

THE REBIRTH OF THE STEVENSVILLE TRAIN STATION

BY

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ALLABOARD! It's been decades since that cry rang out across the marsh flatlands of the Eastern Shore, but thanks to a group of local citizens who grabbed the opportunity and equipped with tenacity and talent, an important piece of our transportation history has come back to life. The Kent Island Heritage Society has completed the restoration of the old Stevensville Train Station. Starting summer 1992, visitors can take a trip almost a hundred years into our past.

In 1898, work was completed on what was called the Queen Anne Railroad. A short 4 years prior, the state legislature had approved and chartered the commission of the system after being convinced by interested parties that a line was necessary to connect the upper Chesapeake peninsula from east to west. For years, a north to south railroad had operated, but the small isolated towns of lower Queen Anne's County had been stranded without access to the growing regional trade. After winning the support of state lawmakers, the powers both in front and behind the scenes saw that their dream became prompt reality.

In the beginning steam ships from Baltimore would come into Queenstown, the western most station of the railroad. It seemed like the perfect harbor, had been so for centuries. But now, with transportation and commerce on a regular basis a critical component of an area's success, the winter freezes in Queenstown Creek necessitated a move. Stevensville was chosen as the next frontier, so to speak.

After laying the 13 miles of track and setting up 6 new stops along the way, the Stevensville train station opened for business in 1902. Kent Island had joined the fast and furious 20th century.

Every town in America desired a train station. It seems odd today, with trucks ripping up and down routes 50 and 301, and with overnight mail, that something as quaint as a train station could be on the cutting edge of commerce. But consider the impact, 90 years ago, when for the first time ever, any number of items, from letters to livestock, could go the 60 miles from Stevensville to Lewes, Delaware in two hours. Phenomenally, newspapers printed that day in Baltimore could be delivered on an Eastern Shore front porch before dark. Almost every aspect of local residents' daily lives became easier with the train's presence.

The railroads were connecting nerves of a region, and a nation in the midst of a technological revolution such as the world had never seen. Advances in science were being made with dizzying speed. And after 2 short decades, the Queen Anne's Railroad had already begun its decline into nonexistence.

In the early '20s, automobiles were becoming more affordable and prevalent. Henry Ford had taken the motor car out of the hands of the elite, and put the average Joe behind the wheel. In 1923, the Baltimore ferries began to transport cars, and the railroad system was dealt a minor but portentous blow. Within a short time, local ferries began to run from Annapolis, and later Sandy Point to Matapeake. This short and continuous route made driving locally that much more attractive. In 1938, the trains stopped passenger service. Freight kept the old locomotives chugging for a time, but by 1953 the trains went no farther west than Queenstown again. Stations at Grasonville, the Narrows, Chester, and of course, Stevensville were closed. Faithful to the end, one of the last loads brought into our area by train consisted of material used to construct the original span of the Bay Bridge. The Bridge was the final defeat for the local railroad system. The trains, and everything connected to them had become obsolete¹ America had reached a cross roads, and they were paved, not railed.

For some time a family lived in the old train station. Makeshift shelter was the building's only duty, and that too was eventually abandoned. The site became overgrown with weeds, neglected and finally forgotten.

In 1987, an owner of a site on State Road, in Stevensville decided to build an auto body repair shop on his recently rezoned property. The only hold up was the dilapidated building quietly taking up space there. Fortunately, the owner, Mr. Skip Morgan, mentioned the structure to a friend, local artist Barbara Koenig. When she looked at the ruined shaped in front of her, she was reminded of a picture postcard she had seen of the train station. She suggested a call be made to the Heritage Society.

Chas. G. (Gil) Dunn was the Society's president. At first skeptical, he too was soon convinced that the building was authentic. Dunn expressed interest, but it was clear that if the building was going to be saved, it had to be carefully moved. Mr. Morgan had plans and deadlines to meet.

Again, interest and concern conspired to save the bundle of wooden bones from a fate worse than uselessness. One morning, "Doc" Dunn showed up at the site to find more than a dozen construction workers from the Bay Bridge, armed to the teeth with expertise and energy. Coming off an all night shift of Bridge resurfacing, the crew was anxious to get the show on the road. When the foreman bypassed some minor safety precautions for speeds sake, he told "Doc" Dunn that if anyone complained, refer them to the foreman. "Doc" was still too stunned to find the words to tell the man that he didn't know who he was. Carpenters inspected the shack to determine the safest way to lift it. A normally expensive operator wielded a massive crane for free, lifting the shaky structure onto a flatbed truck specially modified for this task by welders. Going into Backlane from behind, bulldozers cleared, then replaced a path to the Cray House property. In a matter of hours, the train station was awakened from its deterioration, picked up, and moved to where it could begin it's recovery. That recovery has been completed. Though it will never again hear the rumble of a coal burner shuffling into place, at least living people will once again haunt it's tiny space.

While talking about the restoration, Dunn is quick to give credit where credit is due to the many volunteers who gave time and work to this project. Dunn would be aghast to think he left someone out that has helped in the painstaking process. From his right hand men, Melvin Clark and Norman Park; to contractors that donated their professional services - masons, carpenters, and electricians; to financial benefactors, to the gentleman that donated excess ground for the station to have its own home next to the Cray House, none go unmentioned by Dunn. He's obviously sincere in his gratitude to all that helped. It's as though he'd be the hardest to convince of his own importance in the station's recovery. But looking at the work done, it's certain that occasionally his back, neck or arms must have reminded him of it. The rebirth has been anything but a breeze.