to close the highways of river craft and canal craft!

The Pennsylvania system was shut down as soon as ice crusted on the canal banks. The upper Ohio was blocked to traffic, except perhaps for flatboats, for an unpredictable fourteen or fifteen weeks of the year. In 1849, for instance, the river did not rise from the low stage of summer until the first week of October; and Pittsburgh merchants became aware, to their chagrin, that while business was stagnant locally, in towns with railroad tendrils reaching into the interior country—St. Louis, Nashville, Cincinnati—business was good or brisk; in Pittsburgh one universal complaint of dullness, with every eye turned to watch the clouds; for the staple of conversation the inquiry, "When shall we have rain?" An auditing that season would probably have shown to Pittsburgh commercial interests the loss of a sum that would have built the Ohio and Pennsylvania to the state line.16 When the coal boats could not leave the Monongahela for the journey to western markets, the price of coal reached an extravagant height in Cincinnati and other towns; and in the little river villages people prayed and shivered. Employment in Pittsburgh dived and swooped in consonance with the availability or blockading of the natural highways; and because of the choking of exports and imports, the cost of breadstuffs and other foods tended to become highest when unemployment was largest.

But with the coming of the railroad, technology provided a means of escape from the implacability of the seasons. The locomotive was the steamboat that could not be stopped by weather; it was the canal boat with wings. The railway was an artificial river, perennial, always ready.

Let me quote a letter to the Pittsburgh agent of the "Mail Line," a

company that maintained mail and passenger stages from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. The letter is dated Allegheny Summit, February 22: "Dear Sir—We are running sleds on the mountains from Bedford to Laughlinstown. You can insure six passengers per day that they can get through in time. The mail is the only line via Chambersburg that has made the regular trips through the snow.—Fergus Moorhead, Road Agent for Mail Line." This letter is not a relic from the rugged times of the 1800’s. This boast that by ingenuity and effort a transport company could carry six passengers a day across the Allegheny Mountain is dated 1846—the year in which the Pennsylvania Railroad was chartered. In 1852, when the Pennsylvania was opened as a metropolitan line—when its entire rolling stock was about fifty locomotives and not over one thousand cars—in that year the road carried about fifty thousand passengers.

Before the end of the decade the Pennsylvania Railroad had taken over and practically discarded the canal and the Portage Railway. For a number of towns and villages—especially Columbia, Johnstown, and Hollidaysburg—this meant the end of a burgeoning era; and it meant financial difficulties, even failure, to a number of firms engaged in the outmoded ways of transportation. The mail coach lines also went the way of all things outspeeded. And that citadel of fellowship and forum of democracy in old Pennsylvania, the wayside tavern, also within the revolutionary decade of the 1850’s began its unhappy descent toward the present combination of gas station—sandwich counter—comfort station. But if there was picturesqueness in the outmoded, there is also romance in the new, the faster, even in the more efficient. Technological advance defeats one of its own aims if it reduces the emotional values of life and of the tools of living.

Consider that first Pennsylvania train on Pittsburgh tracks that bore its 150 proud guests to Brinton’s Station eighty-five years ago. It had a personality of its own—quirks and crotchets in its mechanism that the manufacturer could not have duplicated if he had tried. And it had a

17 Daily Commercial Journal (Pittsburgh), February 25, 1846.
name (most likely this was the "Clearfield")—in survival of the tribute that the old stagecoach proprietors commonly paid their best vehicles, just as the pack-horse drivers of a yet earlier time had tied chains of little bells on the lead horses. The three coaches we can visualize from a traveler’s description of a similar car: "It consisted of one great compartment constructed to accommodate sixty people. It was like a small church upon wheels. At either end was a door leading to a railed platform in the open air; from door to door stretched a narrow aisle, on either side of which was a row of seats, wanting only book-boards to make them look exactly like pews, each being capable of seating two reasonably sized persons. The car was so lofty that the tallest man present could promenade up and down the aisle with his hat on." We can assume that during the winter two or three seats were removed from one side to make room for a stove.

This little run from Pittsburgh to Brinton’s Station gradually extended into a through and unbroken connection of Pittsburgh with Philadelphia. From the eastward the Pennsylvania Railroad had built to Latrobe; and, from December 11, 1851, regular passenger service was in this wise: The Pittsburgh station was on Liberty Street, about a block nearer the Point than the present depot. The Express Mail Train (as it was called to distinguish it from the accommodation train that ran to Wilkinsburg, took a spin on the turntable there and came back again) left every morning at 6:30. Disembarking from the little train at Brinton’s, passengers and conductor piled into a fleet of stagecoaches to travel the twenty-eight miles over the turnpike road to Beatty’s Station (track’s end, about two miles this side of Latrobe), and there, according to the advertisements, took "the splendid new sleeping Cars of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company direct to PHILADELPHIA and BALTIMORE." Of course, nobody could sleep in the sleeping cars, and the transit was not direct. At Johnstown the Pennsylvania Railroad engines were disconnected, and the Portage Railway engines took over the cars for transportation up and down the steeplechase of inclined planes. At Hollidaysburg the cars were

picked up by the Pennsylvania Railroad again. Thence two trains daily left for Philadelphia. Genteel ladies and other folk wishing to avoid night travel stayed overnight at Hollidaysburg and took the morning train. Passengers for Philadelphia had to change at Lancaster, to the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad cars. Those for Baltimore changed to the York and Cumberland Railroad at Harrisburg. Either destination was optimistically reckoned at twenty-four hours out of Pittsburgh. After a bit of experience, the company revised the advertisements to predict a journey of twenty-eight hours.20

But on November 29, 1852, the gap between Latrobe and Brinton’s was closed, the staging finally abolished; and with it many of the vexatious delays of the Pennsylvania travel. Pittsburgh was that day connected by continuous rail with Philadelphia.21 The company celebrated the passing of the stages by reducing the fare from $11 to $9.87½. Its new schedule comprised a mail train that made all the stops, covering the span between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia in twenty-two hours; and a “Fast Line” with a twenty-hour schedule, its time so arranged to link with new railways of the West that, with one change of trains in Ohio and another at Pittsburgh, travelers who left Cincinnati at seven in the morning reached Philadelphia at ten-thirty in the evening of the next day.

Work on the Pennsylvania’s track from Hollidaysburg to Johnstown went forward steadily. In January, 1854, the great tunnel through the crest of the Allegheny Mountain was completed; and in February, trains commenced running on the new rails, leaving to the Portage Railroad with its inclined planes only starveling scraps of trade. The first eastward train on the through service left Pittsburgh on the fourteenth, hitting schedule time to the minute and prompting a local editor to exclaim, “Fifteen hours from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia ought to satisfy the fastest of this fast generation.”22 That year, 1854, was not a bright one for railroads generally, or for other businesses. Epidemics of cholera at Pittsburgh and Columbia seriously affected the travel; widespread crop fail-

20 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, December 19, 1851; March 17, 1852.
21 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, November 30, 1852.
22 Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, January 28, February 16, 1854.
ures reduced the agricultural stuffs usually offered for transportation and curtailed the return freights; a bankers' panic drove money under cover. Yet the Pennsylvania paid its stockholders their usual eight per cent—and out of current earnings. One joins the more heartily in that old toast of the sinewy builders of the track bed, "Success to the Railroad," because that success was shaped by men who found zest in adversity and a tonic in sweat.