

The Warren Railroad

A Walk Along an Abandoned
New Jersey Railroad
by Jeff Williamson

Coal bearing cars once travelled along this length of the Warren Railroad right of way through the Pequest Wildlife Management Area
Photo from author's collection; adapted by Gordon Bond

New Jersey can justly call itself the crossroads of America, but that moniker was deserved before the ribbons of concrete and asphalt laced across the state's rivers and ridges. Long before the joke of "You're from Jersey? Which exit?" the Industrial Revolutions turned the paths and simple roads of frontiersmen into byways for commerce and production. The fuel for this transformation in the early 19th century switched from charcoal harvested from the rapidly disappearing forests of New Jersey to the coal of the plentiful mines of Pennsylvania. Those who had access to the fuel were the ones that would survive the deforestation while those who did not, would not. Competition over access and transport was understandably fierce. This is the story of one path that succeeded only to be abandoned back to the nature from which it was carved.



John Insley Blair

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The Early Efforts

The fight to get to the black diamond fields, as the anthracite coal mines of Pennsylvania were called, commenced and western New Jersey was the battlefield. Along the Delaware River between Easton, Pennsylvania and Philipsburg, New Jersey three canal systems, the Lehigh Valley, the Delaware and the Morris, were in place by the 1830s. These waterways helped transfer goods as well as Lackawanna anthracite from the mountains of Pennsylvania to points along the mid Atlantic coast, beyond and between. The canals, however, while marvels of engineering with their locks and water powered inclined planes, were slow and closed down during the winter months—the time coal was in most demand for heating homes as well as iron furnaces and factories. The need for a faster and more durable transportation system was readily apparent, and men whose vision and charisma to gain investors were running to make it happen.

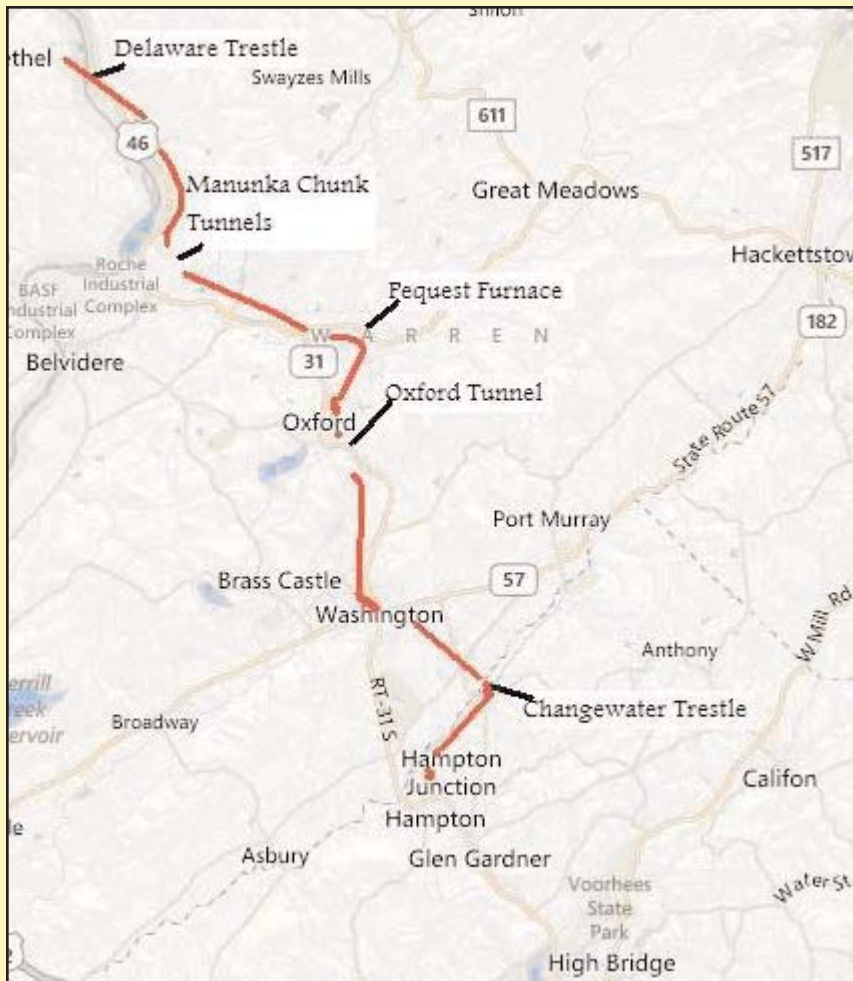
Entrepreneurship

John Insley Blair was one such individual. Born in 1802 near Belvidere, New Jersey, Blair informed his mother at the age of 10 that he was “going to be rich.”¹ By the age of 18 he ran a store in Gravel Hill—now Blairstown—New Jersey and 10 years after that he operated five stores throughout the hills of Warren County. By 1839 he became postmaster of the Gravel Hill community and the town was renamed in his honor, so recognized and appreciated were his business skills.

The industry of north western New Jersey at this time included numerous forges and furnaces turning out pig iron to be sent to factories in the great cities. These furnaces had run on charcoal since the mid 1700s, resulting in much of the area’s deforestation. As charcoal became increasingly in shorter supply, the coal fields of north east Pennsylvania offered the required alternative. Coal was necessary to keep the furnaces and ovens burning, and steam powered trains offered the solution to keeping the coal deliveries running through the winter months when the canals froze over. This was the beginning of the end for the canal systems that had only recently come into operation.

Several railroads already started laying out routes to place their tracks through the mountain ridges of the state, attempting to balance the need to make connections with the availability of capital—or more often just credit—to actually build the tracks. The primary competitors included the Lehigh Valley Railroad (LVRR) and the Central Railroad of New Jersey (CRRNJ) stretching from Elizabeth and Perth Amboy to Philipsburg, New Jersey from which they would transport the coal back to the coastal ports for points beyond.

Blair saw the opportunity to circumvent the transfer point at Easton/Philipsburg by running a railroad more directly to the Pennsylvania



coal fields, not a unique effort as the Belvidere Delaware (Bel-Del) railroad was attempting to accomplish the same by stringing along the NJ side of the Delaware River north from Trenton. Funding lapses, however, offered Blair an opportunity to take the initiative. Edging out the Morris and Essex Railroad for right-of-way permission (according to tradition by a matter of mere hours)² on March 4, 1853, Blair began plotting his route.

The Warren Railroad was incorporated in 1851, but little had been done until the human dynamo Blair took charge. Eventually making a deal with the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad (DL&W RR) of Pennsylvania and the CRRNJ, his Warren Railroad would link the two, bypassing the hub of Philipsburg/Easton. The initial sign-on cost for the two companies and Blair was \$450,000. Three years later, the railroad had still not been completed, and cost \$1.2

million.³ However, temporary tracks laid over the unfinished tunnels at Manunka Chunk began carrying coal and even passengers to start offsetting costs. Eventually, the Warren Railroad was completed and continued functioning, connecting the Central Railroad of New Jersey in Hampton, NJ, to the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western near Stroudsburg, PA. The route was fraught with problems in laying out, but its completion paid off, and its right-of-way is still visible to those who look for it today.

Creating the Route and Following it Today

Hampton Junction is set on a gap in the Musconetcong Mountain range where the Jersey Central, running west from Somerville, had looped back south to continue to Philipsburg via Bloomsbury where it paralleled the competing Lehigh Valley Railroad. The Junction was where Blair struck in his own direction for Pennsylvania. Instead of west, however, he struck north east.⁴ After heading north from the Junction, the Warren RR headed away from Pennsylvania between the Musconetcong ridge and river. The line can still be made out through the trees, but parts of it are now occupied by homes that sit directly on or next to the rail line. Instead of making direct for Washington, the Warren Railroad struck to the small town of **Changewater** along the Musconetcong where a station stop was occasioned

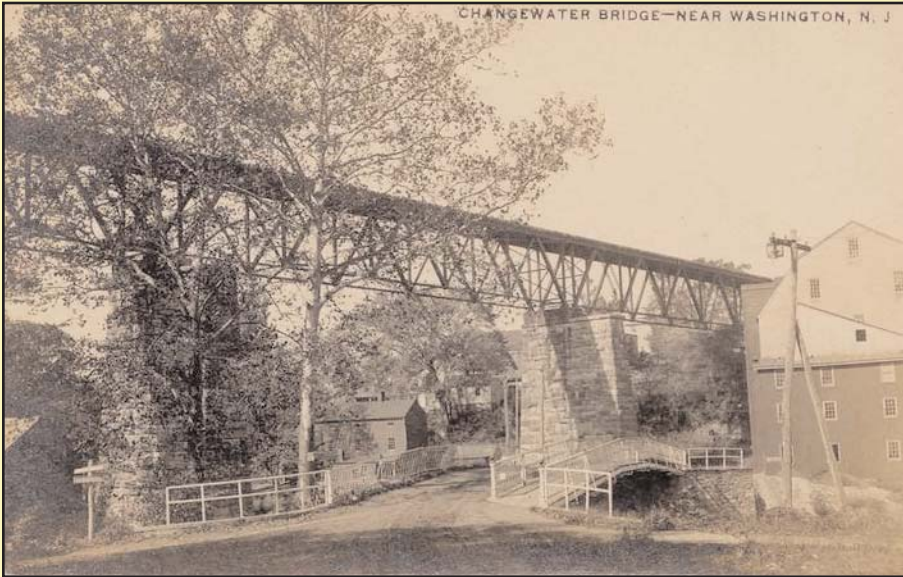


Image of the Changewater Trestle

photo source http://www.washington-twp-warren.org/about_washington/local_history/images/changewater_train_tressel_2.jpg
visited June 29, 2012

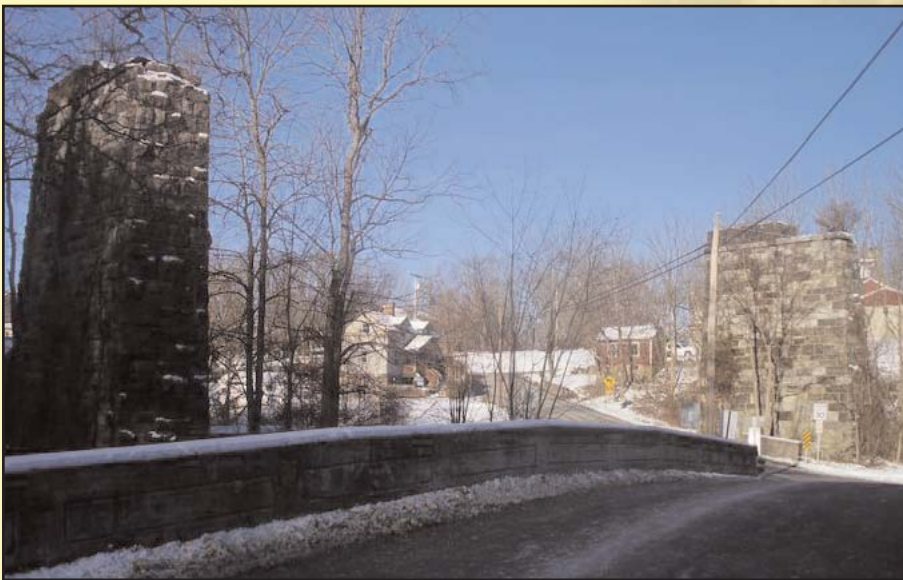


Image of the crossing today.

Photo from author's collection



by the presence of an iron forge hungry for coal, a flour mill, and factories producing woolen goods, picture frames and even snuff. Blair was going to make his route pay off in more than just coal.

Crossing from Hunterdon County to Warren County over the Musconetcong River required a massive trestle almost one hundred feet above the valley floor. While the bridge was dismantled in 1959, the tall stone pylons still stand astride the small metal bridge where County Road 645 crosses.

The Changewater station stood a couple hundred yards north of the crossing, where there is now a private residence. The cut of the railroad then goes straight northeast to Washington. The right of way itself now is only marked by a sunken tree line that does not climb as quickly the surrounding countryside that rises up from the Musconetcong, eventually requiring a cut through a culvert under County Road 635, the Asbury Anderson Road. The culvert has been filled in recent decades, and was known locally as Murderers' Bridge.⁵

Through the rolling terrain, the Warren Railroad maintained a fairly steady elevation that rises above or sinks below Route 645, Changewater

Road, which parallels its straight line on into Washington. Much of this property is private, though drainage ditches can be seen along the stretch, and in the winter months when foliage is less dense, pieces of anthracite can be found in among the grass—silent reminders of the original intention of this railway.

As the Warren railroad entered Washington, a sign of Blair's business pragmatism can be seen. One of the many competitors crossing the state with rail, the Morris and Essex Railroad, had chosen a northerly route from Newark through Morristown to Denville before striking west to Netcong. This route offered fewer obstacles it was thought, but also made the line slower moving west during the 19th century. From Netcong the M&E struck



South face of Oxford Tunnel
Photo from author's collection

south west through Hackettstown and more or less along what State Route 57 now runs to pass through Washington. There, on the south east corner of town the competitors made a junction and notable station (now long gone). While the WRR has long been abandoned, the M&E line ironically is still operated: freight by Conrail still travels on to Philipsburg, Easton and beyond.

The railroad bridges over Routes 57 and 31 North remain. Only a couple hundred yards to the west of Route 31 north of the

intersection, now marked by houses whose occupants may not know, the Morris Canal passed under the railroad that was destined to deny it so much business.

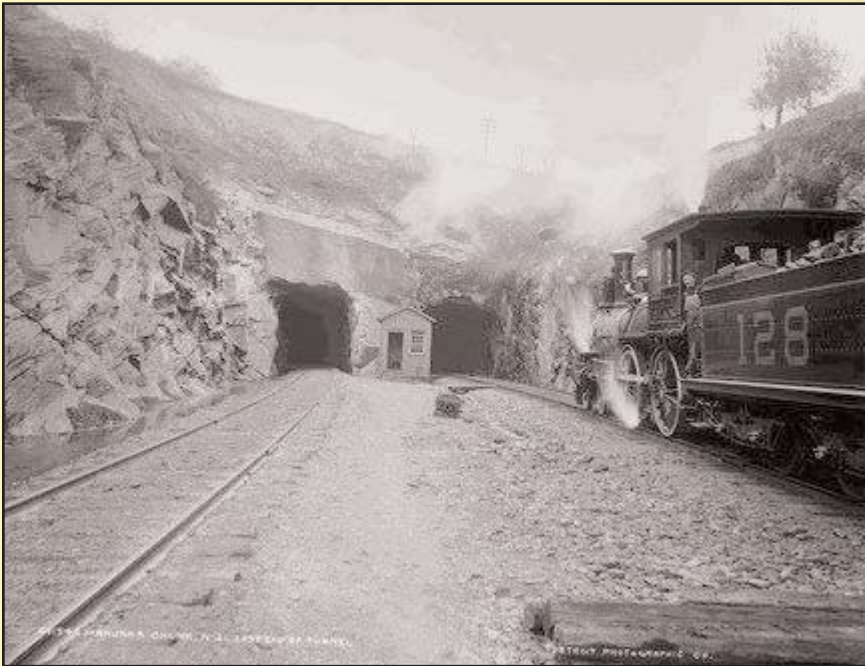
The WRR pushed northward, curving from north west to north east, from the Canal, leaving Washington. This part of the line is in fact passable for hiking, though much of it travels through private property and between still active farm fields. Before crossing over County Route 628, Jackson Valley Road, on a bridge that has since been dismantled, it crosses behind the new athletic fields of Warren Hills High School. After Route 628 it cuts a straight line parallel of Route 31 as it approaches Van Nest Gap.

There, Blair prepared for another technological marvel as he pushed his railroad under the Gap through a 3,000 foot tunnel known locally as the **Oxford Tunnel**. Frequent drainage problems plagued the tunnel despite its impressive construction. Today, the south end of the tunnel is easily accessible from Route 31, though it is on marked private property.

Many locals still visit the site (also known for the location of Michael Bollenscher's murder in September 1888) and the drainage issues can still be seen today as water trickles or more often pours out of the tunnel. The Warren Railroad entered this tunnel just under what is now Route 31 and traveled in a straight line coming out just north of Oram's Lane, east of 31. A massive cave in about half way through the tunnel manages to block more water and debris, causing the north side to be exceedingly swampy between the tunnel and Axford⁶ Avenue in Oxford, where there was once a bridge, now filled in over the railroad's right of way.

In Oxford, the furnaces started in the mid 1700s fueled by charcoal from the surrounding forests. In the 1800s, Oxford Furnaces expanded and started

using coal under the leadership of such notable personages such as the Scranton brothers (George and Selden, for whom the coal mining city in Pennsylvania was named). This occasioned yet another station stop. While the original Furnace ceased operation in the mid 1800s, there were several other furnaces owned by the Oxford enterprise still in operation up to the start of the 1900s. Today, however, the route of the railroad is lost under an industrial park until just north of the main intersection of town, near where the original Furnace preserve and Shippen Manor remain.



Manunka Chunk Tunnels south face "back in the day" circa 1880-1900. Note the few trees from farming and charcoal harvesting.

Picture source: <http://www.encore-editions.com/detroit-publishing-co/images/manunka-chunk-n-j-east-end-of-tunnel> visited June 29, 2012

Leaving Oxford, Blair made a choice as to how to get over the next ridge to the Pequest River. He chose to follow Furnace Brook to the north east of Oxford. Today the WRR right of way shares a bridge with Lower Denmark Road, bending on the east side of Route 31. Behind the houses on the north side of the road, stone embankments can be seen where the railroad actually ran between Route 31 and Lower Denmark Road, now marked by private houses. While Lower Denmark Road comes to a dead end, a bike path and hiking trail continue on along the WRR route north east, crossing County Road 625, Pequest Road, where it becomes unpaved, making a straight level run that eventually proved convenient for the Pequest Furnace.

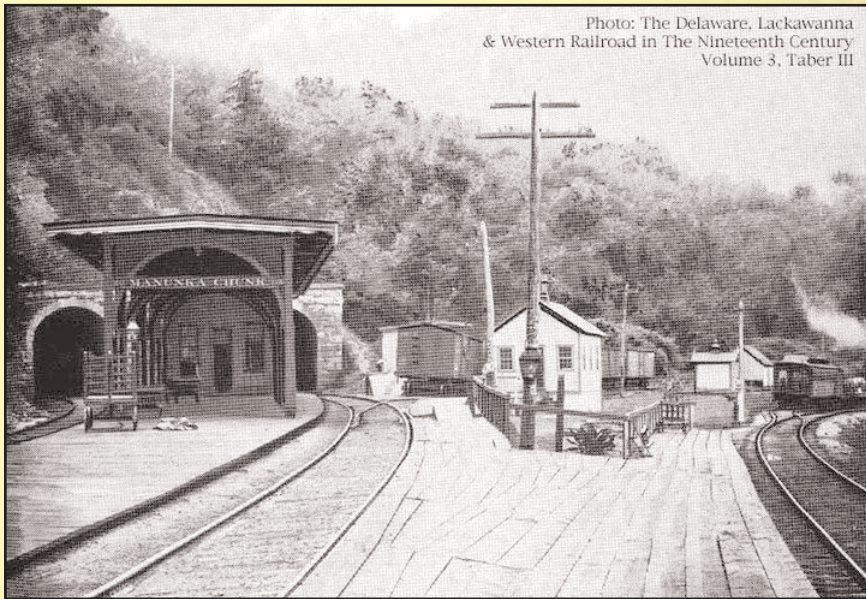


Manunka Chunk Tunnels South face today.

Photo from author's collection

A spur where the WRR finally turned west above the Pequest River fed into the furnace and community that sprung up around the site when it operated between 1870 and 1900. Today, little can be seen of the Furnace besides the slag heap that resulted from the Furnace's last blow out and the stone foundations hidden within the new forest that reclaimed the area after the industry moved on. From the furnace, located on the corner of Pequest Furnace Road and State Route 46 the WRR ran west along the south bank of the Pequest River, paralleling the later Lehigh & Hudson Railroad which connected Belvidere to Poughkeepsie, NY. Both lines on this stretch of land are open to the public as hiking and biking trails

preserved by the Pequest Wildlife Management. Just before the parallel rail lines make contact with the intersection of Routes 31 and 46 outside Buttzville, the WRR crosses over both the Pequest River and the LHRR on



Manunka Chunk Tunnels and Station Junction, north face circa 1890s. The WRR emerges from the tunnel on the left while the Bel Del comes up on the right.

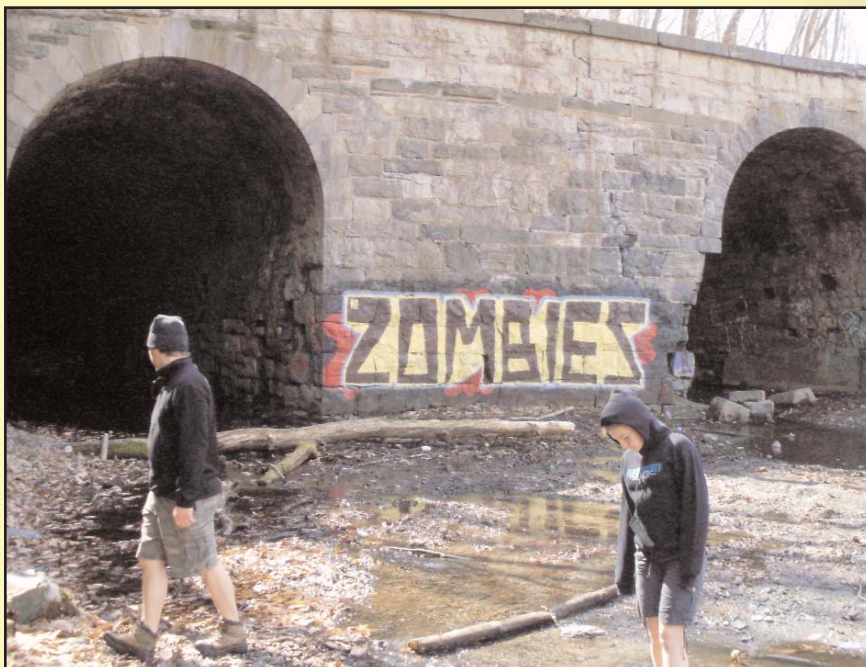
Picture source: <http://dlw-oldmain.tripod.com/manunka.html> visited June 29, 2012)

what is known as the Pequest Viaduct, a three arch bridge, first of stone, now of concrete that can still be seen and walked over today. The WRR then crossed over Route 46 just east of the intersection while the LHRR traveled straight on to Belvidere under Route 31.

The Final Stretch

Finally, John Blair's railroad started moving towards Pennsylvania. The WRR travelled along the north side of Route 46 west through Buttzville before deviating north through what is now a quarry. The line's path is again marred by later developments, but locals using the right of way as a bike or ATV path preserve some of it as it crosses over Rt 519, North Bridgefield Road at Bridgefield Station. This north east straight line continues over Hope Crossing Road, Beaver Brook, Serepta Road and Upper Serepta Road. Then, again, the railroad disappears into private lands before entering the Vass

Gap Tunnels at Manunka Chunk.



Manunka Chunk Tunnels north face today. Locals have clearly found the place convenient for self-expression
Photo from author's collection

and geo cache site, but numerous cave ins make entering them both dangerous and wet. Flooding from nearby Catharine's Run always caused problems when the railroad was maintained and has done nothing to

The **Manunka Chunk Tunnels** proved to be a challenge for Blair's construction teams as they would require a curve inside a mountain. It was over these tunnels a temporary railroad was required to start running goods to market to combat the costs of construction. While the tunnels at Vass Gap are shorter than Oxford at only 900 feet, the curve as the railroad moved from northwest to due north makes them darker, and the consistency of the stone in the mountain raised frequent issues in both construction and maintenance. Further, there were two tunnels to facilitate two-way traffic. Today, the tunnels are a predictable local attraction

*The less than
twenty mile
stretch of
railroad of the
Warren
Railroad can
be found in an
abandoned
state that calls
to those
interested in
finding lost
scraps of the
state's past.*

improve the condition of these ruins today.

Upon exiting the tunnels on the north side, Blair built **Manunka Chunk Station** and junction where the Belvidere and Delaware RR (Bel-Del) was tied in coming up from Belvidere in the south. Today the station is gone, numerous landslides have wiped away the landscape leaving only a narrow ledge used by dirt bikers above Route 46, but comparison pictures hint at what once was, and now is almost impossible to imagine.

Striking northwest between the ridge and the Delaware River, Blair directed the WRR to shadow what is now Route 46 from an elevation (now in the woods) through Ramseyburg to the small town of Delaware. There was the last stop before crossing a trestle bridge, which still stands, over the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. The DL & W RR picked up where the WRR ended, continuing up the Delaware River, through Portland, under the concrete arches of Delaware Viaduct the DL & W constructed later as part of their Lackawanna Cut Off, through Slateford Junction and Stroudsburg, from which the railroad pushed on to the coal fields of the Pennsylvania mountains.

The Later and Final Years

Blair's railroad may have run over budget in construction but continued to prove its usefulness for almost a century. The WRR continued delivering freight after the DL & W completed their Lackawanna Cutoff that ran from Slateford Junction along the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River beneath the Delaware Water Gap in a virtually straight, unbroken and elevated line to Port Morris, NJ. The Cutoff allowed high speed passenger trains, such as the *Phoebe Snow*, starting in 1911, which relegated the WRR "Old Road" to secondary status.

The high trestle bridge in Changewater was dismantled about 1959, closing off the line south of Washington. In 1968, large storms succeeded in wiping out sections of track, encouraging the DL & W, languishing under financial shortfalls with the rest of the railroads to simply pull up the rails, letting sections return to private ownership or the inexorable reclamation of nature.

After completing the WRR, John Insley Blair, the man who at the age of 10, continued in his endeavors. He went on to help the success of the Union Pacific Railroad, the first railroad to penetrate the Rockies, his business sense implying he had the Midas touch even if some projects, as the Warren RR, went over budget in construction. While one of—if not the—richest of men of the 19th century, he was little known to those outside the business, and while he spent a great deal of time traveling in his own private coach upon the railroads, he preferred his home in Blairstown, NJ to the bustling centers of business in New York or Chicago. He died there in 1899.

The modern age holds little interest in observing the world outside of

automobiles as commuters hurry from place to place in their crowded lives. The hints of the railroads that helped construct the world around them—and New Jersey specifically—are rapidly being swallowed up in the name of land development and enterprise. The less than twenty mile stretch of railroad of the Warren Railroad can be found in an abandoned state that calls to those interested in finding lost scraps of the state’s past. Blairstown Academy and the cemetery on Gravel Hill within the Academy’s grounds hold markers to the man more profound, and certainly more dignified, than the remains of the railroad he carved through the Warren county country side. John Insley Blair’s work, however, is impressive even when discovered in the woods or along country roads; its marks are still visible to those who know where to look and relish the idea of uncovering something forgotten and almost untouched by the advance of urban sprawl.

End Notes.

- 1 Cunningham, John T., Railroads in New Jersey, the Formative Years, Afton Publishing Company, Andover, NJ, 1997, p 144.
- 2 Cunningham, John T., Railroads in New Jersey, the Formative Years, Afton Publishing Company, Andover, NJ, 1997, p 147.
- 3 Cunningham, John T., Railroads in New Jersey, the Formative Years, Afton Publishing Company, Andover, NJ, 1997, p 148.
- 4 The later concrete bridge end can still be seen along State Route 31, on the west side shortly after passing over the former CRRNJ, now owned by NJ Transit.
- 5 Peter Parke and Joseph Carter, Jr. were hanged in Belvidere in August 1845 for the quadruple murders in Changewater 1843. As they were executed for murder, which many now doubt was just, they could not be buried with “decent folk.” Their graves were located on the corner of the Carter farm along Asbury Anderson and Port Colden roads. Time has marred the exact location of their graves leading many to speculate that their graves were moved or are currently under the Port Colden Road.
- 6 Axford is the name of the family that helped originally settle the area of Oxford.