

2024 SPRING NEWSLETTER



Did You Know?

Arrival of the Pennsylvania Railroad

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

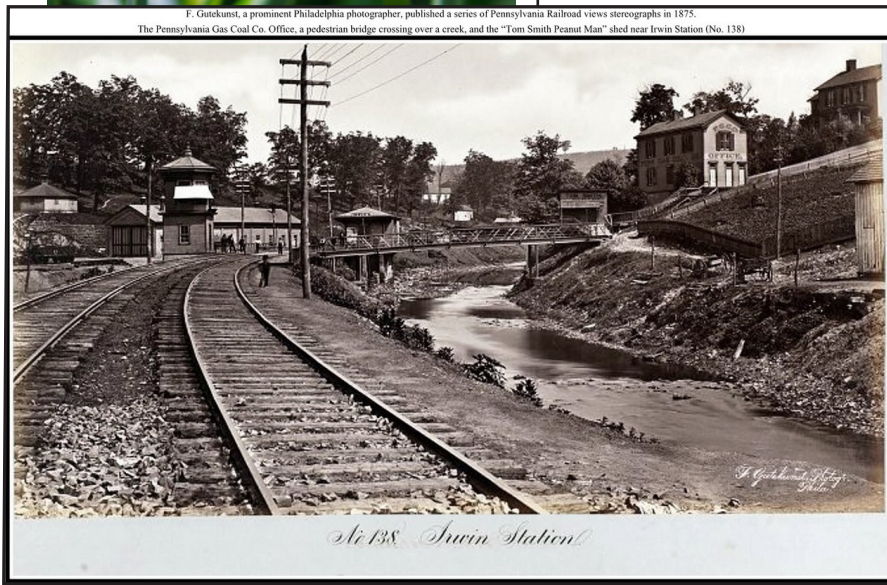
by Bob Cupp

The arrival of the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) in 1852 signaled the beginning of a new era of economic prosperity in Westmoreland County. It was the railroad that made development of the Southwestern Pennsylvania coal industry possible. Because the railroad provided the most efficient means of hauling freight, many new industries started-up along the rail line, creating a corridor for industrial development.

The PRR origin in the Irwin area was facilitated by the businessmen who had the ability to work together for this common cause. The following people have been instrumental in bringing the PRR to Irwin. Thomas A. Scott joined the PRR in 1850 and would eventually hire a 16 year old Andrew Carnegie to become his private secretary. Furthermore, when Scott and J. Edgar

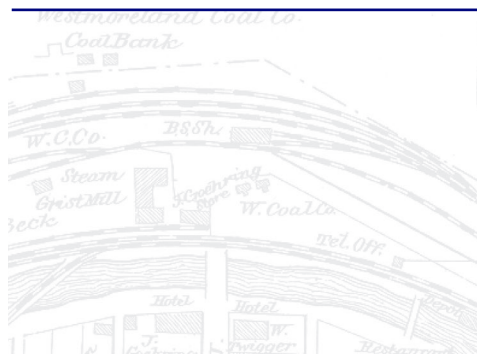
Thomson worked together each using their particular skills, the growth and financial stability of the PRR was assured. John Irwin, founder of the town in 1853, was a business associate of Thomas Scott. Their collective interest in the coal business played a role in the layout of the PRR.

Prior to construction of the PRR's main line, the area depended on two major roads for east – west transportation. The Northern Turnpike entered Westmoreland County near Blairsville and continued through New Alexandria, Salem Crossroads and Franklin Township (now Murrys ville) to Pittsburgh. Portions of the Northern Turnpike were opened for travel in 1818; it was completed in 1819. The town of Murrys ville was founded the following year.



Irwin Station 1875: This was the original Irwin PA RR Station.
It was located along Brush Creek at the Bottom of Oak St.
courtesy of the Trafford Historical Society.

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SaSalem Crossroads, later known as New Salem, and finally as Delmont, became a stagecoach stop along the Northern Turnpike. Tired, hungry travelers patronized several local inns and taverns. The large volume of freight and passengers transformed the young town into a commercial center.

About the same time, a second company built a turnpike over a more southern route through Greensburg; it was a section of the Philadelphia-Pitts-

burgh Turnpike, or Pennsylvania Road, approximating the later route of the Lincoln Highway. The "pike" was completed in 1817-18, helping Jacksonville and Stewartsville become bustling stagecoach stops in North Huntingdon.

Stagecoach passengers also sought sleeping accommodations in nearby Adamsburg. By 1825, there were more than two dozen businesses operating there along the turnpike.

The PRR Board of Directors met for the first time on March 31, 1847. One of the biggest tasks that Chief Engineer, J. Edgar Thompson, faced was selecting a route for the new railroad. Two potential routes were proposed through Westmoreland County. Both routes

followed streams through the lowlands.

One route, known as the Greensburg Route, ran along Brush Creek, north of and generally parallel to the old Philadelphia-Pittsburgh Turnpike.

The other potential route had already been surveyed in 1840. Known as the Turtle Creek Route, or sometimes the Salem Route, it was laid-out north of New Salem and through Franklin Township along Turtle Creek, roughly following the route of the Northern Turnpike.

Just as the two early turnpikes were rivals for hauling freight and passengers across the state, these two proposed rail routes were in a competition and the stakes were high. The towns along the selected route would benefit greatly from new opportunities for development.

The PRR's only source of funding came from the sale of stock and it wasn't selling as quickly as anticipated. Greensburg residents were willing to buy PRR stock, but only if the railroad was going to be built nearby. If residents on the Turtle Creek Route thought the railroad was taking the Greensburg Route, they would be less likely to purchase stock. So, it was to the PRR's advantage to delay announcement of the selected route.

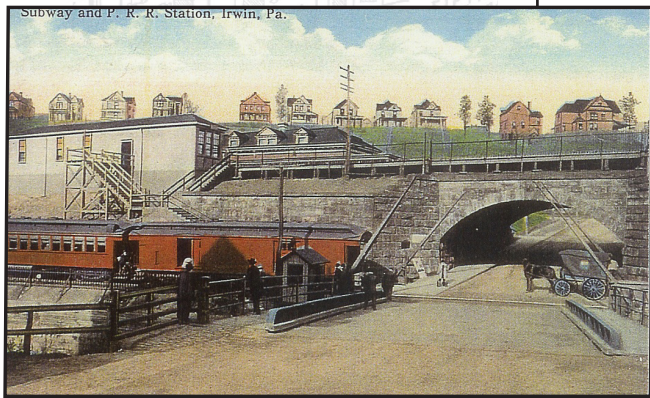
When Thompson issued a report in 1848, he spoke as if both routes were still being considered. Meanwhile, land owners in the Greensburg area were quietly being told the railroad was coming through their town.

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PRR Station looking east from a N. Irwin Hillside.





**RR Station following a great flood in 1903,
Irwin Station and the railroad tracks were elevated
to avoid future flood damage and eliminate rail crossings.
Courtesy of Jean Soyke's postcard collection.**



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Finally, in an 1849 letter to the PRR Board, Thompson described the two routes and, although 3.75 miles longer than the Turtle Creek Route, he strongly recommended the Greensburg Route. His proposal was accepted, based on the fact that the Greensburg Route would require less of a grade than the Turtle Creek Route, and construction soon began on the railroad's Westmoreland County section.

The first train reached Irwin Station from Pittsburgh on July 4, 1852. The rail cars were built in the east and transported to Pittsburgh in pieces by way of the Pennsylvania Canal. The first through train ran from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia on December 10, 1852. With wood burning locomotives, the trip initially took 20 hours. That was a major improvement over the 50 plus hours it took to make the trip by stagecoach.

Once the rail line was completed, stagecoaches and wagons were no longer fast enough for transporting passengers or cargo and, considering the time savings, rail service was much cheaper. Traffic dwindled on the turnpikes as they became, primarily, local roads that quickly fell into disrepair.

In 1855, the last stagecoach passed through New Salem. Since the PRR chose the more southern route through Greensburg and Irwin, the new period of economic growth bypassed Delmont and Murrys ville. Because the railroad was routed north of the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh Turnpike, commercial activity in the once thriving towns along that road also declined.

Irwin's first railroad station was built near the foot of Oak Street across Brush Creek, connecting the community with Pittsburgh and Greensburg. For almost a century, the town owed its industrial development and prosperity to the railroad. By 1890, Irwin had become a boom town. The population had grown to 10,000 from about 2,000 a half-century earlier. At one time, there was passenger train service to and from Pittsburgh almost every hour, making it easy for people to work, shop, or attend plays and concerts in the city.

The railroad made development of the western Pennsylvania coal industry possible. Many small mining communities grew up along the tracks, including Ardara, originally known as Carpenter's Station, Larimer, Shaf ton, Biddle, Westmoreland City and Penn. Coal was discovered in abundance in the area and spur lines were built to haul the coal to market by way of the PRR's main line.

The town of Manor was also developed along the PRR's main line. Manor Valley Railroad was built later to provide access to the coal mines between Manor and Claridge, and the railroad town prospered as new industries were developed. With the PRR bisecting the town east to west, Manor Borough, then known as Manor Station, was incorporated in 1890.

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Penn Borough was laid-out in 1859 south of the railroad by John H. Oliver and on the north side by Penn Gas Coal Co. In addition to coal mining, the American Pipe and Foundry Co. and Hockensmith Wheel & Mine Car Co. were located there.

Passing through what later became Jeannette, the railroad provided an outlet for the shipment of farm products, accelerating the growth of the area. Drilling for salt led to the discovery of natural gas. The gas could be used to fuel glass factories. The town became known as "Glass City", although H. Seiler McKee actually named it "Jeannette" after his wife.

In 1899, Jeannette became a borough and soon grew to a population of 3,000. It became a third class city in 1938. Direct rail service to all the major markets made this a favorable manufacturing location with varied products, including glass, turbo-machinery, plastics, paper products and rubber products.

It wasn't until 1891 that the upper Turtle Creek Valley began to benefit from the arrival of the railroad.

That was the year the Turtle Creek Valley Railroad opened its initial 6.5 miles from Stewart's Station (Trafford) to Murrys ville, transporting equipment and supplies to the Murrys ville gas field. Ironically, the railroad was constructed along the same Turtle Creek or Salem Route that was surveyed for the PRR a half-century earlier; it connected with the PRR's main line at what became Trafford.

Much of the property in the upper Turtle Creek Valley was farmland in the late nineteenth century when the Westmoreland Coal Co. purchased a large tract of coal property east of Murrys ville. In 1892, the rail line was extended to Newlonsburg and then to Westmoreland Coal's new Export Mine. In 1903, the Turtle Creek Valley Railroad merged with the PRR and became its Turtle Creek Valley Branch. Coal became the primary freight hauled on the new line that was eventually extended to Saltsburg.

Without the arrival of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the landscape of western Westmoreland County would be vastly different today. The same would be true if the Turtle Creek Route had been selected for the PRR's main line instead of the Greensburg Route. Few events have had a greater impact on the growth and industrial development of the region.



Irwin Train Station circa 1915

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