

Out with the old, in with the new

Mystery solved about how Lansdale switched train stations in 1902

By **DICK SHEARER**

One of the great rewards of historical research is stumbling upon some information that solves a long-time mystery.

A case in point is Lansdale's train station – no, make that *train stations* - and how the pieces fit together in the summer of 1902 when the present station was about to be built.

First a little background. When the North Penn Rail Road came through these parts in 1856, Lansdale was first served by a tiny shelter that was placed at the Bethlehem-Doylestown junction. It was more than sufficient because the village was comprised of merely a few homes and commercial businesses.

Within months the village began growing into a bustling town and the shelter quickly proved inadequate. A new, larger, more permanent station was built in 1857 to handle both passengers and freight.

This arrangement continued until the turn of the 20th century. During the intervening years, the village became a bor-

ough, its population grew to about 6,000 and businesses relocated here to take advantage of Lansdale's transportation links.

By 1901, plans were in the works to improve a number of stations along the old North Penn line, now run by the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. Lansdale was one of them; it would get two new stations, one for passengers the other for freight.

Needless to say, the local citizenry was elated. A fancy train station created more than a sense of civic pride, it sent out a message that this was a growing, progressive community, a good place to settle.

The plans for Lansdale's new station were indeed impressive. The railroad folks boasted that it would be the finest stop along the line, although in truth they probably made that claim in more than one town. Suffice it to say, Lansdale's new digs made the old wooden station look like a dump.

BACK IN TIME—6



ABOVE, looking north to the 1857 station. Below, the present station in its early years.



After the usual amount of bureaucratic bumbling, work began in earnest in May of 1902. One of the real mysteries had to do with location. Vintage photographs pinpoint the 1857 station on exactly the same site as the 1902 station, but until recently, we lacked certain knowledge of how the transformation took place.

Was the original station torn down before the new station was built, leaving the town without a shelter for half a year?

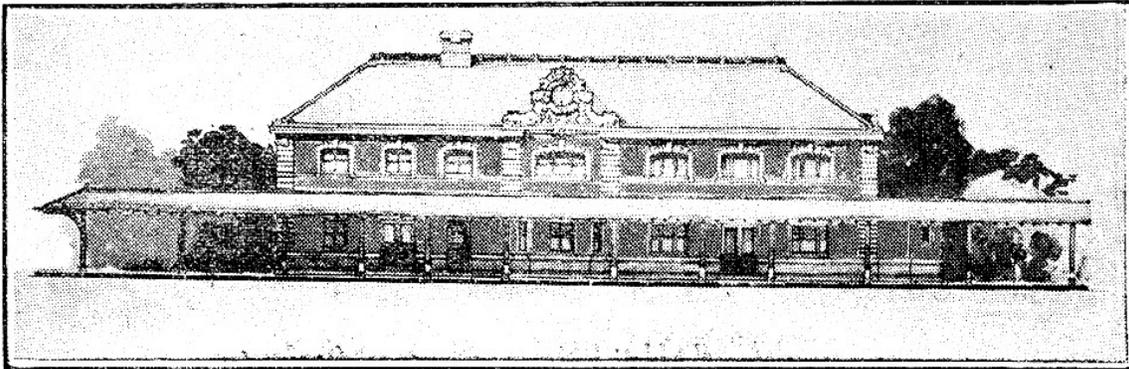
Were the photographs deceptive and were the contractors somehow able to squeeze the two buildings side-by-side until the new one was completed?

The answer was finally uncovered in a single paragraph hidden in the May 8 issue of *The Reporter*. It turns out the foundation of the old station was dug out and the building was rolled 50 feet to the south (right to the edge of Main Street) which allowed just enough room to build the new structure.

It must have required a fair amount of expertise to pull this off, considering that the old station was fairly sizable. Unfortunately, no first-person accounts were published and we've never seen a photograph of the move or the two stations side-by-side.

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LANSDALE'S PROPOSED NEW PASSENGER STATION



WEST FRONT ELEVATION--FACING TRACKS

A tale of two Lansdale train stations

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Nor do we know for sure how the old station met its demise. About a half-century ago, old-timers spread the tale that after dedication ceremony for the new station was held, the men of Lansdale organized a demolition crew to tear down the old building, chop it up and hold a community bonfire.

It makes for a good legend, but we've yet to find the proof.

AND A FOOTNOTE:

Anyone who has driven a car through Lansdale is aware of the problems caused by the rail crossings on Main and Broad streets. One of the most perplexing aspects of this traffic nightmare is the West Main crossing where motorists have to clear two sets of tracks, one for the Bethlehem branch, the other headed to Doylestown.

Back a few years before the present station was

built – say around 1900 – Lansdale's town fathers were keenly aware of the problems this rail split caused for Main Street traffic. Imagine what it was like trying to control a spooked horse caught between the two sets of tracks.

Lansdale Borough Council raised a fuss about the situation and tried to convince the railroad to move the split to the north side of Main Street and push the new station back a suitable distance.

Of course all of this was going to cost a pretty penny, and the railroad balked. Finally, the CEO of the Philadelphia and Reading came out to have a look himself.

Legend has it – but we remember seeing it somewhere in the paper – the railroad bigwig got off the train, glanced at the situation and declared that the junction would be moved “when hell freezes over”.

To date, it appears that hasn't happened since we still have two sets of tracks crossing Main Street.