

Conrail GG1 4809 and a mate roll west along the Susquehanna River at Safe Harbor, Pa., on Oct. 21, 1979. The train is mixed freight WIPI from Edge Moor Yard in Wilmington, Del., to Conway Yard west of Pittsburgh. The Atglen & Susquehanna Branch can be seen above the train.

HOW A RIVER MADE A RAILROAD GREAT

THE PORT ROAD GAVE THE PENNSY THE LOW-GRADE LINE IT NEEDED

BY VICTOR HAND // Photos by the author, Center for Railroad Photography & Art collection



Fifteen-month-old Pennsylvania Railroad SD45 6217 leads an eastbound coal train through Cresswell, Pa., on May 18, 1969. The smoke at left is from the steam excursion pictured above, which has just passed Cresswell.



Two E44 electrics cross Conodoguinet Creek on Oct. 21, 1968, leaving Enola Yard (across the river from Harrisburg) with an eastbound freight. Famous Rockville Bridge can be seen in the far distance between poles.



// RAILROADS WERE BEING BUILT AT THE SAME TIME AS THE CANALS, AND IT SOON BECAME EVIDENT WHICH FORM OF TRANSPORT WAS SUPERIOR. //

Map on p. 53 shows the Port Road and related lines from Perryville, Md., to Enola Yard north of Harrisburg, Pa.



Two privately-owned Canadian Pacific 4-6-2's head a Baltimore-Harrisburg, Pa. excursion west along the Susquehanna at Pequea, Pa. on May 18, 1969.



On Oct. 4, 1968, two E44 electric locomotives pump air at the east end of Enola Yard in preparation for their departure with an eastbound mixed freight.

From colonial times the Susquehanna River has been an artery for trade between central Pennsylvania and the Eastern seaboard. In the early days, timber rafts were loaded with coal, lumber, and agricultural products. The boats were floated down the Susquehanna to the Chesapeake Bay and Baltimore. The products were sold, and the rafts broken up, with the wood bringing additional profit. The boatmen made the long walk back upriver for another load.

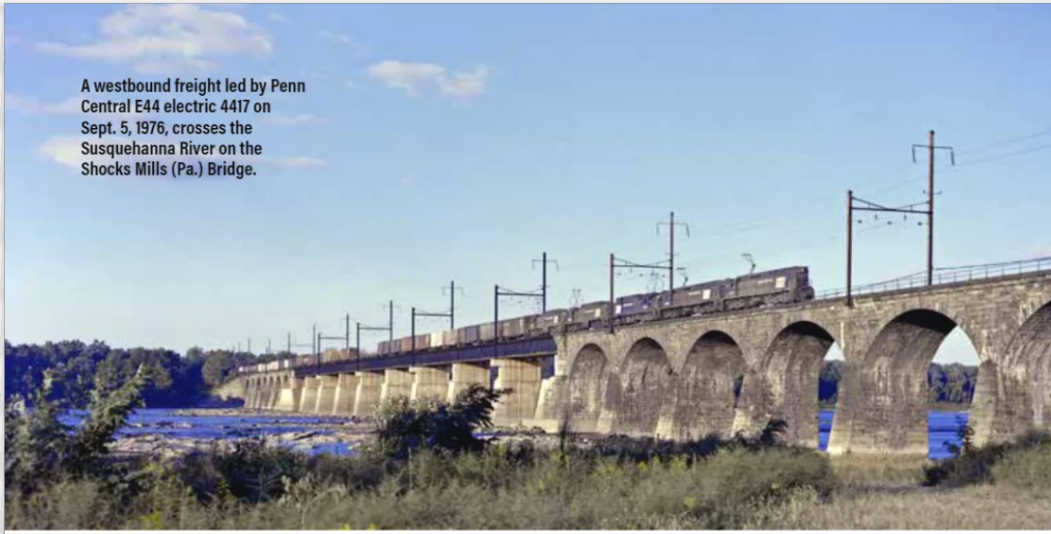
The success of New York's Erie Canal, completed in 1825, led other states to consider building waterways to protect their trade routes. There was intense competition between New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore for trade with the developing West. In Pennsylvania, the "Main Line of Public Works" legislation was passed by the commonwealth in 1826; construction started the same year. The state built canals from Columbia, on the Susquehanna River, to Pittsburgh, using the Allegheny Portage Railroad between Hollidaysburg and Johnstown.

Connecting canals reached up the west branch of the Susquehanna to beyond Lock Haven and up the north branch of the Susquehanna to the coal fields at Wilkes-Barre. In addition, private canals (the Schuylkill and the Union) were built between Philadelphia and the Susquehanna, and the Susquehanna and Tidewater Canal was built along the rocky lower reaches of the Susquehanna River between Columbia and Havre de Grace on Chesapeake Bay.

PARALLEL CONSTRUCTION

Railroads were being built at the same time as the canals. It soon became evident which form of transport was superior. The Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad was built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1834 to connect Philadelphia with the state canals. The Pennsylvania Railroad completed its line from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh in 1854, and in 1857 it purchased the money-losing Main Line of Public Works (the railroads and the canals) from the state.

A westbound freight led by Penn Central E44 electric 4417 on Sept. 5, 1976, crosses the Susquehanna River on the Shocks Mills (Pa.) Bridge.



Two Penn Central GG1 electrics head east with a coal train for Baltimore at Peach Bottom, Pa., on July 27, 1975.



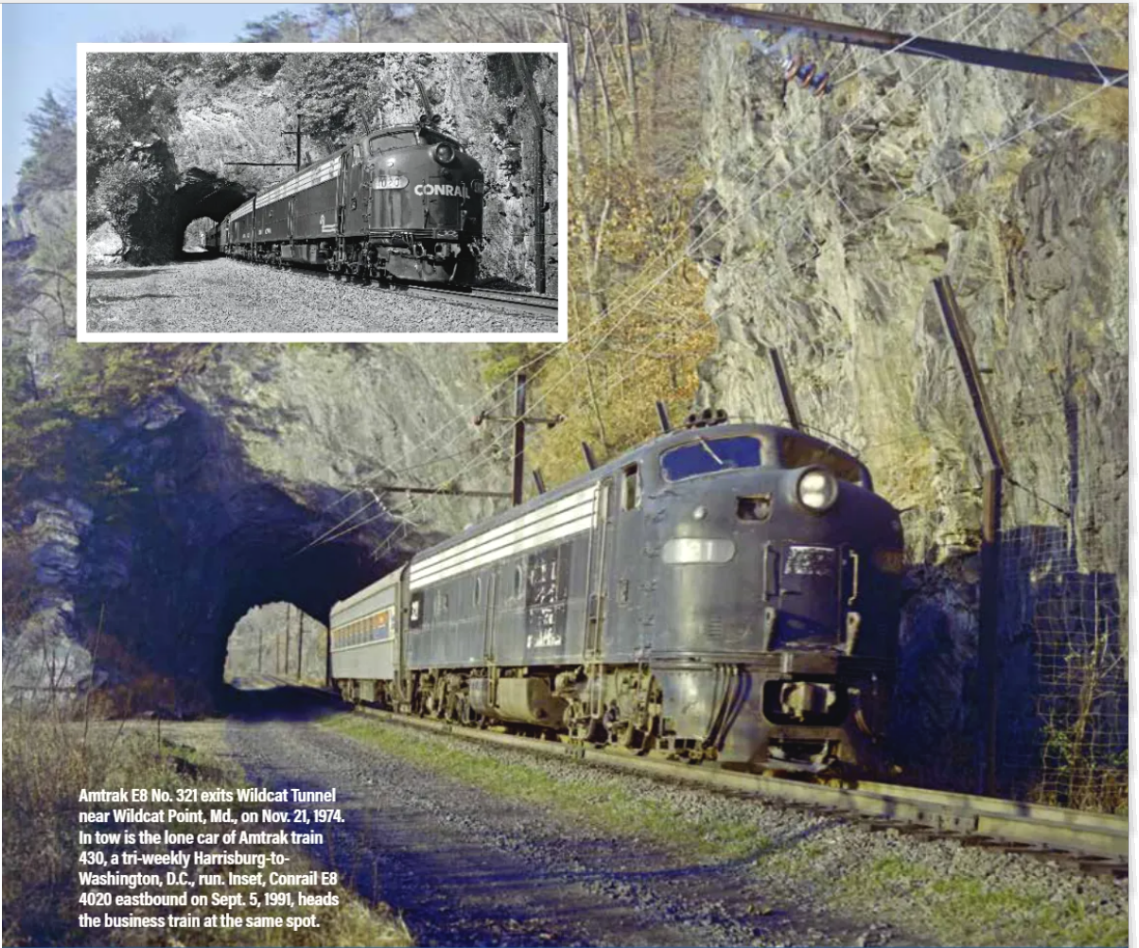
Penn Central 6106 leads an Erie Lackawanna unit on eastbound Conrail train EJ-8 west of Shocks Mills, Pa., on Oct. 22, 1976.



Conrail GP30 2198 is eastbound on the Port Road with a coal train at Peach Bottom, Pa., on Oct. 22, 1978.



Amtrak E8 No. 321 exits Wildcat Tunnel near Wildcat Point, Md., on Nov. 21, 1974. In tow is the lone car of Amtrak train 430, a tri-weekly Harrisburg-to-Washington, D.C., run. Inset, Conrail E8 4020 eastbound on Sept. 5, 1991, heads the business train at the same spot.



By 1861 the Pennsy took control of the Lancaster-Harrisburg link and had a through railroad across the state from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.

What was to become the Columbia & Port Deposit Railroad (known as the Port Road) began as a branch of the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore Railroad, built in 1866 between Perryville, at the mouth of the Susquehanna River, and Port Deposit on the east side of the river. By 1868 this line had been extended up the river to Octoraro, where construction stalled.

During this period the Pennsylvania Railroad was making major investments in the coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania. It was also looking for a way to move the commodity to tidewater while avoiding the heavy grades on existing railroads.

The Pennsy realized a near water-level route along the Susquehanna would be useful and advanced the money to complete the line between Port Deposit and Columbia in 1877.

At Columbia, the line connected with a railroad to Royalton, near Harrisburg, that had been built in 1850. By 1881, the PRR had gained control of the Philadelphia, Wilmington, & Balti-

more Railroad, giving the PRR access to those cities via the low-grade Columbia & Port Deposit line.

GETTING BETTER

The next big improvements came in the 1890s. Traffic growth prompted the Pennsylvania to build the Trenton Cutoff in 1892, providing a Philadelphia bypass for New York traffic. In 1902 construction started on the Atglen and Susquehanna Branch, a spectacular line connecting the Philadelphia-Harrisburg main line to the Pennsy main at Marysville, west of Harrisburg.

This new line met the Port Road at Cresswell east of Columbia and continued across the Susquehanna River on the 2,221-foot Shocks Mills Bridge to a junction with PRR's Northern Central Railway at Wago Junction.

The Northern Central line was used west to Marysville. The huge yard at Enola, across the river from Harrisburg, was built at this time. By 1906 the Pennsy had low-grade freight lines in operation allowing traffic from the West to reach New York, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore, avoiding congested areas.



Four Conrail GG1s take mixed freight WIEN (Edge Moor Yard, Wilmington, Del.-Enola, Pa.) west at Safe Harbor, Pa., on Nov. 4, 1979. The electrics were long in the tooth, so Conrail often dispatched freights with four motors, in the hope that at least one would be running at the end of the trip.

Conrail 7658 heads west on the Port Road under the massive girders of the Atglen & Susquehanna Branch bridge at Safe Harbor, Pa., on Oct. 21, 1979.



Empty Conrail grain train JSI-5 heads west at Peach Bottom, Pa., on Oct. 22, 1978.

// LOCAL PASSENGER TRAINS SERVED THE PORT ROAD THROUGH THE 1920S. THEY RETURNED TO THE LINE IN 1971 AFTER AMTRAK BEGAN OPERATION. //



Conrail 6210 leads freight PE-3 (Potomac Yard, Arlington, Va.-Enola, Pa.) west after a light snowfall on Jan. 22, 1978.

Construction of several hydroelectric dams on the Susquehanna River early in the 20th century involved elevating the Port Road, and many improvements were made at that time to reduce curvature.

By the 1930s the Pennsylvania had a high-capacity freight railroad east of Harrisburg. The freight lines were electrified in 1937-1938 when the Pennsy extended that capability west to Harrisburg and Enola.

LATER LIFE

The Port Road passed into Penn Central ownership in 1968 and to Conrail in 1976. The latter discontinued electrified operations in 1981 when it rerouted most of its freight traffic to avoid high trackage-rights charges on the Amtrak-owned Northeast Corridor.

It did, however, continue to move heavy freight traffic for Wilmington, the eastern shore of Maryland, Baltimore, and Potomac Yard over the Port Road using an assortment of diesel motive power.

Local passenger trains served the Port Road through the 1920s but were eliminated from the line during the Great Depression. Passenger trains returned to the line in 1971 after Amtrak began operation.

The Northern Central line between Baltimore and Harrisburg had become run-down, and Amtrak ran the Washington section of the *Broadway Limited* over the Port Road until 1975, when this train was rerouted via Philadelphia. A section of the *National Limited* ran via the Port Road until 1978.

When Conrail was split between Norfolk Southern and CSX Transportation in 1997, Norfolk Southern assumed operations over the Port Road. Traffic is still heavy, but except for a few intermodal schedules, most trains operate at night to avoid conflict with passenger traffic on the Northeast Corridor. ■