A TALE OF TWO TOWNS: PAOLI AND MERION, PENNSYLVANIA

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ABSTRACT: The Main Line area west of Philadelphia has, since its inception as a suburb in the 1880's, been associated with wealth, power, and prestige. Most popular images involve lawn parties, tea, and eclectic Victorian houses. The intent of this brief paper is to attempt to contrast two extremes; Merion, the quintessential elite railroad suburb, and Paoli, the westernmost station and the repair facility for the commuter lines in and out of Philadelphia, a place distinctly blue collar.

The Main Line - what was initially a railroad term has since become a label for an area, a population, and a way of life. However, many of the stereotypes associated with Main Line life are based more on a select group of aristocrats than on the Main Line as a whole. This is an attempt to briefly outline some characteristics which indicate cracks in what is perceived to be a homogeneous, wealthy, monolithic suburban region. This goal will be accomplished by way of a contrast between two vastly different towns, both ostensibly "Main Line," but sharing few of the same characteristics.

The first, Merion, is the epitome of the stereotype. Wealthy, designed from the outset as a suburb, and started virtually from scratch, with fixed land prices, definite zoning, and a very well connected population, Merion was often used as an example of a pristine Main Line village. Paoli, conversely, began as a stop only because the innkeeper blocked the tracks, and later developed as a repair and storage facility for the Pennsylvania Railroad. This settlement, predominantly comprised of railroad workers, was first ignored then consciously marginalized to keep it from the public view and to disassociate it from the other Main Line towns. However, before plunging into specifics, some historical context is necessary for those less familiar with the area.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When William Penn began selling land in his new colony, one of the first tracts went to a group of Welsh Quakers. They were hopeful that they could establish a semi-sovereign barony within Pennsylvania where Welsh culture and traditions could be preserved. This region, aptly named "The Welsh Tract," is easily discernible from its surroundings by the names of places, such as Bryn Mawr, Bala Cynwyd, Tredyffrin, and St. David's.

Unfortunately for the Welsh Quakers, the land they had settled was some of the richest farmland in southeastern Pennsylvania, which is to say that it was extremely attractive to many of the non-Welsh farmers who were pouring into Pennsylvania in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Indeed, by 1700, the Welsh were forced to officially open the 40,000 acre tract and were soon overrun by English, Scots-Irish, and Germans. Their culture was soon assimilated, and little remains of their reign but local names and a few recent architectural gestures.

Following this influx of settlers, development in the area was slow for the rest of the century. In the late 18th century, the Lancaster or Conestoga Road was pushed through along the path of an Indian trail. While a great improvement over the haphazard road used previously, the new road was still subject to the same difficulties as other early roads and was impassable several months of the year. One traveller discribed it as, "being chin deep in Hasty pudding" (Goshorn, 1972, p.12). The Lancaster Pike opened in 1789, and with heavy Conestoga wagons and six horse teams could make slow but steady progress most of the year.

This situation, combined with the growing need to get to Pittsburgh and the competition from the newly opened Erie Canal, prompted the legislature to commission a railed road to the West in 1828. However, it took until 1834 to get two tracks completed to Harrisburg. The road, and the Department of Public Works were just as susceptible to lobbying and corruption as ever,

> Many curves were introduced solely for the purpose of placating farmers, who either wished, or did not wish, to have the railroad near them; but the existence of many and sharp curves is probably best expressed by the desire...to keep first costs to a minimum by avoiding unnecessary earthwork (Troutwine from Langdon, p.62).

The road was initially intended as a replacement for the turnpike; essentially a public route for private vehicles. Combined with the fifteen steam engines operated by the State on the route, bedlam ensued (Goshorn, 1972, p.14). Proliferation of steam power eventually drove private vehicles from the tracks. However, property values generally declined, first because of fires caused by emissions from early steam engines, but also because many fewer stops were needed, which crushed the inns and taverns along the route (Langdon, p.63). This route was eventually purchased by the Pennsylvania Railroad as a trunk line into the interior of Philadelphia in 1857 (Langdon, p.65).

THE PROPER MAIN LINE

The Civil War basically cut off the Pennsylvania Railroad's improvement plans, but allowed an opportunity for accumulation of capital. As a result, several smaller lines were purchased after the war, including a group in New Jersey in 1871. Now instead of just having access to Philadelphia's port, the Pennsy had tentacles from the Ohio valley and Chicago all the way to northern New Jersey, a place later to be known as the Manhattan Transfer (Spearman, map of PRR). Such a burst of growth and wealth brought both the demand and the capacity for higher speed trains. However, due to the many and dramatic curves, the path of the main line into Philadelphia was completely inadequate for this purpose.

At the same time that this was happening, the first big waves of immigrants were coming ashore in Philadelphia, and the Industrial Revolution was creating an environment revolting to many of the Victorian upper and middle classes in Philadelphia. The result: a desire for distance from the industrial city and the new immigrants from Catholic continental Europe. This desire was made possible by the introduction of various sorts of street cars which allowed people to live further from their employments. As early as 1859 steam engines were being used to convey people to such far flung suburbs as Germantown (Jackson, p.37).

Combine with these two conditions a third, the fact that damage assessments to straighten the right of way would cost virtually the entire value of the farms along the new path, and the stage is set for a very obvious solution. The Pennsylvania Railroad desired to create what was, at the time, the largest suburban network in existence.

The farms adjoining the new right of way were purchased in their entirety under the auspices of the Paoli Heights Land Development Company. Periodically, particularly close to the border of Philadelphia County, small country towns were redesigned. These were to be prime examples of the new ideals Fredrick Law Olmstead set forth in his Riverside.

While in the process of developing this area, the Pennsylvania Railroad actually went to the extent of printing travel brochures for vacationers, such as Suburban Stations and Rural Homes on the Pennsylvania Railroad, published in 1875 by the PRR. An urban family could come out for the summer and stay in a hotel replete with servants and top quality restuarants, or build a vacation house in one of the new developments. All this was meant to create the necessity of suburban life.

These new towns were to be extensions of the city, what we would call bedroom communities, with the essential commerce of daily life still carried out in Philadelphia. Merion was for some time considered effectively part of the city; when the Miss Philadelphia Pagent was held, part of the award was to live in Merion for one year, in the Miss Philadelphia House. These Main line towns simply siphoned off families that had been living on Rittenhouse Square and in Society Hill.

The Paoli Heights Company specified that stores, shops, livery, livery stables, or "buildings for any offensive occupation" were prohibited (Goshorn, 1972, p.15). Homes were to cost not less than $5000, and were laid out along curvilinear streets with plots ranging from one and one half acres to five or six, depending on the oppulence of the purchaser. Alleys, thought to be the downfall of Penn's "Greene Country Towne," were strictly prohibited.

These suburban towns also were built, filled, and stagnated quickly. Population growth was rapid during the 1880's, but slowed markedly until the post-World War II construction booms. While there must have been some turnover of population, serious growth doesn't seem to have occurred (Census).

These easternmost towns on the Main Line, especially Merion, were long used as examples of ideal suburban settlements. They were the focus of maps, articles, and photo essays selling the splendor of life in the country.

THE END OF THE LINE

Paoli represents the extreme opposite from Merion. I propose that the difference between Merion and Paoli is the difference between their roles on the railroad; where Merion was simply a stop adjoining an accumulation of bedrooms, Paoli was the primary service facility for southeastern Pennsylvania. This included everything from parking the trains between trips to and from the city to cleaning and repairing them, as well as maintaining the tracks.

Originally, Paoli wasn't even a stop. Before the age of railroads, there was an inn along the Lancaster Pike called the Pasquale de Paoli. After the advent of the railroad, facing a distinct lack of business, the innkeeper began blocking the tracks so that the trains would stop (Goshorn, 1972, p.13). Eventually it became a habitual stop.

In the late 1870's when the Pennsylvania was purchasing land, Paoli seemed the logical place to locate its service facility for the new commuter world. Paoli was twenty miles from center city, allowing ample room for later expansion, it was at the brink of the South Valley Hills, after which laying rails would be both difficult and expensive, and it was already somewhat developed. All of these factors pointed to making Paoli the commuter rail head.

However, these charactaristics give it a distinctly different heritage than most other Main Line towns. First, the population of the town was decidedly blue collar. The vast majority were employed

in rather menial jobs with the PRR. Some were conductors and clerks, some were machinists and mechanics, many were car cleaners, rail walkers, and switchmen; all were at the whim of the railroad and of lower social stature than the inhabitants of the inner suburbs. In essence, Paoli was the Altoona of the Philadelphia countryside, servicing the needs of the now suburban elite.

Little attention was paid to the way the streets were arranged, generally leaving them as they were before the railroad, resulting in something which looks more medieval than either curvilinear or grid. Properties were bought, sold and subdivided without supervision, which resulted in the creation of many very small lots, several alleys, and essentially two blocks of urban property surrounded in close proximity by farms.

What homes there were generally consisted of company houses, whether replica I-houses for the conductors and clerks or barracks for the railwalkers. There was little, if anything, that might be construed as planning. Houses stand askew, waiting for roads that never arrived; duplexes and rowhouses lay waiting for rows that never came. Garbage from the railyard was just pushed to the side, to become part of the landscape.

Euphemistically, the Pennsylvania Railroad described Paoli as "of the less expensive type," with homes ranging in value from $3000 to $6000 (Goshorn, 1981, p.22). At the high end of that spectrum were several families who either didn't need to go to Philadelphia very often, or couldn't afford to live closer to the city. Thus retirees and the less affluent found Paoli an attractive suburban settlement. The result is that amongst the blue collar architecture described above are several houses designed by Frank Furness, the most noted Philadelphia architect of the period and responsible for such edifices as the Merion Cricket Club and the PRR's Broad Street Station.

However, Paoli was for the most part a self contained working class community, with stores, services, and its own economy. Paoli was also a blemish on the Main Line. As a result, it was quite literally marginalized; two new developments, Daylesford and Duffryn Mawr were created about one mile on each side of Paoli and became the foci of Main Line property maps, leaving Paoli divided and in small type at the edge of the map. Neither of these diversion settlements caught on, the first because it was too close to be independent from Paoli, the second because it was beyond the last stop, and it was simply inefficient to switch trains to go one more mile. Thus Paoli continues with much the same character as before, as a Main Line town only by location.

CONCLUSION

I realize that upon reaching this point, it is clear that by far the greater part of this paper is historic and the lesser portion synthetic. This is unavoidable at the moment, as my research is just beginning. There are, howver, a few hypotheses to be considered.

First, the "Main Line" is not a uniform, repetitive, canned set of communities. Within the Main Line itself there is at least two strikingly different towns, those described above. As an extension of this, I would suggest the possibility that having found one exception to the rule, there may be others.

Second, as alluded to in the section about Paoli, there must clearly have been a certain desireability to living closer to the city, simply on the basis that the most prestigious and wealthy settlements are to the eastern side. I haven't actually found the cause, other than the obvious factor of travel time, but believe this proposition to be a fairly safe bet.

Third, I would argue that "Main Line" as a social term was unfortunate in a past time, and not at all representative in this period. To lump all these settlements, numbering approximately twelve

depending on what criteria are used, together is just not useful in any sense beyond regional location. Referring to these settlements by name, or by east or west Main Line, would at least be somewhat more appropriate.

Most importantly, it is hoped that this brief paper has at least planted the suggestion that the Main Line is not what popular culture would have us believe. Two extremes were used as examples, but between them are many shades of gray. Many towns on the Main Line come close to the Merion idiom, but an equal number are sufficiently different to warrant further study. Understanding the subtleties of the Main Line is essential before forming one general opinion for the region as a whole.

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NOTES: Mr. Goshorn, a noted local amatuer historian, has been an invaluable asset in this research, as have the files of the Chester County Historical Society. The clip file maintained by the Society contains huge quantities of information on the entire Main Line from about 1880 to the late 1950's. Their map collection is also very extensive and for a nominal fee both are accessible and in my opinion necessary to anyone researching the Main Line.

Maps of Merion and Paoli: Notice the rounded streets and the large properties in the map of Merion above. The Merion Station is just off the map in the upper right hand corner from this orientation. Compare this to the map of Paoli below, with its straight streets, narrow lots, and generally irregular form.