

## SAVING HISTORIC LANSDALE: 4

# A TALE OF TWO STATIONS

By **DICK SHEARER**

Lansdale is blessed with a respectable number of historically-significant buildings but none is more symbolic of the town's past than the 1903 Philadelphia & Reading railroad station.

Opened to the public on Feb. 4, 1903, the venerable depot has sheltered millions of rail passengers who rode on the hundreds of thousands of trains that passed through Lansdale over the past 111 years.

The P&R station replaced a frame structure built in 1861 to handle both passengers and freight. By 1903, the town and the region had grown so much that a new depot and separate freight station were long overdue.

Residents wanted a station befitting Lansdale's status as a junction town and arguably the most important stop on the Philadelphia-to-Bethlehem route. They were not disappointed when famed architect Louis C. Hickman's plans were unveiled in April, 1902. Hickman's earlier works were featured at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Describing the new station is for the most part unnecessary because thanks to a major reconstruction

job 15 years ago, it now looks very much like it did when it opened.

Hickman's plans called for a waiting room with 19-foot ceilings, second-floor offices for the station master and station agent, a first-floor ticket counter, a smoking room for gentlemen and a separate waiting room for women and children. The covered platform would span 305 feet – the



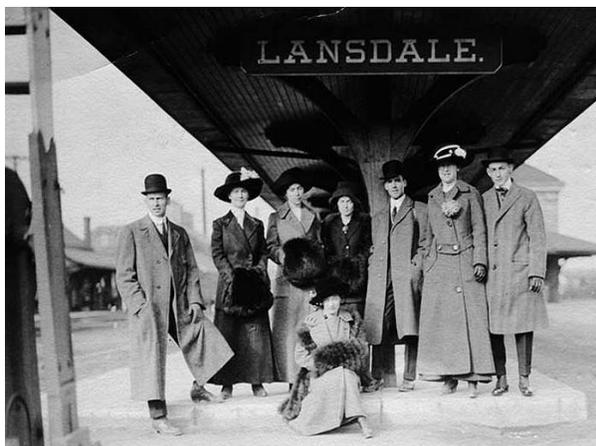
length of a football field.

With more than 80 trains a day passing through Lansdale, building a new station on the same plot as the old depot was no easy feat. First, the old station had to be jacked up and rolled up closer to Main Street to make way for the construction crews. Then the tracks to Bethlehem and Doylestown had to be reconfigured to accommodate the new structure.

Back in the railroads' heyday, it didn't take long to build a new station. Lansdale's was ready to go in about nine months – and during that period, the freight station on South Broad Street was constructed as part of a \$75,000 upgrade that also included a new tower house, signal towers, a pumping station and the track realignment.

Hundreds of Lansdale residents streamed through the depot on opening day and according to *The Reporter*, there was unanimous agreement that the P&R had constructed one fine building. The new station opened on a Thursday and by Saturday all

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# TWO RAIL STATIONS, TWO FATES

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signs of its predecessor had disappeared. The newspaper remarked that travelers who left Lansdale at the beginning of the week likely thought they got off the train at the wrong stop if they arrived back in town on Saturday.

Work immediately turned to completing the platform and as soon as spring arrived, the tract was landscaped with macadam walkways and flower beds that were tended by local gardening clubs.

Over the years, the condition of the P&R station deteriorated as cars replaced trains as the major mode of transportation. By the 1980s it was a shadow of its former self. Rotted roofs, patched doors and windows and a dated, dirty interior that in some ways defied description replaced its early splendor.

Finally in the 1990s, state legislators and the Borough of Lansdale successfully lobbied to have the depot completely renovated. The result was appropriate for one of the busiest terminals on the SEPTA commuter system.

What the station still lacks – and definitely deserves – is recognition as a National Historic Site.

## THE FREIGHT STATION

Unlike the passenger station, the freight depot has been an underappreciated step-child.

Also built in 1902, the freight station served an equally important role in the town's history because many of the goods produced by Lansdale's diversified industrial base moved through it to

Philadelphia and points around the world.

Whether it was stoves from the Abram Cox works, feed and grain from Centennial Mills, silk stockings from Dexdale Hosiery or farm implements from the Heebner Agricultural Works, their journey began at the freight station. Heebner's, in particular, benefit-



ted from the location: Its plant was just across the tracks.

While the car stunted the growth of passenger train travel, the truck eventually killed rail shipping in this region and the volume of goods moving through the station declined sharply after World War II.

Eventually it was sold by the railroad and has sat vacant for decades while developers and townspeople tried to find a use for it. A museum, community meeting hall, restaurant, farmers' market and antiques gallery were among the suggestions. But so far, nothing has materialized.

To be sure, rehabbing it will take a lot of work, but the solid stonework alone makes it worth preserving. As the station stands now, it may be the most endangered of Lansdale's historically-significant commercial buildings.