

## THE WILMINGTON PASSENGER STATION 1907 – 2007 100TH ANNIVERSARY BY STEVEN SERGI

Located at the intersection of Front and French Streets, the Wilmington Passenger Station stands as a monument to a bygone era. Designed by the dynamic architect Frank Furness in 1907, it harkens back to an age when railroads (and the captains of industry who controlled them) began to transform the country into an industrial behemoth. Now in its 100th year of service, the centennial has renewed interest in the building's architectural legacy and its significance to railroading in the City of Wilmington.

Spearheading the station's centennial is the Friends of the Furness Railroad District (FFRD), a non-profit organization that aims to establish the Station and two neighboring railroad buildings (also designed by Frank Furness) as a cultural icon in the City of Wilmington.

"Here it is possible to stand and look at the range of Furness' railroad work, spanning three decades of American railroad history," said Michael J. Lewis, an eminent Furness historian and author of *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind*. "One of Wilmington's irreplaceable historical assets, it is of national significance. On the eve of the Amtrak station's centennial, the city is in a position to recognize Furness' achievement and the station which remains its most memorable gateway." The FFRD is increasing awareness of the railroad district as a place of historical and cultural significance through a series of programs and events ranging from educational curricula to student art competitions.

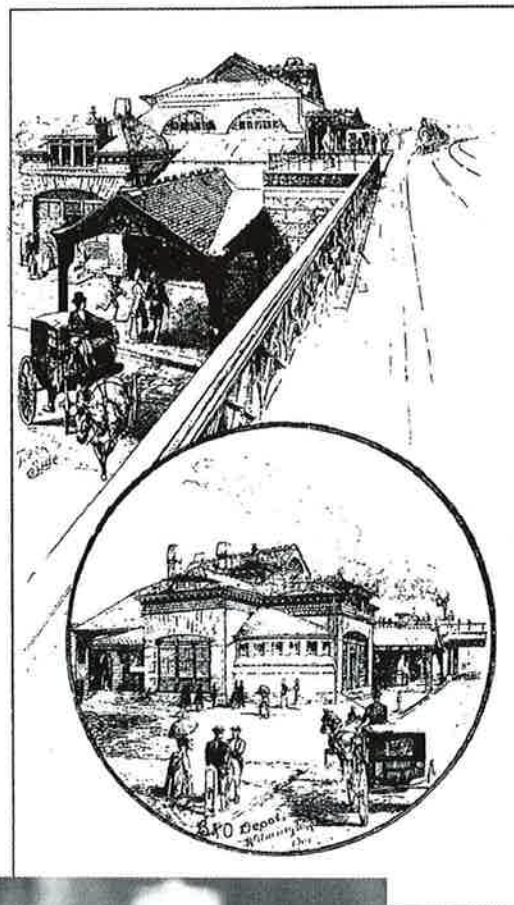
"FFRD has many passionate members and supporters who recognize the importance of raising awareness of and helping to preserve the significant historical and architectural treasure we have in the Wilmington Train Station as well as the other Furness-designed buildings," Jim Tevebaugh, FFRD president, said. "Through community events and involving students we can succeed in reaching people and educating them about Furness, his work and why it is unique and important in the City of Wilmington."

FFRD has been the force behind the 18-month celebration of the centennial, which began on January 28, 2007, marking the 100th anniversary of the first train leaving the elevated tracks. It will culminate on July 7, 2008, the 100th anniversary of the total completion of the station.

FFRD is also conducting research on railroading in Wilmington. It will be used to shape the organization's events and programs and also be used in the school curriculum. FFRD is working with an education consultant to teach Delaware students between grades 4 and 8 about the history and importance of railroading to the City of Wilmington and



Friends of  
The Furness Railroad District



Lithograph  
advertising the  
Wilmington  
B&O Depot at  
Delaware  
Avenue and  
DuPont Streets,  
1892. (Historical  
Society of Delaware)



Frank  
Furness at  
his desk,  
1880s.  
(FFRD)



the development of industrial America as a whole. The lesson plans will also include information about Furness, what makes him an eccentric architect, and why his work is important to the city. Although the centennial was the catalyst for the group, FFRD plans to continue its efforts beyond the celebration with train shows, lecture series, and station tours.

The group is also working to create a permanent museum in the station, which is slated for exterior and interior renovations. Exhibits would tell the story of railroading in Wilmington as well as the importance of the architecture and the uniqueness of the architect.

In all, Frank Furness designed four railroad structures in Wilmington. Three survive, in a largely unaltered form. The B&O Station at DuPont and Delaware Avenues went up in 1884 and served until 1958. It stood adjacent to the B&O's elevated tracks and linked a lower level terminal to the track level by a great sloping roof. Demolished in 1960, the site is now occupied by a supermarket.<sup>1</sup>

Furness designed a second B&O station for the Baltimore & Philadelphia, a subsidiary of the B&O, at Front and Water Streets in 1886. It is currently office space for ING DIRECT. A large office building, designed by Furness for the Pennsylvania Railroad, went up in 1905 to accommodate the headquarters of the PB&W Division.<sup>2</sup> This building is also now office space for ING DIRECT. In 1907, Furness' work culminated with the PRR Wilmington Station, a bustling terminus that continues to serve today. The three surviving Furness buildings, the B&O Water Street Station, the Pennsylvania Office Building, and the Wilmington Passenger Station, create the Furness Railroad District.

Furness, born in Philadelphia in 1839, is an intriguing architectural and historical figure. He studied by working with professional architects in Philadelphia and New York and fought in the Civil War. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, making him the only architect so honored.

After the war, he completed his studies and established his own firm in Philadelphia, where his talent made him one of the leading architects of his day. Furness designed hundreds of office buildings, museums, and homes, and made a specialty of designing stations for three of the country's biggest railroads: the Pennsylvania, the Reading, and the Baltimore & Ohio. Having never studied in Europe, he was recognized for a purely American style of design.

After his death in 1912, his sometimes outlandish-looking buildings fell out of favor, and many were demolished, but his influence continued to be seen in the work of his students Louis Sullivan, who designed New York City's Chrysler Building and is considered the father of the American skyscraper, and Sullivan's most famous student, Frank Lloyd Wright. Today, Furness' particular genius is again recognized, and his surviving buildings, including the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, are revered landmarks.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the City of Wilmington had reached its zenith as a major industrial center. Without a doubt, Wilmington's industrial growth relied on the railroads. The *Wilmington Every Evening* concluded as



The B&O Water Street Station.

(FFRD)



The Pennsylvania Office Building.

(FFRD)



Wilmington Station, 2007.

(FFRD)

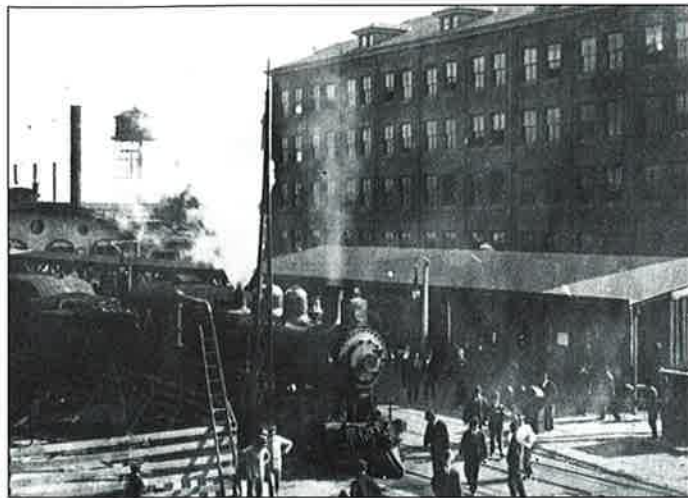
early as 1915 that "no resume of the commercial and industrial importance of Wilmington would be complete without more or less elaborate mention of its rail lines."<sup>3</sup>

Due to the many safety hazards and incidents that occurred with trains running at ground level, the new PRR station would have to carry trains overhead, in order to accommodate a new elevated viaduct. Trains would pass directly over the service floor in an acrobatic feat of engineering, the tracks being carried directly over the main waiting room on a mighty



grid of riveted beams. It would be an ambitious project, and Furness' last train station.

In the span of just five years, 1900-1905, the PRR-controlled PB&W had begun extensive modernization of Wilmington's rail lines. *Railway Age*, witnessing the construc-



Rail traffic in front of the PB&W Office Building, shortly after its completion in 1905. (Delaware Department of Transportation)



Wilmington Station connected to the Pennsylvania Office Building by a wrought iron bridge, which allowed PRR employees access to trains directly from their offices. It was dismantled in 2002. (James Tevebaugh photo)



The men's waiting room. (Ralph Lieberman)

tion first hand, described the growth of the Furness Railroad District as we know it in glowing terms: "The general scheme covers an unusual variety of work and embraces almost if not every sphere of railway engineering activity. The brick arched viaduct; the plate girders at street crossings; and now the changes of the tracks in the neighborhood of the passenger station, as well as the new passenger station and office building; all of these are splendid examples of modern engineering and architecture."<sup>4</sup>

The station included men's and women's waiting rooms, a grand staircase, unique design details in columns and stair rails, and other elements of grandeur that highlighted the beauty of the steel and brick that created the strong structure.

Today, those embarking and disembarking at Wilmington Station will find the waiting rooms closed. The boot shiners, barber shop, and smoking room are replaced by coffee shops, car rental counters and newspaper stands. One hundred years after it was constructed, passengers have been replaced by commuters. They catch the *Acela* to New York or Washington for business, never waiting more than 20 minutes for their trains.

With the impending renovations, the station will continue to be the transportation hub of the City of Wilmington and will regain some of the luxurious elements that have faded over the past 100 years.

FFRD is accepting members who support the mission, are interested in railroad history, and would like to participate in the efforts of the group. Members will receive a bi-monthly e-newsletter with updates, historical information, and plans for upcoming events. It has already sponsored a highly successful student art competition, and has created public awareness and appreciation for Frank Furness and railroading in general.

The organization is also looking to collect any photographs, biographical accounts, or other useful information regarding railroads in Wilmington. To share information, call 302-425-5500, and to become a member, visit [www.friendsoffurness.com](http://www.friendsoffurness.com) to fill out an application.

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. George E. Thomas, Jeffrey A. Cohen and Michael J. Lewis. *Frank Furness: The Complete Works*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), p.274.
2. *Railway Age*, "Pennsylvania Railroad Improvements at Wilmington," November 3, 1905, p.563.
3. *Wilmington Every Evening*, "The Pennsylvania Railroad," August 1, 1915, p.46.
4. *Railway Age*, November 3, 1905, p. 561.

#### Ten-Wheeler North

*Ten-Wheeler North, Part III*, by Jack Barclay Smith, will appear in the spring 2008 *Keystone*. We would have preferred to keep moving the story along in this issue, but space did not allow it. – Ed.