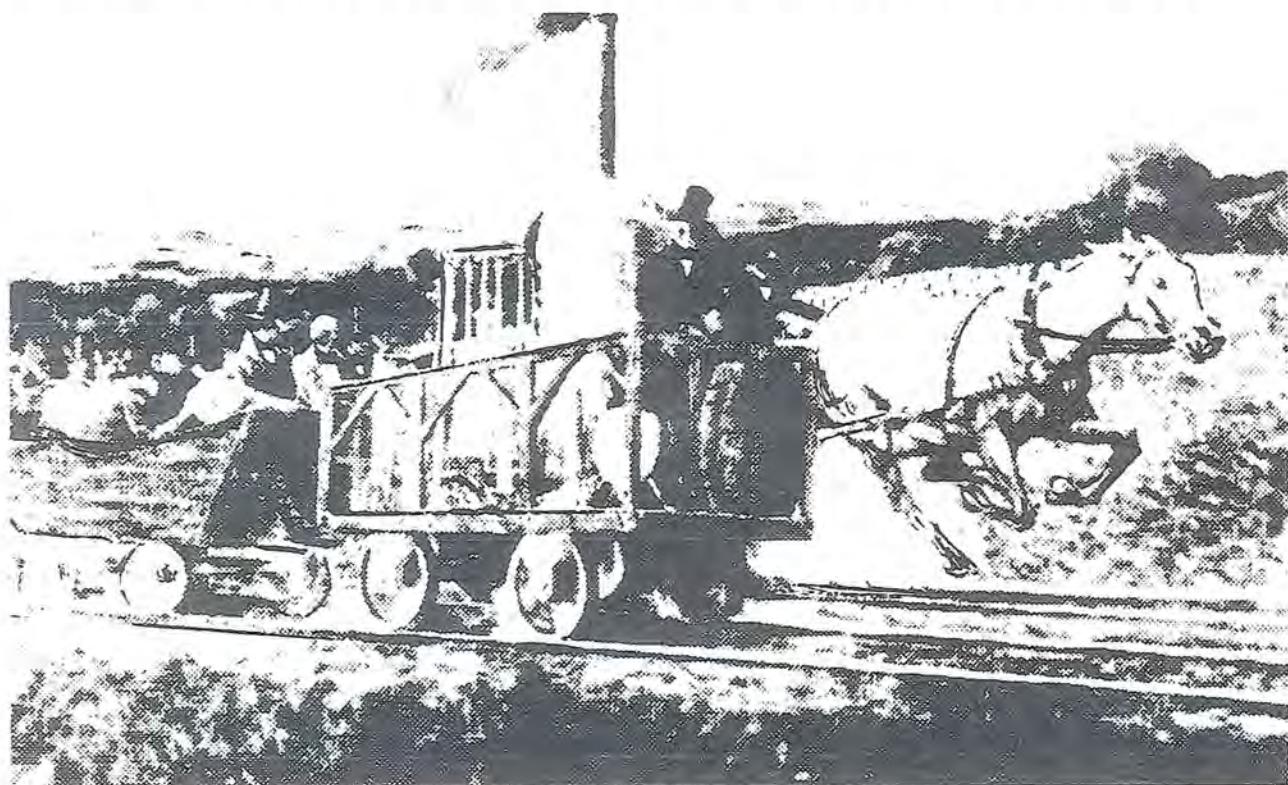


Railroads Push Ahead

Railroads Push Westward



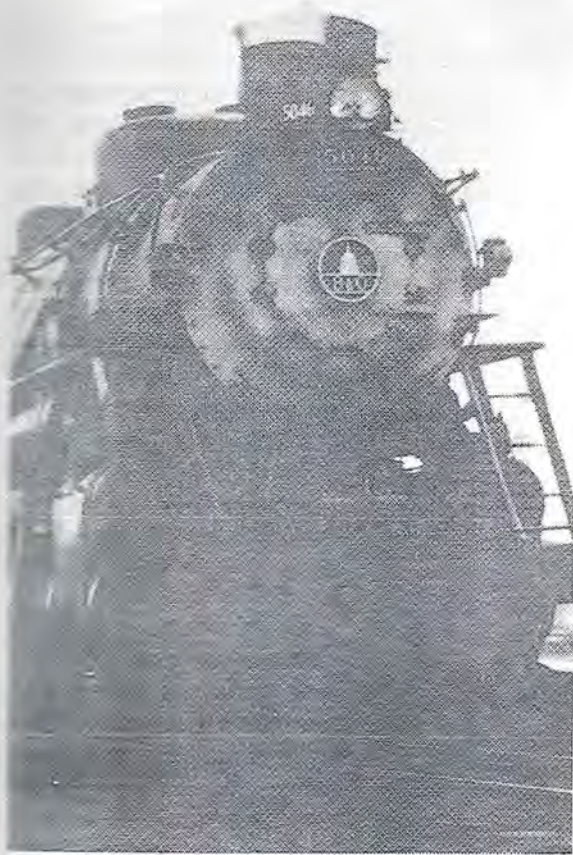
Horse-drawn coach races early steam locomotive

It is yet another of those interesting footnotes to local history that some of the earliest efforts of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to build a line through Pennsylvania were carried out in Washington County. In addition, one of the most commanding figures in the early history of American railroading was a civil engineer from Centerville named Jonathan Knight, who served for 12 years as the first chief engineer of the B&O. The Pennsylvania Legislature, by an act passed on February 27, 1828, authorized the company to begin construction of a railroad in the commonwealth. Within two years the headlong rush for railroad construction was on in earnest, and the age of machine transportation was under way in the United States. Roads on rails were nothing new — in 16th century Europe, horse-drawn coaches were pulled along rails because ordinary roads were so poorly designed and maintained. So it was not surprising that the B&O, the first common carrier of record in the United States, first planned to build a road consisting of tracks over which coaches would be

drawn by horses!

The B&O had been organized in 1827 by bankers and merchants who had very little know-how in the business of railroad construction. Of course, the whole industry was in its infancy, and the B&O, like other early companies, sent its engineers abroad to find out how the English were doing things. The only school of engineering in existence in the United States at the time was the United States Military Academy at West Point. The B&O builders assumed that the base for a good railroad bed would probably be the same as that for a well-constructed highway like the National Road. Thus it was natural that they should turn to Jonathan Knight, the prominent civil engineer who had worked on that project. Knight was well known in Washington County; he had also surveyed and laid out the plat for Beallsville in 1821. In November, 1828, the President of the B&O sent Knight and two others to England to study railroad construction.

Early B&O plans called for a line to be built from Baltimore to the Ohio River, with



Last train leaves City

Wheeling as the western terminus. It was to make use of coaches drawn on rails by horses. Relay stations for changing teams were to be established every six miles. The project would thus require at least 64 stations along the proposed 379 miles of track. And of course extra horses would be needed at relay stations in the mountains. This plan of operation obviously had a number of very practical drawbacks.

Fortunately for the B&O, English and American inventors were at that very moment busily experimenting with steam-driven locomotives. The record of success for the contraptions was somewhat checkered, but they looked a lot more promising than the clumsy system devised for horse-drawn trains. At this critical moment Peter Cooper, the inventive genius from New York, entered the picture. In August, 1830, his diminutive locomotive "Tom Thumb" ran successfully on the B&O's tracks from Baltimore to Ellicott's Mills, Maryland. It lost a race with a stagecoach driver (who might well have been Lucius Stockton himself) because a fan belt slipped from a pulley and the stagecoach reached the goal line before Cooper's little engine could get up another good head of steam. Nevertheless it was clear that the steam locomotive was the

answer for the source of power needed by the B&O to get its railroad line into operation.

Unfortunately, all this delay in locomotive experimentation proved costly to the B&O and eventually caused it to lose its original charter to operate in Pennsylvania. The 1828 charter called for construction to be completed within 15 years. With the enormous problems involved in pioneer railroad construction this was all-too-brief a period. Along with trying to resolve the power problem, engineers had to explore possible routes, another time-consuming project which required seven to eight years. In Washington County the route called for tracks to cross the Monongahela at Brownsville, follow Ten Mile Creek to its head, and then proceed along Wheeling Creek to the Ohio River at Wheeling. A branch would cut off at the Monongahela crossing and go to Pittsburgh. After the route had been determined, the next step was to contact several hundred landowners and acquire the right-of-way. These preliminaries took so long that the B&O applied for a four-year extension to its original charter. The request was granted by the legislature and the B&O then had until February 27, 1847, to complete its project. However, by 1844 the road had not even entered Pennsylvania; it had been constructed only as far as Cumberland, Maryland. A second extension was clearly necessary. This time there was considerable opposition to the B&O in both Allegheny and Washington Counties.

In Allegheny County there was by now a great deal of interest in the Pennsylvania Railroad which was just getting under way. This Philadelphia-based company, organized in 1846, planned to make Pittsburgh, instead of Wheeling, its western terminus. Pittsburgh businessmen were naturally more interested in the Pennsylvania operation. In Washington County the opposition to a B&O charter extension came from a different source. Since the opening of the National Road in 1818, large segments of the county's population owed their livelihood to jobs which were related to the operation of the Road. Tavern keepers, tollhouse operators, stage drivers, drovers, carriage makers, and others by the hundreds who made their living on the Road held protest meetings and let their representatives in the legislature know how they felt. The B&O charter extension was denied; Pittsburgh won the Pennsylvania Railroad terminus. Washington County pro-

testers achieved a brief reprieve for the National Road. However, the iron horse continued its inexorable march westward. A Pennsylvania Railroad train chugged into Pittsburgh in May, 1852. The B&O, after rerouting its line from Cumberland to Wheeling through Virginia as a result of the failure to get an extension to its Pennsylvania charter, ran its first train into Wheeling only six weeks after the Pennsylvania reached Pittsburgh. Washington County was thus not only bereft of its cherished National Road, on which traffic came to a standstill almost immediately — but also it was minus an important railroad link across the Alleghenies to the east.

During this same period, several railroad lines were chartered in Washington County. They were short lines, designed to cover distances between communities no further apart than Pittsburgh and Washington or Waynesburg and Washington. Most failed before construction ever started. One, known as the Hempfield Railroad, was

chartered in 1850 and organized in 1851. It was to build a line from Greensburg to Washington by way of West Newton and continue to Wheeling. Its first president was T.M.T. McKennan and its directors included C.M. Reed, A.W. Acheson, and William McKennan. Jonathan Knight was retained to help select the most desirable route. The Wheeling to Washington segment of the road was completed and ready for operation by the spring of 1857 at a cost of \$1,434,000. Unhappily, work on the Washington-Greensburg leg had to be suspended in 1854 because of lack of money. The road was mortgaged in 1855; in 1861 foreclosure proceedings were begun and the road was placed in the charge of trustees. In 1871 the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania authorized the sale of the Hempfield Railroad. It was bought by John King, Jr., vice-president of the B&O Railroad, for \$131,000. Thus it was that more than 40 years after it began operations the B&O finally acquired a line in Washington County.