



A National Treasure

Wilmington's Frank Furness Railroad District

By Scott Bogren

The busiest passenger rail tracks in the nation – those of the Northeast Corridor – gently rise above downtown Wilmington, Del., offering riders a panoramic view of a city in transformation. Unbeknownst to many, the view includes an unparalleled collection of rail buildings and stations designed by renowned American architect Frank Furness.

The grouping of buildings, known collectively as the Furness Railroad

District, includes two currently occupied by Dutch-owned ING, Inc., a leading world-wide lending, insurance and banking firm, as well as the Wilmington Rail Station (once known as Pennsylvania Station) at which Amtrak trains call. Collectively, these famed buildings are helping the city revitalize its waterfront and drive the local economy.

“The Furness Railroad District has unmatched potential for telling the story of American railroad architecture

in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,” says Wilmington Historian Dr. Preston Thayer. “The stylistic shifts seen in Frank Furness’ buildings reflect the broader history of American railroads from entrepreneurial venture to corporate behemoth.”

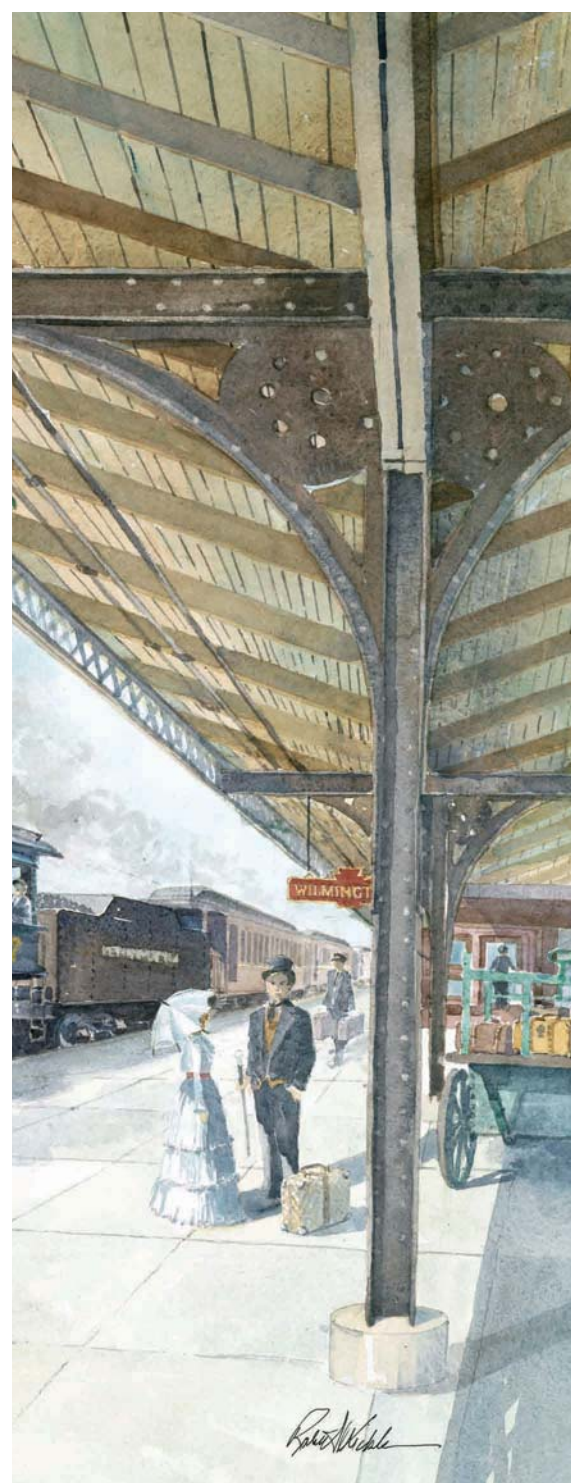
“We’re working to help people realize what we have in these buildings,” says Wilmington architect and Friends of the Furness Railroad District President James Tevebaugh. “It’s a national treasure.”

This limited edition lithograph from the Friends of the Furness Railroad District is entitled, "First Arrival."

had a unique design because in 1900 the Pennsylvania had decided to construct a four-mile long, Brandywine granite-arched viaduct elevating its tracks alongside the Christina River through downtown Wilmington to alleviate grade crossings. Thus, the new rail line crossed the top of the new station, bisecting the station's second floor into two separate areas and leaving the ground floor for retail and ticketing activities. The station's central architectural feature was always its three-story clock tower – with four clock faces and unusual terra cotta work. The station was built with brick, trimmed with stone and topped with a tile roof.

Wilmington station has a unique place in American history because it is the last designed by Frank Furness. Furness (1839-1912) designed nearly 200 railroad buildings and stations in his storied career, many of which have since been lost or demolished. A decorate Civil War veteran, Furness designed a number of banks, churches, and stone mansions – in addition to his work with the Pennsylvania and Baltimore & Ohio railroads.

"Furness invented his own form of dynamic architecture," says Tevebaugh. Indeed – bold, strong lines, powerful dormers and chimneys and sturdy elements like terra cotta and stone were Furness signatures. He was, according to experts, less influenced



A Treasured History

Wilmington Rail Station was built in 1907 by the Pennsylvania Railroad, replacing a 25-year old structure built by one of its subsidiaries. At that time, the riverside industrial areas teemed with activity, and the city had no fewer than four major passenger railcar manufacturers and claimed it built more railcars than any other city in the union.

Right from its inception, the station

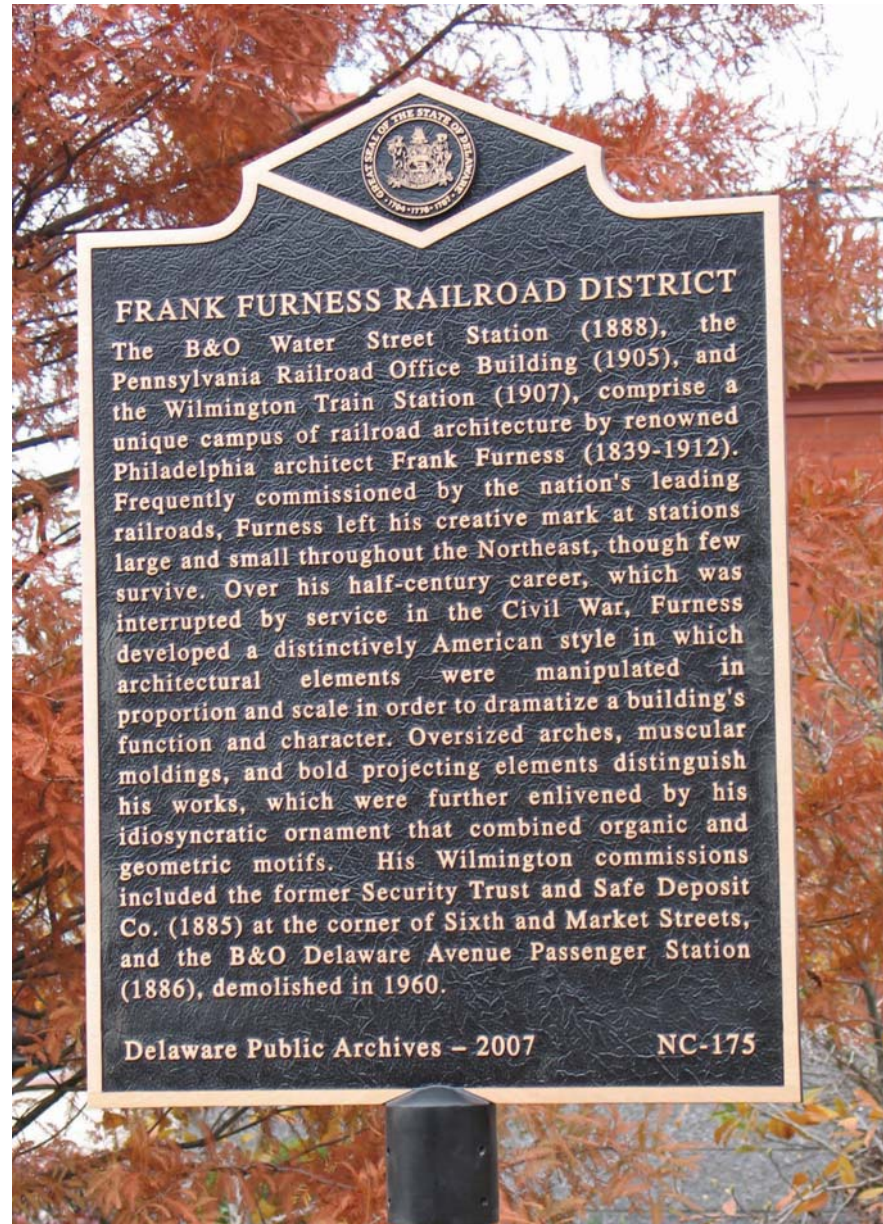


Photo courtesy of the Friends of the Furness Railroad District



DART buses serve Wilmington Station. The old waiting rooms rise above the tracks on the far side, the structure beyond is Furness' Pennsylvania Building.

by European designs with his style embracing the industrial age in which he worked so prolifically.

"Most architects would have protected waiting travelers from the din and clamor of the railroad, but not Frank Furness," says Williams College Art Professor Michael Lewis, author of *Frank Furness: The Complete Works*. "His Wilmington Station reminded passengers that the modern locomotive was an object of immense force, hurtling dangerously and excitingly through space."

The Wilmington Station was not ready for train operations until late June 1908. All told, the structure cost more than \$300,000 to complete, earning Furness what would be his largest commission: \$11,000. It would be his final rail station and – sadly – one of the few surviving today. His other large stations in Philadelphia, Newark, Del., and Pittsburgh have

been torn down.

"Of the approximately 180 depots that came from the drawing board of Frank Furness, not more than 18 are left and only one is of any substantive size – the former Pennsylvania Station in Wilmington," says Author Janet Greenstein Potter in her book, *Great American Railroad Stations*.

The two other structures that comprise the Furness Railroad District are the B&O Station on Water Street, approximately a block west of Wilmington Station, and the Pennsylvania Building astride the station to its south.

The B&O Station was a branch line depot and freight station, completed in 1887 and evocative of Furness' later style with a multifaceted roofline, dormers and chimneys. It had two small waiting rooms – men's and ladies' – as was the custom at the time.

The Pennsylvania Building was the railroad's headquarters for its Philadelphia, Wilmington and Washington Division and was completed in 1905 at a cost of \$175,000. The 60,000-square foot, five-story facility was designed as the Pennsylvania Railroad's management center of its many local operations, machine shops, maintenance and repair activities and more.

"During his half-century career, Furness perfected two entirely different types of railroad stations. His urban stations were leviathans, built of red brick and vigorously industrial in character, while his suburban ones were more picturesque and built of mixed timbers, brick and stone," says Professor Lewis. "Both types are present in Wilmington."

Historic value alone does not always save rail stations and buildings. What helped save the structures that



Immense overhead beams announce a train's arrival in the waiting room with a great rumble.

comprise the Furness Railroad District were the changes that began to occur in Wilmington.

"This whole end of Wilmington is changing rapidly," says Amtrak's Wilmington Station Manager Ronald Edwards. "The waterfront property has become valuable as have a lot of the buildings in the neighborhood. People want to come down here now: it's the place to be."

First: Saving the Station

Owing to its place along the busy Northeast Corridor, Wilmington's Rail Station has seen regular and continuous passenger service for the past century. In the early 1970s, however, the building did experience some hastily performed painting that served only to cover the accumulated grime. It wasn't until a decade later in 1984 that the station became part of Amtrak's Northeast Corridor Improvement Project and was more fully restored by professionals.

What emerged from this restoration was a main waiting area beneath the tracks that offered passengers an exposed ceiling of uncovered, riveted trusses that loudly announce an arriving train. The station remained busy, as well, and is today the eleventh busiest in the nation. More than 70

different Amtrak trains come through the station daily, as do another 30 or so SEPTA commuter rail trains. Overall ridership is up more than 10 percent at the Wilmington Station, with SEPTA ridership growth at more than 20 percent.

In July, Amtrak marked the beginning of a three-year, \$30 million effort to restore the Wilmington station's exterior, stairways and its

Two of the Furness Buildings: The Pennsylvania Building (right) and the Wilmington Station (left).



two second-story waiting rooms. The project promises to be a significant one. Brick re-pointing will restore the station to its original red color, windows will be replaced, waiting areas will be enlarged, new office and retail space will be developed, exterior lighting will be greatly enhanced, the heating and air conditioning plant will be replaced, and – perhaps most importantly – a major waterproofing effort will be undertaken.

Amtrak intends to adapt its Acela marketing campaign into the interior and concourse renovations, which isn't popular with everyone involved.

"It's not 100 percent authentic, but it has the character of an old train station," says Clarence Wright, program director of Main Street Wilmington. "I'm not very happy with the plans that are on the table."

Amtrak's senior director of stations, facilities and engineering structures, Joseph Rago, disagrees: "Frank Furness was a proponent of using leading-edge technology in his designs. The proposed design portrays the very image of Amtrak's goal and vision of being the leading transportation provider of the 21st Century. The new interior conveys the message of modern, safe and efficient travel."

Amtrak's investment in the

station only enhances the system's presence in Delaware – a presence that very much recalls that of the Pennsylvania a century ago. Currently, its Consolidated National Operations Center, a major nationwide training facility, parts warehouse and railcar maintenance facilities are all located within the First State. But the real icon is the station.

“The Wilmington Station, unmistakably, is a landmark,” says Edwards. “It’s a grand building and a focal point for the city – it always has been. Everyone in town, whether on a bus going by the station or walking to an appointment, looks up at the clock tower”



Photo courtesy of the Friends of the Furness Railroad District

Furness' Water Street B&O Depot (above and below) was nearly lost.

Next: Saving the District

The modern renaissance of the Furness Railroad District can be traced to the realization by local officials that Wilmington's Christina River waterfront could once again become the area's economic engine. In 1995, a Governor's Task Force created the Riverfront Development Corporation (RDC) of Delaware to, “oversee the future of the Brandywine and Christina Riverfronts.” A year later, the RDC launched a major state-funded effort to restore the area's economic vitality. Warehouses have been replaced with restaurants, shops, and a regional conference facility. Vacant historic buildings have been preserved and restored to serve as corporate headquarters for major employers. A shoreline once strewn with litter and debris is now lush with native plantings. Crumbling parking lots have been converted into parkland and spacious gathering areas for concerts, festivals, and community celebrations.

The Pennsylvania Building was the first home of the RDC after it was created. In 2001, ING Direct expanded its Wilmington operations to take the entire building, which it still occupies today.

The smaller B&O Station didn't fare nearly as well as its larger cousin up the street. By 1990 the station had been vacant for decades, experienced a fire and was boarded up and seemingly ready for the scrap heap. It stood on ground still owned by CSX



Photo courtesy of the Friends of the Furness Railroad District



Photo by Rich Sampson

Fully restored, the Depot illustrates Furness' versatility and rounds out the historic district.

Transportation and that was rumored for sale. Studies showed that the little station was still – amazingly – structurally sound, though Tevebaugh often wonders whether it could have withstood another strong winter snowstorm.

But stand it did, and renovation efforts that got underway with the 1990s saw the Water Street Station truly brought back to life. Efforts to save it were so successful that the RDC took it over in the late 1990s and then – just as with the Pennsylvania Building – ING Direct arrived. Only this time they didn't lease the building, they bought it outright.

The Frank Furness Railroad District

The Friends of the Furness Railroad District first came together in 2006 as the Wilmington Station's 100-year

anniversary approached. Working with the local business community and U.S. Senator Tom Carper – himself, a railroad advocate having served on Amtrak's board of directors – they began to carve out a role for the District as both an economic development tool and an educational opportunity.

"We just knew that we had to get people here in Wilmington to understand what they had in these terrific buildings," says Friends of the Furness Railroad District President and local architect Jim Tevebaugh. "All great cities have a landmark, ours is this station and district."

The Friends' goal has always been to increase awareness of the District. Accordingly, they have been busy helping with the restoration of the Furness structures, raising historical markers and developing a museum-quality exhibit for the Amtrak station

that tells the story of Furness, the Wilmington Riverfront and the importance of railroading in the city's past.

"We would love to see the District become a regional tourism destination," says Tevebaugh.

The Friends are also creating an ongoing, hands-on educational curriculum for the Wilmington School District to increase the understanding and visibility of their work.

"This is a great story that has really not been told," he says. **R**

Left to right: Christina Serio of the Wilmington Renaissance Corp; Ron Edwards, Amtrak's Wilmington Station Manager; and Jim Tevebaugh, Friends of the Furness Railroad District.



Photo by Rich Sampson