

Railroads and Fort Miles

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September 2018

Railroads have played an important role in making the modern history of Delaware. They were the brainchild of John M. Clayton of Dagsboro, who started planning the first railroad in Delaware in 1836. Clayton was one of the great Delawareans of the 19th century. He was a local legislator, US Senator, Secretary of State of the United States under President Zachary Taylor, Chief Justice of the Delaware courts, one of the fathers of the Delaware Constitution and a great believer in the Manifest Destiny of the United States.

Clayton was born in Dagsboro, DE and raised in Milford in the wonderful Parson Thorne Mansion. He later in life built the beautiful house and grounds at Buena Vista, named after a famous victory in the Mexican War when he served in the national government and is now the New Castle County mansion owned by the state of Delaware. Both are on the National Register of Historic Places.

But he also became one of the first Delawareans to support the idea of the new railroad in Delaware and its first great promoter, and as such he had several towns in Delaware named after him after his death, including Clayton DE, high schools in Sussex County and buildings like Clayton Hall at my alma mater, U of DE.

Clayton was very much a railroad man both for Delaware and the nation as he saw the railroad as the both the unifier of his home state and the country. Clayton's railroad idea really took off in the 1850's when the concept of a north/south railroad line was born. Ultimately the line was going to be built for 95 miles from the PA border in the north to the MD line in the southern part of the state, thus connecting the entire length of the state. Clayton saw that the new railroad would move down the center of the state and through his home county of Sussex and the county seat at Georgetown, famous for the concept of

Return Day, when after the election the local politicians, both the winners and losers, joined together in a local tradition to show unity. Clayton once said "...that the man who had been to a political meeting in Dagsboro, seen Return Day in Georgetown and visited Paris had witnessed the three most interesting sights in the world." Many of the folks who attended Return Day in Georgetown arrived to the event on the new railroad line that he promoted.

The railroad concept was promoted by many important individuals after the death of Clayton, but in particular another prominent Delawarean, Judge Samuel Harrington, got involved. Harrington actively worked to include Dover in 1855 with Seaford to follow in 1856. The rail line was built in the central part of the state to avoid the marsh. For his hard work and effort in bringing the railroad to central and southern Delaware, Harrington had a Kent County town named after him and, today, a large casino and race track!

The first Delawareans to benefit in a major way from the new railroad line were Delaware farmers. Perishable products could be moved to the big cities in quick time, thus avoiding spoiling. Especially for peaches which Delaware promoted and in 1875 alone over 900,000 carloads of peaches were moved from Delaware farms to market making Delaware known in the East as the "Peach State." Towns such as the previous mentioned Georgetown and Seaford and later Bridgeville, Greenwood and Harrington were built and prospered because of the new railroad. Spur lines were then built east and west to connect other Delaware towns, including Lewes and Rehoboth Beach. In the time of poor roads in the state in the 19th century, most visitors to Rehoboth Beach came by the new rail system. Even when the "new" DuPont Highway was planned in the early part of the 20th century, a railroad track was planned in the median to move train passengers up and down the state. Railroads quickly became central for the growth of the state of Delaware.

In times of war, the new Delaware railroads became both important and critical to the winning of the war. In the Civil War, much of the ammunition and weapons used at the massive Fort Delaware to protect the Delaware River approaches to Philadelphia were brought in to the fort by rail. Many thousands

of Delaware troops during the Civil War were called up and used to guard the vital railroad depots and bridges though out the state. In the Spanish American War the new Fort DuPont in New Castle had it much of its equipment brought to the Fort by rail. It was the same with the WWI Fort Saulsbury near Milford which had its four massive 12" guns each weighing almost 70 tons each moved to the marsh.

In pre WWII Delaware, the beach was used by the US Army railroad guns for testing. The 52nd Coast Artillery unit from Ft. Hancock, NJ practiced for years at Sandy Hook NJ near the harbor of NY City but as that city grew and expanded, local folks started to complain about broken windows so the Army looked to move to a region close by, but a less populated site. Cape Henlopen became an obvious choice as there were very few folks who lived in the area and the railroad line was there to serve a local sand company. So in 1938, the 52nd CA came to Lewes from Fort Hancock for the first time to fire their short range 8" mortars and 8" guns at the mouth of DE Bay.

The new location proved very popular to the Army as the beach was large and the site was perfect for rail traffic as it was very secluded and easily hidden. The 52nd could fire its large guns with little complaint from the locals compared to the problems they had at their previous New Jersey location. Locals liked the troops and their money helped the local economy. Every spring before the war the 52nd visited Cape Henlopen to fire their guns and prepare for war.

The railroad guns of the 52nd were both short range mortars and longer range 8" artillery rifles with a range of over 18 miles, thus covering the mouth of the DE Bay. Both weapons were old models but were still effective in the late 1930's. The mortars fired 300lb shells but were high trajectory, short range weapons that could defeat ships with plunging fire. The 8" guns were different as they had much more range with their 260lb armor piercing shells that could defeat enemy warships with direct fire. Each weapon had a fire rate of two rounds per minute and were served by 25 men. They were moved around the sand dunes along with their ammunition and fire control cars by Army locomotives built at

the Baldwin Railroad Factory in Philadelphia. The soldiers started to call the area "Camp Henlopen."

As WWII loomed, Camp Henlopen grew in size and larger weapons were needed. In all cases, the railroad was critical for moving the large guns both into the Camp but also to move them around with their ammo and crews. Snow fence was used to hide them in the dunes and sandbag revetments were built for protection against counter battery fire (those sandbag revetments are still out in the dunes today).

Batteries C and D of the 52nd were stationed at the new Fort Miles early in the War to protect the new base. The older 1888 8" guns were replaced by the newer 8" Mk6 Model3 models in four two gun batteries. These were long range naval guns removed from older battleships and they shot a 260lb shell over 18 miles. Sadly, today only four of these weapons still exist.....three in Alaska and the one we have at The Fort Miles Historical Artillery Park, the only one in the continental US. I invite you to visit our artillery park to see this wonderful static display. The Fort was laced with rail tracks and the remains of them can still be seen south of the Fort Miles Museum on the way to the Biden Center.

Railroads played a critical role in the winning of WWII for the United States. Beginning in 1939 the leadership of the country saw war clouds on the horizon and beginning to plan for massive railroad use to move both men and material throughout the nation. In 1939, for the first time since the early 1920's there was a shortage of boxcars in the country due to the ramping up of war production. But that did not last long as the government pushed war production in all areas. Millions of men were moved during the war by railroads and were millions of tons of war materials. It is safe to say that without the efficient use of American railroads during the war, the war could not have been won.

Railroads actually played a role in both my creation and my life. My mother and father were married in Beckley WV on December 26, 1942 and right after the wedding boarded an overnight sleeper train at Prince, WV for their honeymoon. According to my father, I was conceived on that train during that several days trip! Doing the math, I was born on October 1, 1943 so he was probably right!

After my birth, he joined the Army Air Corp and was in training in OK on B-26 Marauders when I got seriously ill and he had to get leave and jump on a train to come home to help my mother and grandparents nurse me back to health. So the railroads played a critically important role in my early life as they did with millions of other American's during the war. It was the way folks got around as, in my home state of WV the roads were terrible and air travel almost non-existent.

My early life was spent with my maternal grandparents, Mabel and Jeff Harper in Harper WV, a small hamlet near Beckley WV on the Virginian Railroad line and in the heart of coal country. My great grandfather, Henry Harrison Harper, was the founder of the small town and, being a large landowner in the area, was able to work with the Virginian Railroad to have a depot built at Harper. It became a key stop on the line to move coal from the coal fields in WV to shipment at Norfolk VA. Some of my first memories were watching the trains come right by our house in Harper shaking my grandmother's china and the entire house as they struggled up the mountain cut to the Harper depot.

I can also remember waving at the soldiers hanging out the windows on their way overseas to Korea and the workers in the caboose as they disappeared over the horizon. I would spend much of my childhood at the depot at Harper WV with Mr. Dunn, the depot master, listening to the "click-click-click" of the telegraph in his office. My grandfather (Thomas Jefferson Harper, called "TJ" or "Jeff") had his office just across the tracks from the depot and we lived just two houses down the lane from it. I got to Harper each summer after school was out on the train from Charleston, an hour train ride through the beautiful WV mountains. I can still remember the conductor coming down the middle of the train car with a galvanized tub full of ice covered glass bottles of Cokes! And the soot from the train smoke coming under the windows! What a treat! So railroads played a key role in my growing up in WV!

Railroads also played a key role in the development of Fort Miles. In early 1941 the name of Camp Henlopen was changed to Fort Miles, named after the famous US soldier, Nelson Miles of MA who was awarded the Medal Of Honor

for his heroic service in the Civil War and later distinguished himself in the Indian Wars (capturing Geronimo and defeating the Plains Indians) and the Spanish American War in which he captured Puerto Rico. After naming the fort after Miles, the government began to seriously develop the fort to protect the Delaware estuary (DE, MD and NJ). The 261st Coast Artillery (a Delaware unit) was moved to the area and they began to build the base. Temporary tents were replaced with barracks and big guns were moved in, including eight 8" railroad guns as previously mentioned.

The new base at Fort Miles had its own railroad line and tracks to move the large guns and ammunition throughout the fort. Although the track was removed years ago you can still find their trail with a little effort in walking throughout CHSP.

But larger guns were needed with longer range and striking power, so large 12" guns were moved to the fort from Fort Saulsbury to be installed in Battery 519 (the present Fort Miles Museum) and later huge Mark II Model 1 16" guns were brought in by railroad. These monster guns weighed over 500 tons and were moved to a new casemate built in 1941/42 at Battery Smith (the huge dune behind the present Biden building).

The 16"/50 cal guns were massive. They were made to outfit the two new battleship and battlecruiser classes designed during WWI, the South Dakota class of battleships and the Lexington class of battlecruisers. Since barrels are much easier to build than ships, 70 of these large guns were built quickly but due to the Washington Naval Conference of 1922 agreement, both classes of ships were cancelled. So, in pre WWII America, the 70 barrels were given by the Navy to the Army which then proceeded to emplace them in casemates throughout the country to guard harbor entrances from Boston to NY to Cape Charles VA and harbors along the west coast.

As mentioned, two of these monster 16" barrels were brought by railroad to Fort Miles and, with much effort, were emplaced in Battery Smith. The first gun was proofed in February, 1944 and fired its shell over NJ, landing in the ocean eight miles off Wildwood, NJ. The big guns did not fire much as their loud

concussions raised the ire of Lewes locals. They were so large and cumbersome that after the war, rather than moving them again, the Army had them cut up for scrap on the base. Sadly, only four of the original 70 barrels exist today including one at Aberdeen Proving Ground in MD.

Which brings us to recent days. In August 2003 the Fort Miles Historical Association was created to tell the story of Fort Miles including the story of the railroads around the fort. One of the key parts of our Association development was to get big guns. At first, working with Delaware State Parks historian Lee Jennings we were very successful in getting smaller guns to the Fort Miles Historic Area but it was always our plan to get a gun representative of the types of guns at Fort Miles, including 90mm, 3", 6", 8" railroad, 12" and the massive 16". The one gun we were always concerned about was the huge 16" and we continued to hunt for one for our emerging artillery park.

In 2011, working with our contacts at Dahlgren Naval Weapons Center and the Coast Defense Study Group, we found fifteen 16" barrels from the Iowa class battleships stored at an Army base in NV. We contacted the US Navy at Building 197 at the Washington Navy Yard (interesting, where the barrels were actually made) to start the process of requesting one of the barrels for Delaware. The Navy required that we develop a logistics, financial and rehab program for the barrel request. Sadly, we found that the Navy was also involved in a process for ultimate destruction of the barrels and had hired contractors to sell them for surplus. We lost that race in 2012 and all the barrels we had located in NV but one was destroyed.

But we then found out that the remaining eight barrels from the Iowa class battleships were being stored at St Julien's Creek, a 480 acre annex to the Norfolk Naval Base. Working with a key contact at the Dahlgren base on the Potomac River, we started the process of working with both our state partners and the US Navy in securing a 16" gun for our growing artillery park. Our hunt attracted national news and support, and working with a local fundraising group, we were able to raise the necessary money (\$150k) by private donation (no state money involved) for shipment required by the US Navy. The Navy also

required us to come up with several plans: a financial plan to support the barrel once in Delaware; a plan to maintain the barrel once here and a plan to move the barrel to Delaware.

Working with our state partners, FMHA developed three shipping plans: the first by truck, the second by tug and barge, and the third by railroad. The truck plan was quickly dropped as the 128 ton weight of the barrel would have meant that it would take us years to get the necessary bridge and road permits from the three states involved in the move, VA, MD and DE. And, we were racing against the clock as the US Navy was actively working to have the barrels scrapped before we could save one or more of them.

Of the three plans the barge plan was the most promising as the barrel was within two miles of water near Norfolk and we wanted to place it right off the beach in our new artillery park, plus water travel is the easiest of all the moves. But the tug company we were working with (Wilmington Tug) was very worried that the tides are so severe in our area that they could not place the barge on the beach in the required same spot for twelve hours to allow the gun to be correctly off loaded. So the issue came down to the railroad shipment.

And railroads move many thousands of tons of heavy equipment each and every day so the load was not the problem. And the railroad had several other advantages. First, we have a railroad line that comes right up to Fort Miles! Thanks to the Delaware Coastline Railroad, we were able to work out a plan with them for the shipment right to the gates of Cape Henlopen State Park. Second, we found out that the Chesapeake Bay Railroad Ferry that had been shut down for years was open again in 2012! So, working with Norfolk Southern Railroad, our heavy movers Lockwood Brother from Hampton VA and the previously mentioned Delaware Coast Railroad, we were able to work a railroad plan to deliver the gun to Lewes in 2012.

We were also able to work out a plan for several of the barrels to be saved at the same time, and working with others including our friends in the Coast Defense Study Group (CDSG), we saved all eight of these historic barrels by finding them all homes. Of the eight barrels, three were from the Missouri (one

came to us, one to the state of AZ and one to Cape Charles VA) and each was the middle barrel of each of the three turrets. Four of the barrels were from the NJ and the final barrel was the proof barrel from the Iowa. Many of these moves are on U Tube and you can see how we moved them to other places in the country.

The barrel was loaded on a super Norfolk and Southern railcar in April, 2012 and shipped with the Cape Charles barrel over the Chesapeake Bay to Cape Charles. It then made the trip up MD and DE to the Norfolk and Southern railyard in Harrington DE. Thousands followed the trip on both the news and on their computers as we had GPS tracking on the car. It sat in the yard at Harrington for a time and was then moved to Georgetown where it sat on the siding near the Post Office.

In late April 2012 we had a welcoming ceremony for our Missouri barrel on the circle in Georgetown which was attended by hundreds. The barrel was then moved to Lewes by the Delaware Coast Line to near the old Lewes Library and its trip was, again, followed by hundreds. We stopped the train to rearrange the cars for the trip over the old Lewes and Rehoboth Canal swing bridge.

The first bridge over the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal was built in 1869. It was modernized in 1916 and reconstructed in 1997. Before we made the move of the barrel, engineers check and rechecked the weights and determined that the bridge could handle the weight, and they advised that the engine and gun barrel should not go over the swing bridge at the same time. So when the barrel arrived in Lewes the tradition railroad way with the engine pulling, the train was stopped exactly beside the new library and the cars were reoriented so the gun would be pushed over the bridge with a flat car and caboose between it and the engine thereby the heavy Missouri barrel would go over the swing bridge first with the engine last. This hour stop allowed photographers to go to the Freeman Bridge opposite to get some really good shots of the barrel going across the swing bridge.

Once on the other side, the barrel then moved toward SPI Pharma and was stopped near its entrance where a 12 axle trailer was brought over and the

barrel was then slid off the RR super car, using gravity. It was then trailered into the Fort Miles complex and, again using gravity, slid off to the ground where it lay for another four years. This time allowed us to build the new Fort Miles Artillery Park and the huge reinforced gun pad for the Missouri Barrel outside the new northwest entrance to the Fort Miles Museum.

The movement by railroad of the Missouri Gun barrel was the last large load that went over both the Delaware Coast line and the Lewes-Rehoboth Swing Bridge. As most locals know, the bridge was shut down in 2016 and is due to be removed in the near future. Since the swing bridge has so much history to this town, Fort Miles and Sussex County, we are working to save it for posterity. Most of the tracks, as you can see, have been removed and the railroad in Lewes is now history.

But that is not the end of the story. Thanks to the hard work and interest of the leadership of the City of Lewes, 200' of track was saved between the new Lewes Library and the new Lewes Museum. Accordingly, a small committee of interested locals (including this author), are working with the City of Lewes and the Lewes Historical Society to both save the historic swing bridge and find a railroad car that can be placed on the track to tell the important Lewes railroad story for town visitors.

In summary, there would have been no Fort Miles without the rail line into Lewes. But, in a way, it is sad for this historian to see such a critical piece of Delaware 19th/20th/ and 21st century history be pulled up and destroyed but it remains to us, the local historians, to continue to tell the important story of the railroad and its value to both the people of Delaware the defense of our homeland.