

Carroll Yesteryears  
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Train Line Brought Prosperity to New Windsor  
By Frank Batavick

Isaac Atlee, a late 18<sup>th</sup>-century real estate developer from Lancaster County, PA, founded New Windsor. The forested site then sat upon a key colonial crossroads where the Buffalo Road from Washington, DC, met the Shawan-Monocacy Road from Baltimore. From there travelers could journey northeast to York and Philadelphia or northwest to Frederick and Winchester, VA.

After Atlee laid out the town in 1797, it grew steadily, welcoming new residents and a smattering of small businesses catering to their needs. The nearby sulphur springs proved to be a magnet for visitors seeking the water's once-valued medicinal powers. But all this activity dramatically multiplied when the Western Maryland Rail Road Company came to town.

Investors originally chartered the company in 1852 as the Baltimore, Carroll, and Frederick Railroad with the aim of connecting Baltimore City with the far reaches of Washington County and its rich coal deposits. The rails reached Westminster in 1861 and New Windsor and Union Bridge in 1862 and proved instrumental in transporting troops and supplies for the Union during the Civil War.

Following heavy rains, disaster struck at 8:00 a.m. on August 5, 1863, in Elhanan Englar's meadow south of town. As the eastbound train crossed a bridge spanning Dickinson Branch Creek, masonry abutments collapsed, tumbling the wooden passenger car into the drink and leaving the locomotive astride twisted rails. Miraculously, the only casualty was the conductor, Samuel Andrews, and his injuries were not fatal. Frederick Dielman, a 16-year-old town resident, captured efforts to salvage the trains in a vivid watercolor that the Maryland Center for History and Culture in Baltimore has in its collection. Frederick went on to achieve national fame as a noted book illustrator and a muralist for such buildings as the Library of Congress and the *Washington Star* newspaper's headquarters.

The next July, a Confederate raiding party under Major Harry W. Gilmor torched the rebuilt bridge after looting the town. Residents were able to extinguish the fire.

The Civil War delayed any further expansion of the railroad until 1868, with the line finally arriving in Hagerstown in 1872. Train transportation had an explosive impact on New Windsor and helped dwarf the commerce of the "crossroads and Conestoga wagon" times of the previous 100 years. No more were muddy, rutted roads to markets an obstacle. Farmers now used easy rail access to buy seeds, equipment, and parts and ship wheat flour, cornmeal, milk, and livestock to markets much farther away. Also, shopkeepers in town began receiving merchandise faster from the big cities while offering customers the latest and finest in food, clothing, and home furnishings.

Rather than build a passenger depot, the Western Maryland Railroad opted to lease a building owned by Peter Engel & Son. It was on the south side of the lower end of Church Street, and passengers could buy tickets there, check luggage, and seek shelter from the weather.

Another plus of the railroad was summer's influx of folks from Baltimore and Washington seeking to escape city heat and smells. This further established the town and its sulphur springs as a tourist destination. The years between the 1870s and the 1920s were the heyday of the storied Dielman Inn, as well as a handful of smaller hostelryes.

A disastrous fire on a windy night in December 1875 claimed the Western Maryland depot at the foot of Church Street and destroyed two railroad cars. The fire also consumed 600 bushels of oats, 200 bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of rye, 50 barrels of flour, several tons of bran, \$250 worth of leather, \$150 worth of salt, a large lot of fertilizers, and the railroad's stationery and cash. The account books were saved. Officials speculated that sparks from the engine of the night train going east around midnight caused the blaze.

After the fire, the railroad replaced the passenger depot with a repurposed house opposite the tracks on High Street. The building still stands today and is used as a private dwelling. In 1896, when Westminster built a larger passenger depot, the old one was dismantled and moved by flatcar to the lower end of Church Street near the freight station and tool house. Its original design was altered, and a cupola added.

David P. Smelser was the railroad's agent in town, and he also owned considerable real estate abutting the tracks. He entrepreneurially built rail sidings for the canning factory and coal storage and constructed a freight shed, cattle pen, and milk stand—all with his own money. Since none of these properties was owned by the Western Maryland Railroad and had to be leased, this became a source of great wealth for Smelser and a bone of contention for the railroad.

Regardless, train whistles signaled a commercial boom for this small town that continued until the 1920s. The area along the railroad sprouted a foundry, a fertilizer factory and flour mill, a grain elevator, a cannery, a creamery and ice cream factory, and a fruit packing firm. Fairfield Farms Dairy built a milk cooling station in 1927. For the most part, these businesses weathered the Great Depression and World War II.

Since 1913, watchmen had manually operated the safety gates at the Church Street crossing. This practice continued until 1949 when 24-hour flashing light signals replaced workers.

Radical changes in mass manufacturing, new super highways, commercial trucking, and the public's preference for the automobile levied a heavy toll on railroads in the 1950s. Many local businesses couldn't compete and were shuttered. Today all that survives in the town are the concrete silos at the foot of Church Street and the Fairfield Farms Creamery building on High Street.

Because train ridership declined, the railroad ended passenger operations on this section of the line in 1957, and demolished the station in 1964 without warning and to the everlasting regret of town residents.

Mother Nature conspired to add to the railroad's troubles in 1972 when a "500-year storm" in the form of Hurricane Agnes washed out the Pennsylvania Railroad bridge over the Monocacy River, cutting off contact with Frederick. The span was rebuilt, but a 1974 storm proved even more crippling.

Today the Maryland Midland Railway, now owned by a rail conglomerate, the Genesee and Wyoming Railroad, is the successor to the Western Maryland Railroad. Freight trains and covered hoppers from the Lehigh Hanson Cement Company in Union Bridge still chug through town. Their lonely whistles are faint echoes of a rich time gone by.

*Frank Batavick is a trustee of the Historical Society of Carroll County and a member of New Windsor Heritage.*



*New Windsor gets Westminster's hand-me-down station and reconstructs it, 1896-7. (New Windsor Heritage)*



*The train station, c.1950. (New Windsor Heritage)*