



I HEAR THE TRAIN A'COMIN: The Darby Creek Low Grade Line

The 1909 and 1933 maps of Newtown Township both contain something that has always puzzled me – they each show a railroad running through the eastern end of the Township. The line is identified as the “Darby Creek Low Grade Line” of the Pennsylvania Railroad. I worked for a competitor, the Reading Railroad, and at one time lived in a house in Newtown whose backyard was the abandoned right of way of the “Newtown Square Branch” of the Philadelphia & Delaware County Railroad, which ran passenger and freight service to Newtown Square. I thought I was up to speed on the local railroads, but I never looked into the mystery of the “Darby Creek Low Grade Line”. But last week, meeting with an Aronimink Life neighbor at our Paper Mill House, he asked the question. And I had to admit that I didn’t know the answer. But now I do. And if you keep reading, you will too!

At the turn of the 20th century, railroads were still the “high tech” industry, growing with the country and the world, constantly

linking new places with rail lines that carried both passengers and freight. The Pennsylvania Railroad was the largest of the east coast railroads, and was run by Alexander J. Cassatt. Cassatt was knowledgeable about the “Main Line” – the name given to area surrounding the “Main Line of Public Works” of the Pennsylvania Railroad – its road from Philadelphia to Harrisburg and Pittsburgh. Cassatt and the Pennsylvania Railroad were chiefly responsible for the initial development of the Main Line as a prestigious address – giving attractive Welsh names to what had been more common ones: Athenville became Ardmore; and Humpreysville became Bryn Mawr, for example. Cassatt encouraged railroad executives to build summer homes in the area – and took his own advice, building Cheswold, his Queen Anne style villa designed by Frank Furness on 54 acres off Montgomery Avenue; and later buying the 550-acre Chesterbrook Farm to breed and train racehorses.

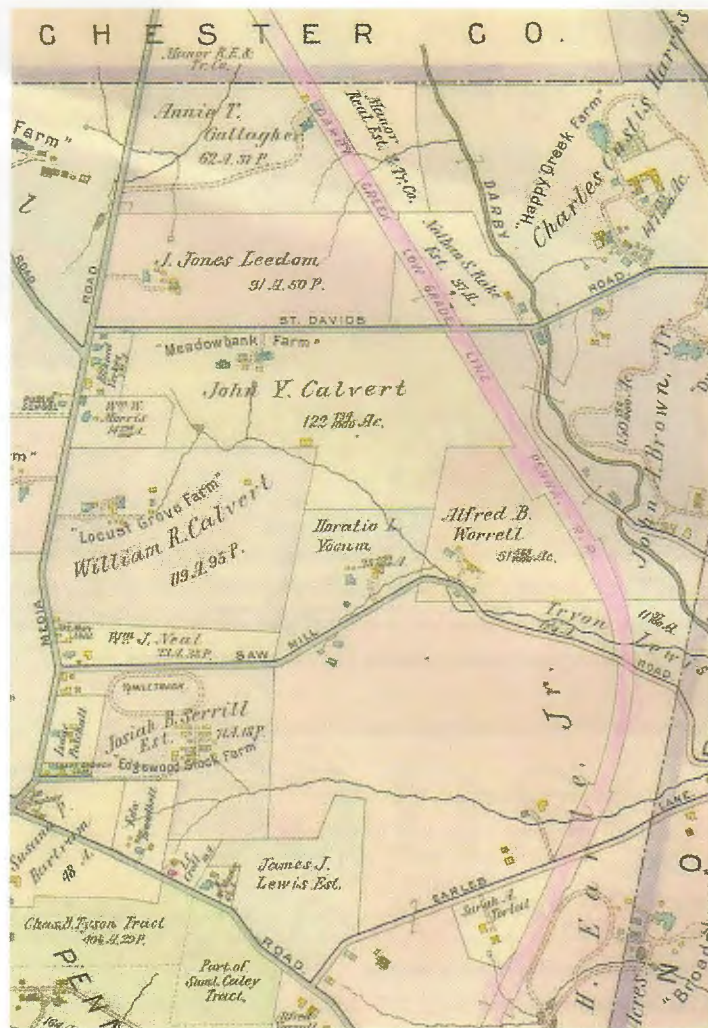
Passenger lines and freight lines don’t play well together. The whole beauty of a passenger line is that it is run on a fixed sched-

ule, and so when you need it, it is supposed to be there at the time shown on the timetable. While scheduling is important to a freight line, it is more important that it is run efficiently, and can pull 100+ freight cars filled with commodities and merchandise a long distance. Passenger cars are largely light empty boxes filled with revenue-producing passengers. Freight cars are heavy cars meant to carry coal, iron ore, sand, stone, and other commodities. Passenger cars want to go fast, and because they are relatively light, they can nimbly climb the “grades” of the hilly Pennsylvania countryside. Freight cars don’t have that same goal – speed is not as important, and when they are pulling hundreds of thousands of pounds behind them, a long, steep grade can be a difficult climb. And yet in the 19th century, both types of trains shared the same rail lines. Alexander Cassatt set out to change that situation.

In the early 1900s, the Pennsylvania Railroad began building a series of “low grade” lines, new lines that were intended to bypass both the passenger traffic and the relatively steeper grades of the existing lines in the area. The engineers surveyed the countryside for locations where they could build straighter routes with less steep climbs that would enable their freight trains to run more economically and more timely, with less strain on the equipment. Their main line through the heart of the Main Line needed that type of relief, and so an alternative route was planned: the Darby Creek Low Grade.

The line was laid out to separate from the main line at 56th Street in Philadelphia, a few blocks east of the Overbrook station. It would then run through the Overbrook neighborhood, cross into Haverford township around Earlington Road, run straight through the heart of Haverford, crossing into Marple, Radnor and then Newtown at about the intersection of Malin Road and Bryn Mawr Avenue, not far from where the Newtown Square branch already crossed at a high bridge at that same location. The new line would curve north, cutting the huge property of the Earle family in half, and then make a gentle turn, running parallel to and west of Paper Mill Road across St. David’s Road, and then leaving the township and heading west to connect back in to the Main Line at Glen Loch – near the borough of Malvern.

In 1905, the real estate arm of the Railroad, Manor Real Estate and Trust Company, began buying up the land and filing condemnation proceedings to put the line together. The low grade line was a wonderful idea for freight railroad purposes, but not quite as popular with the neighborhoods through which it was planned. The Overbrook School for the Blind objected, as did the well-to-do homeowners who had purchased the beautiful new homes in Overbrook. The going was slow – by 1915, the company had acquired about 70% of the land needed. In 1917 the country entered into World War I, and the railroads were temporarily taken over by the government for the war effort. All capital projects were put on hold. After the war, the Paoli main line was electrified, and that allowed for more efficiencies in sharing the existing four tracks of the main line. The Great Depression kept the plan on the shelf, and then World War II followed. The plans for the Darby Creek Low



Darby Creek Low Grade Line Map circa: 1909



Bridge Over Bryn Mawr Ave.

Grade were finally abandoned, and the company then began the process of selling off the real estate it had acquired.

Havertown was growing faster than Newtown in the 1920s and '30s, and so the layout of the line impacted land development there. Newtown was still largely farms and large estates, and so the impact in Newtown was negligible – the railroad was never more than simply lines on the old maps. For the curious, if your title report shows that your property was once owned by the Manor Land Company, then you would have been in the way when those big noisy freight trains came rumbling through on the Darby Creek Low Grade.