

# NEW BRUNSWICK AND TRANSPORTATION: A Brief Sketch of the History of Transportation and the Architecture of the Train Station

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**A**S LONG as anyone can remember, New Brunswick has been called the "Hub City" because of its important geographic position north of Trenton and Philadelphia, south of New York, and alongside the Raritan River. A business interest in transportation grew naturally in such a fortuitously located city. The nearby Raritan provided New Brunswick with the opportunity to build a profitable shipping industry, which it did promptly and with much success. But prosperity faded, at least temporarily, with the advent of rail travel, which was so much more efficient in transporting goods and passengers that it squelched local shipping interests. It was not until the Civil War era that the city flourished again, this time in the manufacturing industry.

The European settlers of New Brunswick realized the potential of the city's geography, and in the seventeenth century they linked East New Brunswick (present-day Highland Park) and New Brunswick proper with a passenger ferry that crossed the river.<sup>1</sup> In the eighteenth century, New Brunswick's businessmen began to ship New Jersey produce downstream to New York. The business of transportation grew at an impressive pace, and more sophisticated travel technology was developed to match its demands.<sup>2</sup> By 1801 the city had its first paved street. From 1830-1833 work crews toiled to complete the Delaware and Raritan Canal at a cost of three million dollars. The canal was one of the major engineering feats of this era.

By 1830 the New Brunswick shipyards were bustling; nearly a million bushels of grain passed through the city in that year. Aggressive foreign trade made the Raritan one of the most commercially significant rivers in the country. Steamboats plied the Raritan to and from New York four

<sup>1</sup> John P. Wall, *The City of New Brunswick, NJ* (1908; rpt. New Brunswick: Clark's Bookstore, 1979), pp. 3-14.

<sup>2</sup> Wall, p. 29.

The New Brunswick  
Railroad Station in  
the 1970s.



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times daily. The young Cornelius Vanderbilt was one of those who profited from New Brunswick's stake in the shipping business. He owned a steamboat called *The Bellonia* and a hotel by the same name.<sup>3</sup>

In 1835 the New Jersey Railroad between New Brunswick and Jersey City began service with a festive celebration:

On January 2, 1836 a new locomotive called 'The New Brunswick,' attached to thirteen cars decorated with banners bearing the names of the counties, cities and villages along the line, came down from Newark at the rate of fifteen miles an hour. The cars were filled with guests along the route. At East Brunswick they were received by Alderman Zabriskie and a committee and conveyed in carriages over the Albany Street Bridge to the

<sup>3</sup> Wall, p. 34.

Court House, where a sumptuous feast was served presided over by C. L. Hardenberg.<sup>4</sup>

If we examine these words carefully, they reveal that in 1836 there was no railroad bridge into New Brunswick; passengers had to pay 6½ cents to take a stagecoach over the existing bridge. However, by 1838, the first depot and a wooden railroad bridge had been built. At this time the railroad tracks cut across the city at ground level, intersecting some of the city's main streets at odd angles. The old depot, on George Street, was a simple two story brick building with a low pitched roof, a rustic wooden overhang and little ornament. Photographs from this time period show the building with loose shutters and peeling paint.

The opening of the canal and the new railroad proved to be a major blow to the shipping interests of New Brunswick. Formerly, farmers would sell their produce to merchants in New Brunswick's Hiram Market who would in turn transport the goods via the Raritan, fueling the shipping industry. Now, the goods were transported more cheaply, easily, and speedily by rail. Times were changing and manufacturing interests began to prosper in the city as the shipping and market business faded. After the railroad bridge was completed over the Raritan River, the Central Railroad was extended as far as Somerville by 1852.

The first railroad bridge burned in a spectacular fire in March of 1878. A temporary bridge was quickly built and replaced later with a steel bridge. That structure was in use until the elevation of the tracks was completed in 1904. At this point, the existing arched masonry bridge was constructed.<sup>5</sup> In the first few years of the twentieth century, with the new concerns of public safety, faster and more streamlined trains, pollution and traffic congestion, a plan had been made to elevate the tracks.<sup>6</sup> The old, street-level depot on George St. was abandoned in 1904 and a temporary depot was opened on the corner of Albany St. and Easton Ave. This structure was soon replaced by the Pennsylvania Railroad depot we use today.

The present New Brunswick train station, built in 1903 and 1904, does not distinguish the city as the "hub" and important center that it was in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But although New Brunswick's new station was never the largest or the fanciest on the road between

<sup>4</sup> Wall, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Wall, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Constance M. Greiff, *et alia*, *The Operating Railroad Stations of New Jersey* (Princeton: Heritage Studies, 1981), p. 131.

New York and Philadelphia, it was certainly one of the more impressive stops when it was new.

The station was designed by William H. Brown, chief engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad. The structure is nearly identical to the Chester, Pennsylvania Station, built in 1902.<sup>7</sup> The station is a fairly reserved, Georgian Revival structure faced in buff brick, arranged in a rather simple common bond pattern. A variety of materials were used in its decoration. The Ionic columns of the long, porch-like colonnade are cast iron, and they rest on brick piers. The colonnade supports a wooden entablature. The west side of the building is attached to the colossal rusticated brownstone walls which elevate the tracks. Quoins and recessed panels under the upstairs windows provide decorative interest.

One of the least formal aspects of the building is its covered colonnade, which hugs three sides of the station. The undersized columns were awkwardly placed on piers in an effort to approximate the height of the interior floor. The piers spring from the concrete of the sloping, vaguely defined plaza, and there are a few stairs which lead to the eastern doorway, but they are subordinated by the colonnade. The transition from the ground to the tracks is rather unsophisticated, perhaps partially due to the fact that elevated tracks were a new design challenge for the architects of the era. The roof of the colonnade has always been made of sheet metal; old photographs show that it originally included large skylights positioned over the windows and doors of the lower level. Over the years the north end has been enclosed and recently a glass and wooden taxi kiosk has been installed in part of the south end. The colonnade does succeed in camouflaging the substantial height of the building, which had to rise to the level of the tracks. Unceremonial though it is, the colonnade still provides a pleasant, protected and shady place for the traveller or towns person to relax or wait.

The windows are exceptionally large on the main level and slightly smaller on the upper level. The first floor windows have simple stone sills. Those on the second story are linked by a continuous horizontal stone band which runs parallel to a similar band below where the colonnade's roof joins the exterior wall. The main roof includes seven wooden pedimented dormer windows, each flanked by fluted pilasters. Two single dormers and a central, double dormer appear on the east and west sides of the building. A single dormer appears on the south side.

Each double-hung window within the dormers contains twelve rela-

<sup>7</sup> Greiff, pp. 131-135.

tively small panes of glass in a six over six configuration which follows early American precedents. The windows on the main stories are more modern in style. Their traditional upper sash contain nine panes while the lower sash are large, single panes of plate glass. This style was devised late in the Victorian era to showcase the latest technology. The large panes, widely available for the first time in history, were used in the lower sash as expensive status symbols, coveted for the unobstructed views and comparative ease of maintenance that they provided. Such windows continued to be popular until well after World War II when large panes of glass ceased to impress the public and nostalgic windows with multiple panes in both sash became fashionable. (By currently popular aesthetic standards, windows with large panes are considered unattractive and are often misinterpreted as cheap modernizations or replacements by those unfamiliar with their history.)

By far the most sophisticated detail of the original exterior was the main cornice just below the roofline. It consisted of a lower register with closely spaced dentils and an upper section with larger modillions. The wooden cornice gave the structure a strong horizontal emphasis and shadow line at the top of the facade, which balanced the heavy visual weight of the large colonnade. A flat fascia with a crown moulding and a concealed gutter ran along the top edge of the cornice. This gutter was drained by heavy leaders, probably made of copper with ornate, oversized top boxes to catch the roof water. Today a simple band of stucco and an ordinary gutter are all that exists where the old cornice was located. It is likely that portions of the cornice rotted away from years of neglect and it was easier to remove what remained than to repair it. The original slate roof of an unusually light colored stone still remains. Unfortunately, it has been patched with mismatched slates.

The original interiors remain partially intact. When the station was new, the main entrance on the center of Albany Street facade led into a large, well-lighted, open space. Today, the main entrance is on the south side at the foot of Easton Avenue. In the past this was a secondary entrance. At present this space has been divided up; many details still survive. The recessed window moldings, the high wainscoting of raised wooden panels and the high ceilings with their ornate classical cornices of plaster all remain at least partially intact.

Originally the ticket counter was under the stairs and to the right as one entered the station. The counter was remodelled in the 1940's and large plate glass windows were installed. Streamlined letters which spelled out "Tickets" stood dramatically on top of a molding which juttred out

over the expanse of glass. During the 1970's all but the ticket windows of this once high-style counter was boarded over with plywood and the sign disappeared. A much smaller, older wooden sign which said "New Brunswick" was found in the building and hung in its place in 1978.

The upper level is accessed from inside by the single interior staircase. Originally the stairs had large colonial style balusters and a heavy handrail which curved up elegantly where it joined the oversized newel posts and at the midway landing area.

The upstairs consists basically of a waiting room opening onto the train platform, and the floor is level with the railroad tracks. This room was built with a heavy plaster cornice of a much simpler design than the one on the main floor and an unusual ceiling open to the underside of the hipped roof. Over the years a series of renovations took place. The original panelled wainscot was replaced with imitation wood veneer, and the cornice and raised ceiling were hidden by an acoustical tile dropped ceiling. It was probably at this point that the dormer windows were boarded up.

The original platforms had wooden shed roofs consisting of ornately cut and trimmed rafters and supported by slender cast iron Doric columns. The west-bound platform is connected to the station by the brick, barrel-vaulted pedestrian tunnel adjacent to the larger rusticated rubble-stone vault which allows vehicular traffic to pass under the tracks at Easton Avenue.

The station was built with a central steam heating system. Heat was distributed throughout the main building by ornate cast-iron radiators. The west-bound platform had a small wooden waiting room which was heated only by a coal stove until well after World War II.

Throughout the station the original architectural quality millwork, fittings and fixtures were insensitively replaced with mismatched institutional equipment. One noteworthy exception to this unfortunate trend is the series of heavy oak benches which have survived from the early days in the upper waiting room. But, alas, some have been painted a dusty rose.

By 1954 the train station had deteriorated to the point that New Brunswick found it necessary to complain to the Pennsylvania Railroad. The awkwardly long flight of stairs to the tracks and the decaying wooden platforms were among the major problems; modernization of the outdated station was demanded.<sup>8</sup> In 1956, after continued complaints and lengthy

<sup>8</sup> "Showdown between Pennsy and City nearing at last," *New Brunswick Sunday Times*, March 7, 1954, n.p.

negotiations between the city and the railroad, the outer half of the staircase and the handrail were removed and a modern Otis escalator was installed. On May 31st of that year, two beaming local women were the first passengers on the new escalator. They posed for photographers as they effortlessly glided up to the waiting room.<sup>9</sup> The escalator could have been inserted against the west wall of the station, leaving the outer half of the stairs and the elegant rail intact. It is unfortunate, but typical, that the designers of this modernization were totally insensitive to the architectural integrity of this landmark when making "improvements."

As the public began to voice the need to renovate and maintain the train station, the city explored new ideas in urban planning. Their decisions would affect not only the number of users of the station but also the entire downtown neighborhood. In order to accommodate those commuters who had cars, a second station opened at Jersey Avenue in 1962. This maneuver enabled commuters to park conveniently, bypass downtown congestion and the old station and freed up parking and traffic downtown. Unfortunately this shift away from downtown had a negative effect on the local businesses which relied on commuters for their income.<sup>10</sup>

In 1966 local planners voiced their desire for a stop in New Brunswick along the new high-speed New York-Washington D.C. route. The stop would eliminate the need for local commuters to go to New York to catch the Washington train. It was also expected to have a lucrative effect on the professional and office rental market.<sup>11</sup> This stop was eventually put into place at the downtown station after the city made plans for additional downtown parking. This service has been heavily reduced, but still continues today.

By the 1970's the renovations of the fifties had worn out. The escalator started to break down by the late sixties and intermittent repairs to it never succeeded. In 1976 the students of Cook College undertook a facelift project for the station which included new signs for the station and the refurbishing of the plaza in front of the station. Square wooden planters incorporating benches and trees were placed in the macadamized plaza. The new signs designed by the students were never installed.<sup>12</sup> In 1978 a rehabilitation plan was announced for the station. Nearly \$115,000 was

<sup>9</sup> "Escalator at New Brunswick Railroad Station goes into Use," *The Daily Home News*, June 1, 1956, n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Wilton Berte, "Merchants Oppose New Station," *Sunday Home News*, May 6, 1962, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Soda, "City Gathers Steam, Toots Whistle for Rail Stop," *The Home News*, October 2, 1966, n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Ted Serrill, "Facelift for Train Station," *The Home News*, December 7, 1976, n.p.

allocated to upgrade the mechanical systems and appearance of the station.<sup>13</sup> An air conditioning system was installed but no plans were made to fix the escalator. Although Otis had installed the escalator, they would only repair it if they were paid to dismantle and examine it. The city and railroad were unable to reach an agreement with Otis and the estimated cost of replacement was too high. The escalator which the commuters of the 1950's had fought so hard for remained frozen.

Soon after these repairs were completed disaster struck the station. In 1980 a fire on the main floor did over \$100,000 worth of damage to the station, destroying windows, ceilings, wiring and the newspaper stand, along with the newspaper vendor's business.<sup>14</sup> Repairs were once again made to the space. At about this time an agreement was finally reached with the Otis Escalator Company. The escalator was disassembled, cleaned and rebuilt with specially made parts. In 1981, after more than a decade of disrepair, the escalator finally began rolling again, to the pleasant surprise of the commuters.<sup>15</sup>

By the 1980's the station was serving over 3000 commuters daily, more than it had during any time in the past. With the growing interest in historical preservation and the increased importance of the station, it was time for further upgrading. In 1981 an historical survey of all operating railroad stations in the state was prepared for New Jersey Transit. This survey included a detailed description of the New Brunswick Station which acknowledged its importance as an historic building.<sup>16</sup> In October 1982 a plan which had been developed by the Paul Partnership of New York was presented and was approved by New Jersey Transit and the Office of New Jersey History.

The renovations set forth in this plan were completed last year. Today, the main room on the first floor is no longer open to the public and plans indicate that it is to be used as a restaurant.<sup>17</sup> Upstairs is the newly restored waiting room and a new ticket counter. The wainscoting in this room has been restored and dropped ceiling has been removed, exposing the original dramatic ceiling. The dormer windows have been reopened and the

<sup>13</sup> Ted Serrill, "Downtown Rail Station to get a New Look in Spring," *The Home News*, January 10, 1978, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Rudy Larini, "Blaze at City Rail Station Hurts Struggling Business," *The Home News*, March 5, 1980, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Rudy Larini, "City Rail Station Refurbishing Plan on Track," *The Home News*, August 20, 1980, n.p.

<sup>16</sup> Greiff, pp. 130.

<sup>17</sup> Peter D. Paul, *et alia.*, *Renovations, Improvements and Restoration Design, New Brunswick Rail Station* (New York: The Paul Partnership, 1982), pp. 1-30.



space is once again flooded with light. Two new, oversized Doric Columns divided the ticket area from the waiting area and new oak doors have been installed in place of the inappropriate glass and aluminum doors. The platforms were raised and contemporary cantilevered steel and glass structures were installed in place of the original platforms. The portico has a new metal roof, a new wooden ceiling and a restored cornice. Although most of the plaza was removed to make way for the widening of Albany Street, the remaining sections have been provided with planters and paved with brick.

The restored train station is now the centerpiece of the renovated New Brunswick business center and is an excellent example of the tasteful renovation of an historic and very servicable building. The unusual design of the colonnade is the obvious source of inspiration for the detached colonnade surrounding the Ferren Mall across Albany Street. It is hoped that the train station in its entirety will be a source of inspiration to local developers and encourage the intelligent renovation of other landmarks in the city rather than insensitive destruction.

The nostalgia with which the train station's architecture looks back at the American past—at the Georgian style—suggests that its designers had achieved a certain distance from those early ideals. The modern age had indeed arrived, with technology as its beacon. As the playfully imitative architecture of the train station reveals, modern society could only see the past through a romantic haze, and as an abstraction. Few inhabitants of today's updated, redecorated, aluminum-sided New Brunswick houses know that this town once supported a major shipping industry. Few of them who stand each morning upon the platform and wait for the train to work are aware of the mortal price that the shipping industry paid for the arrival of the railroad or of how the railroad continues to shape New Brunswick's economic history.