



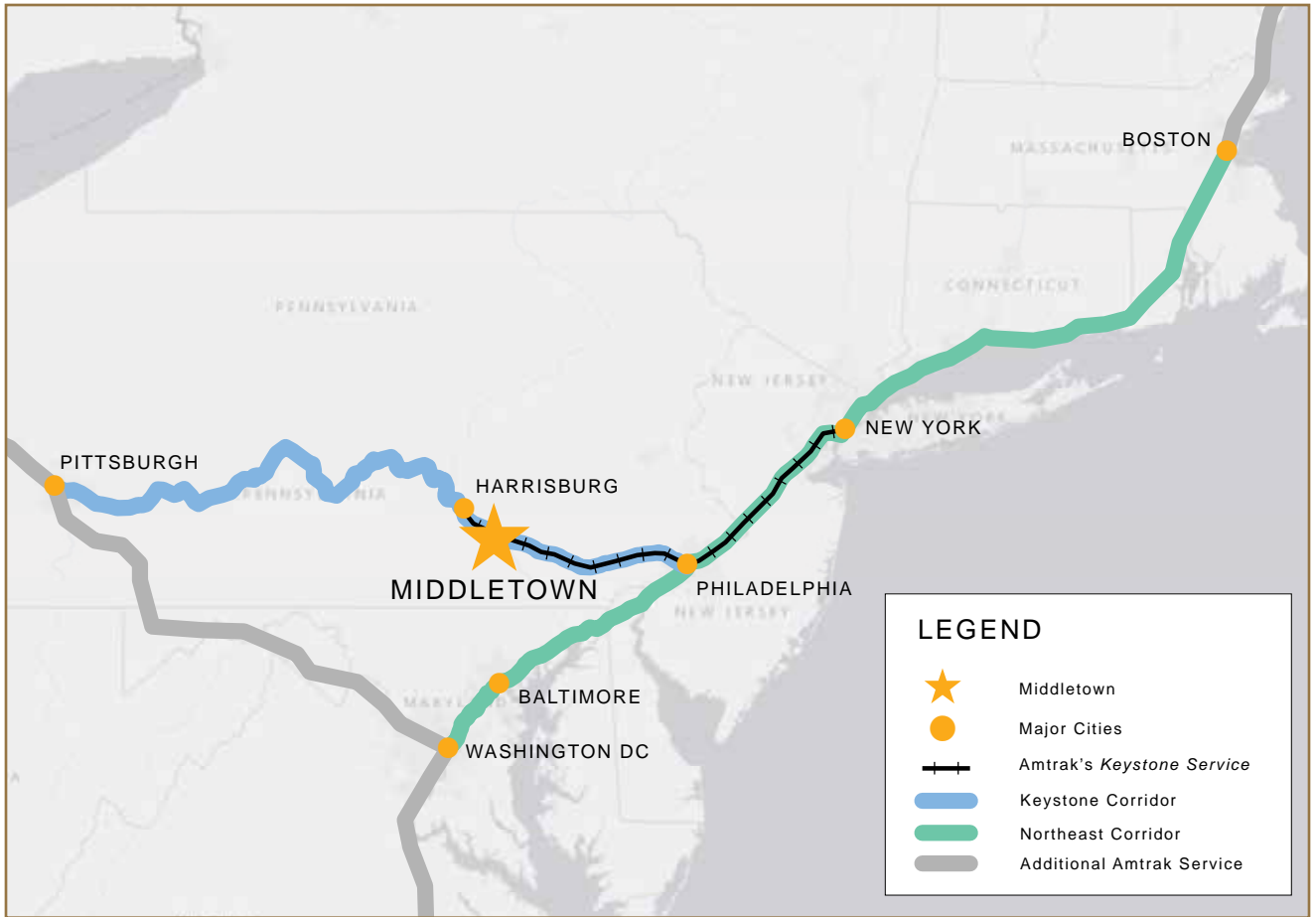
History of the Middletown Train Station





This booklet was prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) in cooperation with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to help preserve and publicize the history of Middletown Station amid Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements.

March 2021



Johnson, Mirmiran & Thompson, Inc.

▲ Map of Amtrak's Keystone Corridor as of 2020, which connects Middletown to the Northeast Corridor as well as Pittsburgh and points west.

Introduction

Middletown—settled in 1752 and incorporated as a borough in 1828—has a long history of active regional trade and passenger travel. From the earliest and roughest roads, to turnpikes, canals, and through the arrival of the railroad, citizens of Middletown and the adjacent communities of Portsmouth (now an incorporated part of Middletown) and Royalton have been on the forefront of improvements to transportation across Pennsylvania. Freight and passenger transportation leapt forward in the 1830s when the

Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy and Lancaster Railroad (HPMJ&L) arrived—first in 1836 upon the completion of the first section between Middletown and Harrisburg, with further gains two years later when the railroad was completed to Lancaster.

Although the railroad has changed hands several times in its almost 200 years of operation, it has always connected Middletown and its surrounding communities to distant markets. Middletown grew in step with the railroad as new industries and jobs

arrived. Over time as the railroad network expanded, Middletown benefited from reliable links to Pittsburgh, New York City, Baltimore, and beyond.

As of 2020, Middletown is served by Amtrak's¹ *Keystone Service*—passenger trains running on the Keystone Corridor between Harrisburg and New York City via Philadelphia. Much has changed since the railroad first came to Middletown in 1836, but one constant has been the railroad's ongoing service to Middletown's community.

¹ National Railroad Passenger Corporation doing business as Amtrak®



Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division

▲ Native American trails established a framework followed by European settlers as they gradually constructed roadways. This 1780 map shows this early transportation network.

Early Transportation

The First Routes

Long before European settlers first arrived in the territory that is modern-day Pennsylvania, the Lenape and other Native Americans established efficient trail routes to navigate the region's forests, mountains, and waterways. These complex networks of overland pathways extended from the Atlantic across Pennsylvania, and were in regular use during the Colonial Period.

The Allegheny Path was one of the primary trails out of the Delaware

Valley from Philadelphia through Paoli, past Reading, through Middletown, to Harrisburg, and beyond into Carlisle, establishing what remains one of Pennsylvania's most important transportation corridors.

Early Improvements to Major Routes

Native American trails were the framework followed by settlers, who gradually widened and smoothed out the routes. At first, travel by wagon was impossible—nothing more than

horses in single file could traverse the early roads due to the rough condition of the trails. By 1683, in order to improve upon these existing paths, Pennsylvania Governor William Markham and the colony's provincial council required colonists to either work on the construction of such roads and bridges or pay a fee to travel. These were the earliest toll roads, known then as the "King's Highways." Following the United States' independence in the late 1700s, many of these roads were in need of improvements.



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▲ Share of the “Company of the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike Road” issued March 16, 1795, signed by company president William Bingham.

The newly independent governments of states had to reevaluate the most effective means of funding these important roads.

In Pennsylvania, the solution came from private investors in Philadelphia who stood to gain from a faster and more accessible route across the state to better sell their goods. Thus emerged the nation’s first turnpike in 1795—a toll road paved with crushed stone, linking Philadelphia and Lancaster. The Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike did not extend to Middletown. However, the Lancaster, Elizabethtown, and Middletown Turnpike Company initiated construction of the Harrisburg Pike, which by

1800 connected Middletown and Lancaster by developing the existing trail between the two cities. Travelers, businesses, and villages benefitted from the improved access between Philadelphia and Harrisburg.

By 1820, other states including Ohio, New Jersey, New York, Maryland, and Delaware had followed the Pennsylvania model of privately funding turnpikes and were interconnected through a regional turnpike network.

Although turnpike travel was an improvement over the early trails, it was crowded, slow, and rugged. In an effort to speed up transportation throughout the state, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania planned a

network of canals to more efficiently move passengers and goods to larger markets and thoroughfares.

Investing in turnpikes had proven to be a profitable business venture, and the same enthusiasm that surrounded turnpikes embraced canal construction in the early 1800s. Private investment funded the work of the Schuylkill Navigation and Union Canal companies, and they began surveying and constructing canals in Pennsylvania in 1815.

Connecting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh was an important goal, but the state’s mountainous terrain made it too difficult to build a single canal across the entire state. The solu-



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▲ North entrance of the 729-foot Union Canal tunnel west of Lebanon, off PA 72.

tion was a system that used railroads where canal construction was not possible. In 1826, the Pennsylvania Legislature approved an initiative dubbed the “Main Line of Public Works” to create a cross-state route using canals and railroads to provide a more efficient connection between the state’s two largest cities, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

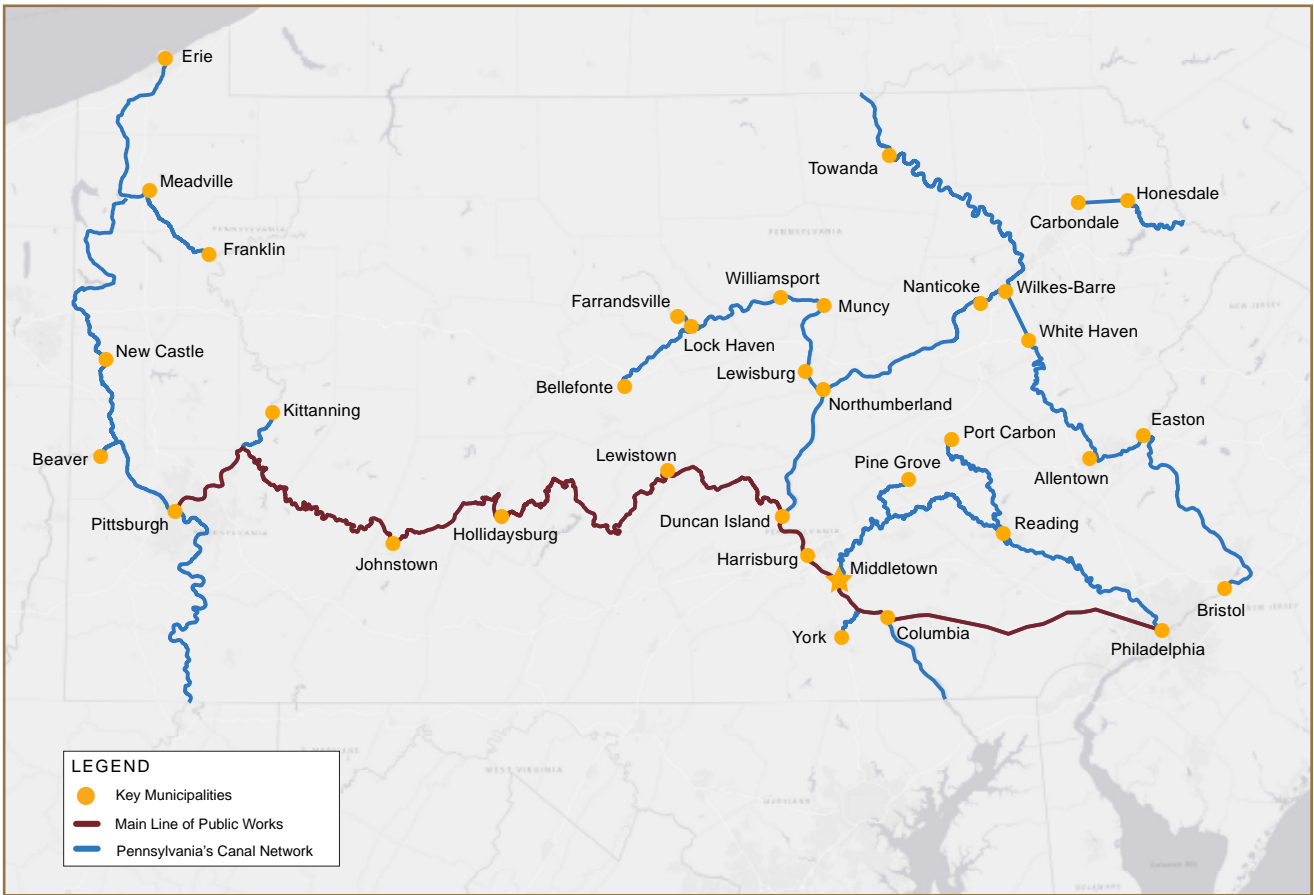
Meanwhile, the Union Canal, a private venture, was constructed in 1828. The canal began in Middletown and stretched 80 miles east along the Susquehanna River to a point at the

Schuylkill River just south of Reading. The Union Canal connected to the Schuylkill Canal and thus linked Middletown and Philadelphia. Furthermore, it was at Middletown where the Union Canal met the Pennsylvania Canal, which connected Middletown to other towns and cities further south and west.

Construction of The Main Line of Public Works was completed in 1834. The line was ultimately connected with smaller, privately-funded canals and expanded over the years with the addition of several state-funded canal

divisions to form the Pennsylvania Canal System. This system provided smoother access from agricultural and coal regions to major markets as compared to the earlier wagon trails.

The Main Line of Public Works successfully reached its goal of connecting Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, but the journey was long, slow, and complicated. Travelers and freight switched from rail cars to canal boats and back three times before reaching Pittsburgh. The canals also froze, rendering the western portions of the network useless in winter.



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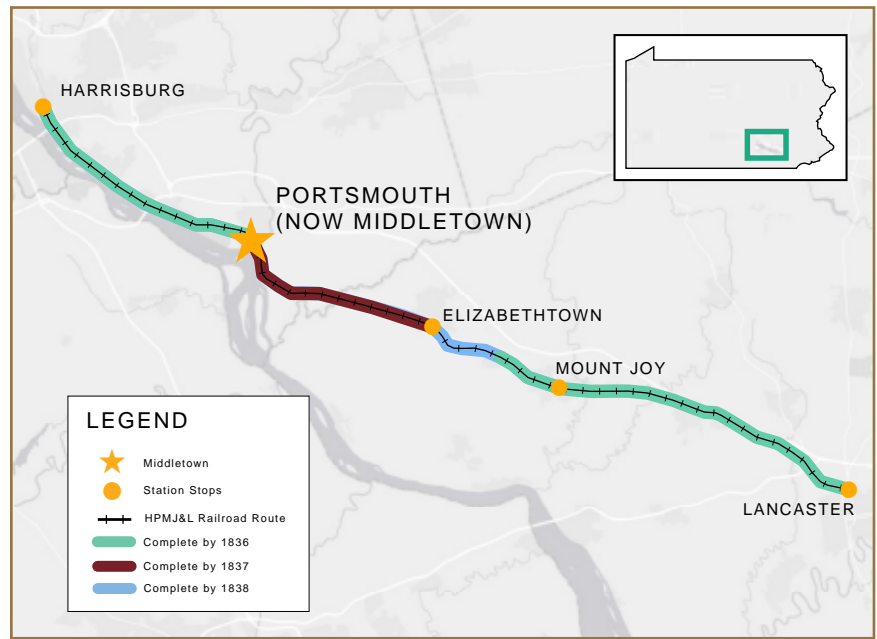
▲ By 1834, the Main Line of Public Works established a critical connection between eastern and western PA. The state continued to expand the network beyond its original extent, forming a broader canal system accessible by more remote communities to the northwest and northeast.

▼ The Main Line of Public Works—a canal-and-rail route constructed between 1826 and 1834 linking Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Freight and passengers had to transfer between rail cars and canal boats three times to cross the state, and frozen canals halted winter traffic.



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► The Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy, and Lancaster Railroad through Middletown was completed in two segments, fully opening in 1838.



Railroad Advancement and Influence in Middletown

For many years in the early 1800s, the Philadelphia–Lancaster Turnpike and the Main Line of Public Works’ Union Canal were the primary means by which the people of Middletown traveled and imported and exported their goods. Horse-drawn freight wagons would roll into town, and then leave with whatever was to be sold at market in Philadelphia or elsewhere along the journey. Similarly, canal boats of various sizes and carrying assorted goods would coast in and out of town on their way to connection points east or west. However, overall travel was still slow and unreliable even with the travel combinations of turnpikes, canals, and railroad segments.

To improve connections within the region, and to better compete with the success of New York’s Erie Canal, Pennsylvania needed a speedy and reliable system across the state. Although the Pennsylvania canals worked in tandem with the railroad for about 50 years, a statewide all-rail network would dramatically improve travel.

While the Pennsylvania Legislature focused on building a statewide all-rail network, smaller private enterprises worked to link towns with

larger urban centers throughout the state. Cross-state transportation was vital for statewide commerce and travel, but local connections were equally important to small villages and urban centers. One such private enterprise was the Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy, and Lancaster Railroad (HPMJ&L).

The Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy, and Lancaster Railroad (1832–1848)

HPMJ&L received its charter in 1832, incorporated as the Portsmouth and Lancaster Railroad Company in 1834, and in 1835 changed its name to the Harrisburg, Portsmouth, Mount Joy, and Lancaster Railroad Company. HPMJ&L’s Chief Engineer Moncure Robinson estimated that a double-track railroad could be built for \$18,000 to \$20,000 per mile in 1830s currency. By November 29, 1834, he had surveyed and located a 24.5-mile corridor for the rail line from Lancaster to Portsmouth. The following year, Robinson’s successor W. Milnor Roberts surveyed the remainder of the line from Portsmouth to Harrisburg. The cost of construction,

including buildings and locomotives, was \$850,000, or \$23,611 per mile—a total of more than \$23 million in 2020 dollars.

Construction started in August 1835, and by September 1836, Harrisburg and Middletown were connected by 9.5 miles of track. That December, an additional 15 miles of track were completed between Diller-ville (near Lancaster) and Rheems (near Mount Joy). By May 1837, 7.5 miles of track connected Middletown and Elizabethtown. By 1838, after years of hard work, Elizabethtown was connected to Rheems, and Middletown was finally connected by rail to Harrisburg, Lancaster, and beyond.

Despite its strategic location along the Susquehanna River, and therefore the Union Canal, Middletown did not yet have a railroad station. Travelers used a wood platform adjacent to the rails at Mill Street to access the trains. Even without a formal station, passengers and goods now had a faster, direct line between Lancaster and Harrisburg. Between the canal, the railroad, and the Harrisburg Pike, Middletown now had multiple ways to access Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.



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▲ The Pennsylvania Railroad Company system as of 1918.

The Pennsylvania Railroad (1848–1968)

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company (PRR), also known as the “Pennsy,” was incorporated by the Pennsylvania Legislature on April 13, 1846. Its purpose was to provide a convenient and profitable rail line between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—one that would be more efficient than the combined canal–rail system of the Main Line of Public Works. During the latter half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, the PRR expanded well beyond Pennsylvania. In addition to constructing new lines, the PRR leased or purchased smaller railroads, improving them as necessary and incorporating them into the PRR network.

On November 1, 1848, the PRR signed a leasing contract allowing it to operate the HPMJ&L. The agreement also committed the PRR to replacing all strap rail, respacing tracks for wider cars, and constructing a double-track branch to Columbia. When the PRR eventually purchased the HPMJ&L in 1857 (discussed below) and incorporated it into the PRR’s expanding rail network, the HPMJ&L

became known alternatively as the “Pennsylvania Railroad: Philadelphia–Harrisburg Main Line” (abbreviated to “the Main Line”) in reference to the Main Line of Public Works program under which it was constructed. The Main Line came to refer to the PRR’s primary route between Harrisburg, Lancaster, and Philadelphia.

In 1857, the PRR’s lobbyists gained traction with proposed legislation calling for the state to sell the Main Line of Public Works to the PRR for \$7.5 million. The fine print of that proposal stated that 1) the PRR would receive major state tax exemptions, and 2) the PRR could also purchase or lease the HPMJ&L. Selling the Main Line of Public Works was a hotly contested issue. Henry S. Mott, a PRR stockholder who disagreed with the proposed purchase, sued to block the sale of the Main Line to the PRR, and his case made it to the PA Supreme Court in June 1857. The case was unsuccessful. That month PRR President J. Edgar Thomson purchased the Main Line of Public Works at sale in Philadelphia. He made the sole bid.

In July, the PRR stockholders met to finalize the purchase, and on July 31, 1857, the PRR issued its \$7.5 million payment for the Main Line of Public Works—\$20 million in 2020 dollars.

After purchasing the Main Line, the PRR undertook several major capital improvement projects. It converted a dangerous tunnel near Elizabethtown into an open cut, accommodating larger trains. The PRR also improved some of the sharper curves along the Main Line to make travel faster and safer. The purchase resulted in the commercial benefits the PRR had long sought, providing a direct line of PRR-owned rails through which the PRR could move passengers and goods between Philadelphia and Harrisburg. This included goods produced along the Main Line, such as lumber, machine parts, and agricultural products.

By 1948, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company had obtained control, either by outright purchase, majority stock ownership, or long-term lease, over the rail lines of more than 800 smaller, separate corporations.

PRR's Middletown Station



- ▲ Photo of the Middletown Train Station, circa 1910.
- ▼ The building pictured to the left of the station was the home of the stationmaster and his family.



For the first 66 years of the railroad's operation in Middletown, passengers used an uncovered platform alongside the tracks at Mill Street.

In 1902, the Pennsylvania Railroad built the town's first railroad station, on Mill Street. It was an eclectic, rectangular, brick and stone building with Colonial Revival detailing. The hipped roof had one central brick chimney and three dormers on the front and back elevations, each with detailed pediments. The central dormers contained a pair of windows and were slightly larger than the flanking dormers, which contained single windows. A small curved eyebrow window detailed the side elevations of the roof. The roof had a moderate eave overhang with ornamental brackets. The station's skirted canopy began slightly below the cornice and was supported by large triangular brackets on three sides. Along the platform, the canopy connected to the platform shelter, which was supported by simple posts. The open-air shelter offered moderate protection to waiting travelers.

The station included a separate building in front of the station which housed the stationmaster and his family. The small frame dwelling was three bays wide and two bays deep, and the hipped roof had wide eaves and a central brick chimney.

This station served as the point of entry and departure for passengers at Middletown for 68 years until it was demolished in the 1970s.

Middletown Area Historical Society

Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania



Middletown Area Historical Society

▲ Middletown's Old Railroad Hotel on South Union Street, circa 1900.

PRR's Industrial Influence on Middletown

Middletown's economy, like that of many early Pennsylvania towns, was originally centered on agriculture. Area farmers grew wheat, which was processed into flour at local mills powered by the Susquehanna River. After the PRR purchased the HPMJ&L and the U.S. continued to industrialize, other industries arrived in the borough.

Around 1850, the Old Railroad Hotel was built near the double tracks at South Union Street. Also known as the Raymond and Kendig Hotel, it provided convenient lodging for railroad workers and travelers. Nearby at 17 East Mill Street was the D.J. Hake Rail Road Restaurant (Daniel J. Hake). The close proximity of these establishments to the railroad enabled them to cater to rail passengers as well as railroad workers.

In 1872, Cornelius Walborn launched the Pipe Mill, where workers manufactured pipes, boilers, and

tubes. In 1880, George Matheson purchased the Pipe Mill and renamed it the American Tube and Iron Company.

Middletown was also home to a number of lumberyards and sawmills,

including the Walter Kendig, John Bricker, and William Lauman Lumberyard. The borough also featured the Romberger Knitting and Hosiery Mill, built in 1898.



Middletown Area Historical Society

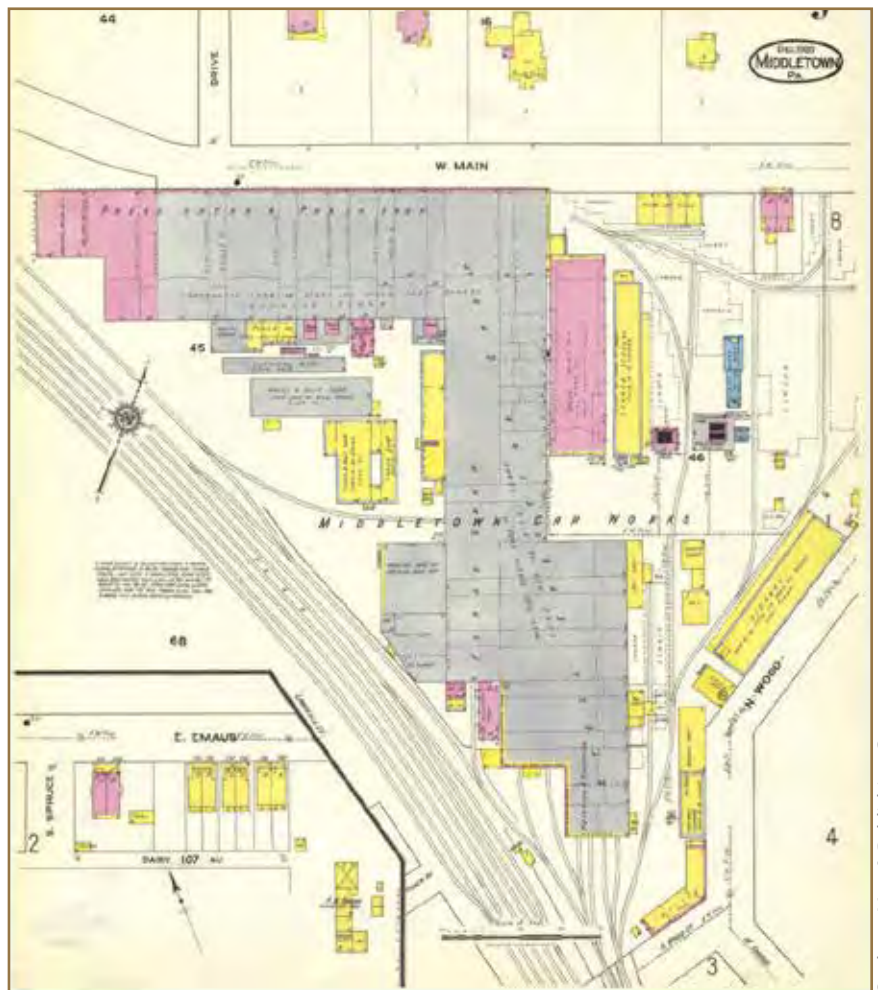
▲ Print of Middletown's American Tube and Iron Company, circa 1900.

The Middletown Car Works, founded in 1869, was one of Middletown's preeminent industrial plants. It was strategically located between Main Street and the PRR, just west of downtown Middletown. In 1904, the factory filled the largest-ever order for rail cars at that time, constructing and shipping 640 freight cars to Argentina. After it became a subsidiary of the Standard Steel Car Company in 1912, the plant went on to design and manufacture the first all-steel boxcars. In 1918–19, Middletown Car Works aided in rebuilding the French railways after World War I and shipped passenger cars in a "kit" format, assembling them locally upon arrival. By the 1920s, Middletown Car Works was producing train cars for PRR, the Reading Company, and the Norfolk and Western Railroad.

Despite the local and international business conducted by the Middletown Car Works, the Great Depression proved insurmountable, causing the company and factory to close down during the 1930s. The factory stood largely vacant, a silent reminder of Middletown's remarkable industrial history, until it was demolished in the 1960s.



Middletown Area Historical Society



Sanborn Map & Publishing Company

► Top: Middletown Car Works, circa 1905.

Bottom: Map depicting the former Middletown Car Works site, circa 1920, bounded by W. Main Street, Ann Street, and N. Wood Street.

PRR Decline, Launch of Amtrak (1968–1976)

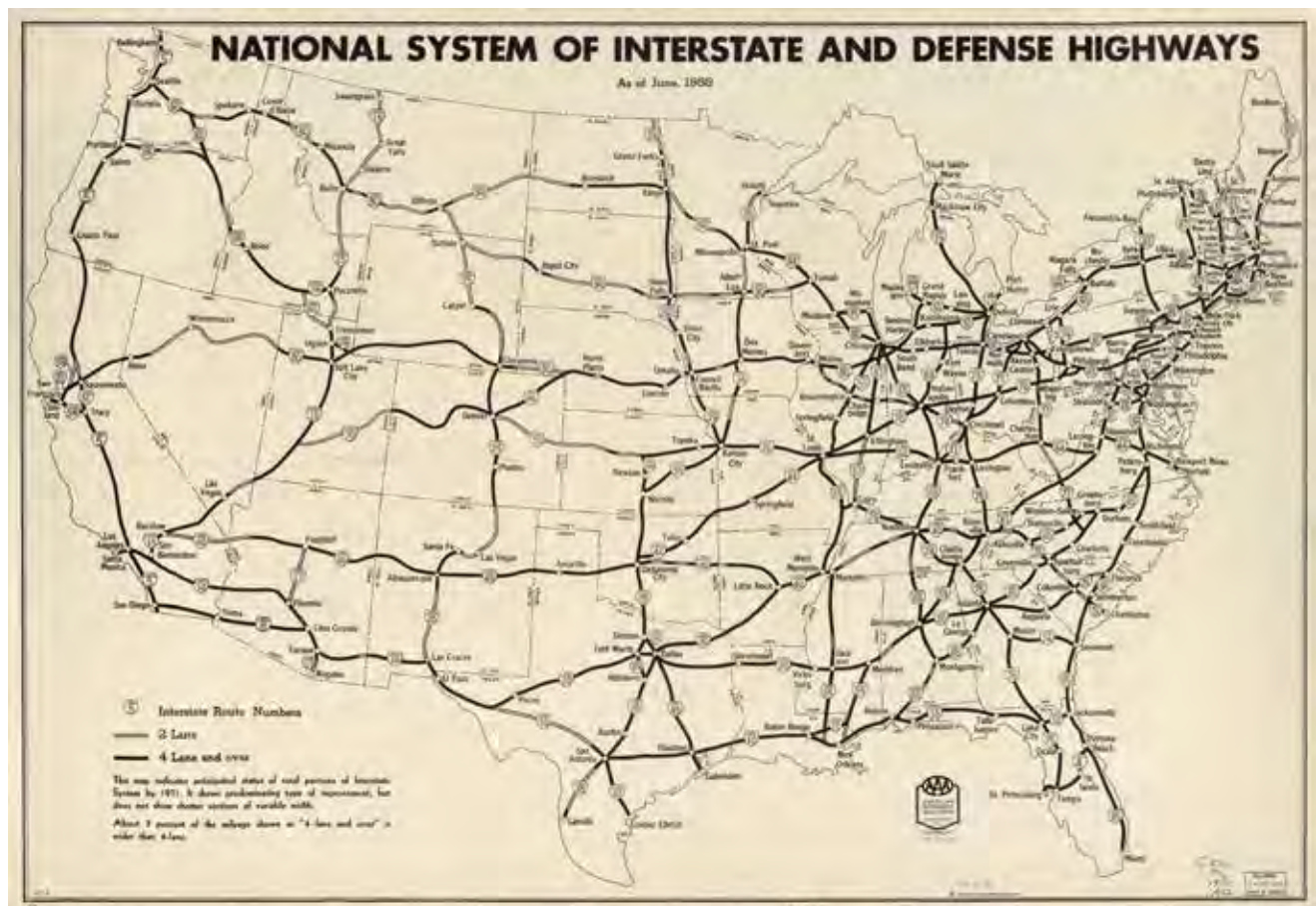
Although the Pennsylvania Railroad Company prospered during both world wars, the end of World War II marked the beginning of the end for the PRR. The emergence of the American “car culture” in the post-war period reduced revenue from passengers who previously relied on trains for general transportation. Similarly, the rise of truck transportation for freight further hindered the railroad system. Although the railroad continued transporting passengers and freight, it did so at significantly reduced capacities. The passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, which established the Interstate Highway System, transformed roadway transportation but was another blow to the PRR and all railroads.

By 1957, the PRR was aware of the problems the highway system could cause the railroad business, and it considered merging with its long-time rival, the New York Central Railroad. Eventually, in 1968, that merger went through, perhaps in a last-ditch effort by the railroads to regain better financial footing. With that merger, the PRR became the Penn Central Transportation Company (Penn Central). Unfortunately, the company's finances did not improve, and the Penn Central filed for bankruptcy in 1970.

In 1973, Congress passed the Regional Rail Reorganization Act, which requested an assessment of the rail system by the United States Railway Association. The association

recommended that a private corporation, known as the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail), be created from major portions of the Penn Central and other regional railroads. The federal government committed to investing up to \$2.1 billion in Conrail securities, which would be paid back from railroad revenues over time. When funds were fully repaid, federal involvement would cease. On April 1, 1976, Penn Central and other failing northeastern railroads relinquished all of their assets. Much of this was transferred to the new Conrail, but several passenger lines, including the Penn Central: Philadelphia–Harrisburg Main Line, were conveyed to a new entity—Amtrak.

▼ 1958 map of the proposed Interstate Highway System, envisioning the network by 1971.



► Middletown Station looking northwest, 2020. The stop is not fully accessible, requiring most passengers to climb stairs to board the train (a wheelchair lift is available).



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Amtrak Service (1976–Present)

Amtrak is a U.S. government corporation that was founded in 1971 to operate the passenger lines of some of the nation’s failing railroads, including those of the Penn Central. In 1976, Amtrak assumed ownership of the Penn Central: Philadelphia–Harrisburg Main Line through Middletown.

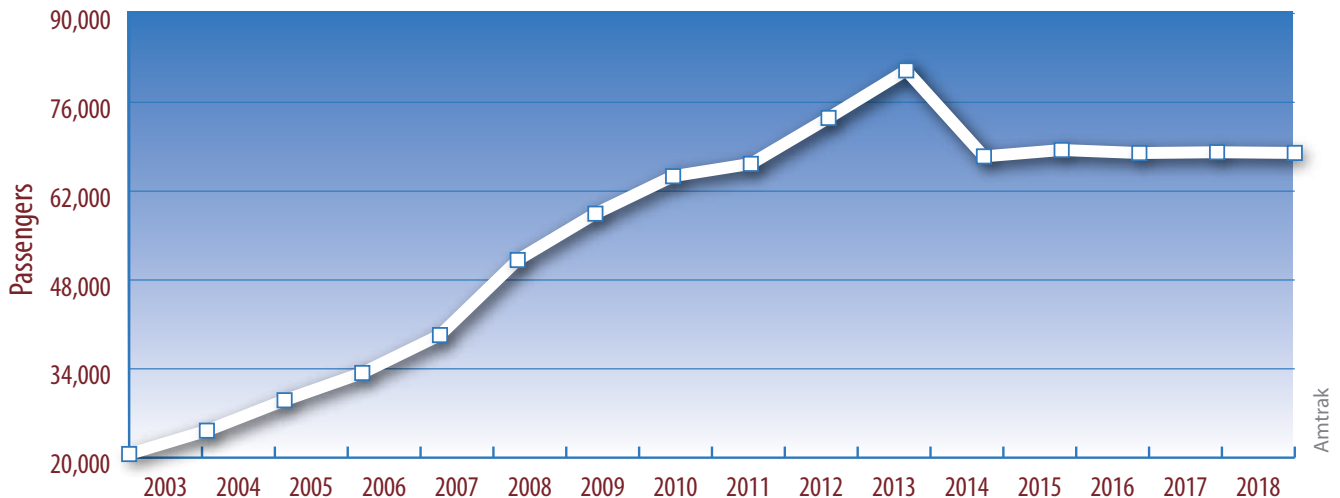
Following its takeover of the Main Line, Amtrak established the *Keystone Service*, which continues to provide daily service between New York City and Harrisburg via Philadelphia. From Middletown, passengers can access

Amtrak’s nationwide rail network.

Amtrak’s statistics show that since 1971 most passengers on the Main Line are commuters who work in Harrisburg or elsewhere along the Main Line. Most other passengers are traveling to Philadelphia or Lancaster. Between 2003 and 2018, ridership between Middletown and other locations along the Main Line tripled from approximately 20,500 riders to 68,000. Even after more than 100 years of serving Middletown, the railroad continues to support the community.

1990 Amtrak Station

In 1990 Amtrak constructed a new low-level platform and shelter at Middletown Station on the same site where the PRR station stood from 1902–1970. Unfortunately, the location has functionality and accessibility limitations. The station stop is on a curved segment of track which requires through trains to slow down, causing delay. Additionally, the ground-level boarding platforms are not ADA-compliant, and the curved track prevents construction of accessible high-level platforms at that site.



▲ Between 2003 and 2018, Amtrak ridership at Middletown more than tripled.



Sowinski Sullivan Architecture + Engineering (2)

21st Century Passenger Rail

A new, accessible station is being built at the intersection of Ann Street and W. Main Street (Route 230).

In fact, the new station and its associated parking areas are on the site of the former Middletown Car

Works factory. The industry and the property that connected Middletown to destinations around the world will again support Middletown's commuters and travelers as they ride the rails toward Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and beyond.

▲ Top: A rendering of the future Middletown Station at Ann Street and Route 230, looking west, 2020.

Bottom: Bird's eye view rendering of the new station and parking areas, 2020. Note how the shape of the station property matches that of the former Middletown Car Works (page 10).

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Acknowledgements

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