

# Elizabethtown

## Historic

FREIGHT STATION





*The Elizabethtown Freight Station, built in 1912, was removed in 2013. While demolition made way for further modernization of Pennsylvania's Keystone Corridor to meet current and future ridership needs, in its day the freight station was vitally important to Elizabethtown and the surrounding region.*

*To help preserve and publicize the history of the Elizabethtown Freight Station, and to meet the requirements of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) executed in 2013 under Section 106 of the National Historic*

*Preservation Act of 1966, this booklet was prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation in cooperation with:*

- *U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration (FTA)*
- *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC)*
- *Borough of Elizabethtown*

2014



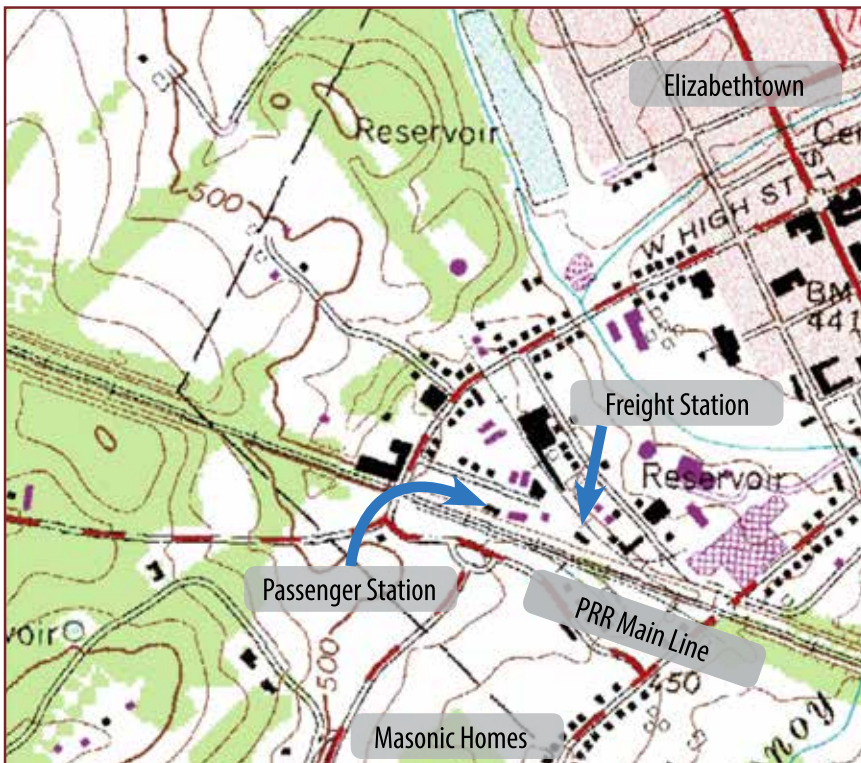
# When, where, and why was the station built?

The Pennsylvania Railroad built the Elizabethtown Freight Station in 1912 to replace a circa 1890 facility.

The Harrisburg, Portsmouth (now part of Middletown), Mountjoy, and Lancaster Railroad had opened in 1838, with a stop in Elizabethtown. The Pennsylvania Railroad, chartered in 1846, leased and later purchased the railroad line.

Between 1898 and 1899, the Pennsylvania Railroad relocated many of its main line tracks to eliminate at-grade crossings and reduce collisions with horse-drawn buggies and wagons. At Elizabethtown the railroad main line was moved to an embankment along the southwestern edge of town, with a bridge across High Street.

The old main line became a siding (pull-off), along which the freight station was later built.



"Sign of the Bear" tavern, still a local landmark, served travelers between Lancaster and Harrisburg in the 1700s and helped establish Elizabethtown as a transportation hub.

**Elizabethtown was a transportation hub** long before the railroad came through. A Native American trail once ran along present-day Market Street. In 1718 an early European trader, Peter Bezaillon, established a road along the trail.

In 1732, Thomas and Mary Harris built a cabin along the road, and by 1738 they had received permission to operate a tavern out of it, which was known as the "Sign of the Bear." The location of the Harris' tavern, about midway between Lancaster to the east and Harrisburg to the west, made it an ideal stop for travelers. By 1745, the Harris family had made enough money to build a larger, stone tavern (pictured, above).

Elizabethtown grew up around this tavern, and became the population center and business and transportation hub for the surrounding area. Elizabethtown achieved borough status in 1827.

# What did the freight station look like?



The wide overhanging eaves of the side gable roof sheltered the platforms and the station doors from the elements. The building's architectural elements included exposed rafters, triangular knee braces, and wood shingle siding.



The Pennsylvania Railroad did not have a standard design for small freight stations. An in-house architect designed each station to suit its site. Nevertheless, the 1912 Elizabethtown Freight Station had a number of features typical of small, wood frame freight stations.

The single-story, 85-foot-long, 22-foot-wide building had full-length wood platforms on the long sides. The track-side platform was built to the height of the floor of a railroad boxcar, which simplified loading and unloading freight. Similarly, the street-side platform was the same height as a delivery wagon. Originally, the roof was finished with granite shingles; these were later replaced by corrugated metal.

The building sat on 24 short concrete piers, creating a crawl space beneath part of the station. A 12-foot by 12-foot basement at the station's east end held a coal burning stove.

# How did it operate?

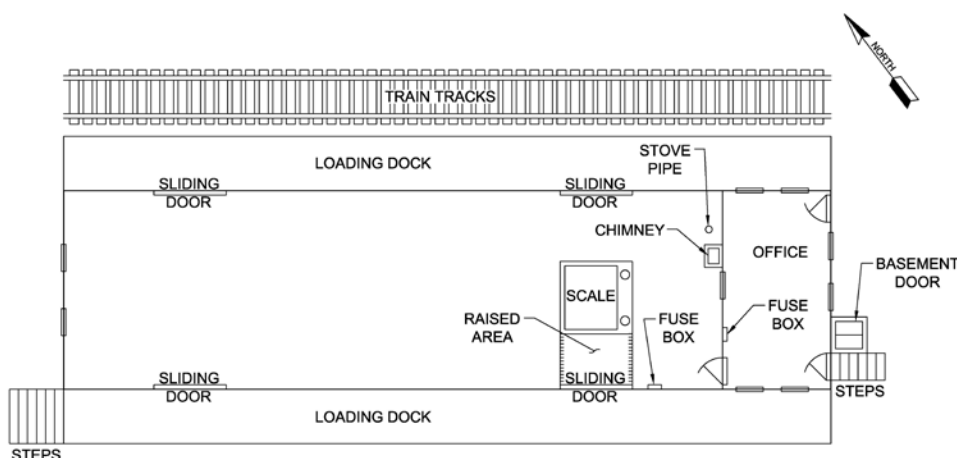
## The Elizabethtown Freight Station was designed for efficiency.

It had three functional areas: a warehouse (also called “the floor”), an office, and exterior platforms.

The warehouse portion had an open floor plan so freight could easily be moved. Four large sliding doors permitted efficient movement of freight to and from the platforms.

Freight movement followed an orderly pattern through the station. Goods heading out of Elizabethtown arrived at the street-side platform, which was the height of a wagon for ease of unloading. Workers moved the freight by hand, using hand trucks or carts, or by pushing or rolling it. Freight was moved through the right-hand sliding door into the warehouse. There it was weighed and then stored to await the train.

Freight arriving at the station by rail came in on the track-side platform, which was built to the floor height of a standard boxcar. Freight was then moved into the warehouse for storage, or through the warehouse to the opposite platform for customer pick-up.



The warehouse portion of the freight station had unfinished interior walls, with horizontal boards spaced along the lower portion of the walls. They protected the walls and were useful when stacking and securing freight.

A scale built into the floor was used to weigh outbound freight.



# What did the station clerk do?

The office was the organizational center of the freight station and was run by the chief station clerk.

The clerk scheduled freight pick-ups, logged freight arrivals and departures, and kept track of payments. A window or door between the office and warehouse gave the clerk a view of the warehouse and its contents.

After outbound freight was weighed, the clerk determined the shipping charge based on the weight and size of the freight and the distance it would be transported. The clerk then put a tag on the freight, indicating that the delivery cost had been paid and specifying its final destination.

If there was enough freight going to a particular destination to fill a rail car, the freight could be moved immediately onto a car. If not, the goods would be stored in the warehouse awaiting a full load.

In 1910, the Pennsylvania Railroad hired Joseph Helm (1892-1976) to be a freight clerk in the Elizabethtown Freight Station; he moved to Elizabethtown when the station opened in 1912.

In 1930, Helm became Chief Clerk of the Elizabethtown Freight Station. He worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad for 49 years. When Joe Helm retired, the railroad gave him a certificate—personally signed by Pennsylvania Railroad President James M. Symes (1897-1976)—noting that his name had been added to the company's Roll of Honor.



*photo courtesy of the Helm family, Ancestry.com*

In 1916, Elizabethtown Chief Station Clerk Joseph Helm married Olive Shiffet (1894-1972). They are pictured above circa 1917.

# Why was a local freight station so important?

Freight was the lifeblood of railroads, and freight stations were vital to communities.



*postcard image courtesy of the Elizabethtown Historical Society*

Merchants along Market Street, Elizabethtown's main commercial avenue, would have used the Elizabethtown Freight Station to ship and receive merchandise.

**In the days before widespread use of automobiles and trucks**, a freight station connected a town to the larger world, bringing in essential goods, newspapers, and mail; enabling farmers and businesses to ship their products throughout the country; and providing a means for people to send goods to far away relatives and friends.

The Elizabethtown Freight Station handled nearly every type of freight going to or coming from Elizabethtown and the surrounding area. Information compiled by the Pennsylvania Railroad just prior to constructing the new freight station in 1912 indicated that three-quarters of the freight handled by the station was classified as general merchandise. Almost two-thirds of that was inbound freight—goods bound for the businesses and people of Elizabethtown. Most of the remaining material

consisted of inbound coal and coke destined to power businesses and provide a heating source. A small amount of livestock was shipped out of the station.

**The Elizabethtown Freight Station**, like almost all small freight stations, handled primarily less-than-carload freight—freight shipments that would not fill an entire railroad boxcar. For outbound traffic, a boxcar would be parked on the siding beside the station. Merchants like those on South Market Street, Elizabethtown's main commercial avenue, would bring their products to the freight station for processing and shipping. When enough outbound goods were gathered from Elizabethtown and the surrounding area to fill the boxcar, it would be picked up by a scheduled freight train and moved to a classification yard, where the goods were sorted based on their destination.

Inbound traffic would arrive at the siding next to the Elizabethtown Freight Station in one or more boxcars. The station agent would check the



*photo courtesy of the Elizabethtown Historical Society*

Delivery vehicles like these in front of Klein's Chocolate (1917) would have been used to take less-than-carload freight to and from the Elizabethtown Freight Station.

## The station's economic role, cont'd.



*postcard image courtesy of the Elizabethtown Historical Society*

Kreider Shoe Manufacturing Company, shown in this 1913 postcard, is an example of an Elizabethtown business that did not have its own railroad siding and would likely have used the Elizabethtown Freight Station for receiving raw materials and shipping finished goods.

**During its final decade of operation,** the Elizabethtown Freight Station also housed the office of the Railway Express Agency (REA). REA carried smaller, high-value freight, which often needed to reach its destination quickly. Initially, the REA office was located in the Elizabethtown Passenger Station. However, by the 1960s, the freight business of both the REA and the nation's railroads was struggling due to competition from trucking firms. In a bid to save money, the REA office was moved to the Elizabethtown Freight Station, and the railroad clerk also served as the REA clerk. The REA went bankrupt in 1975.



*portion of a 1954 REA advertisement,  
Library of Congress*

shipment against the manifest (the list of goods on board) and stack the merchandise inside the station. Business owners and residents would be notified that a shipment had come in, and they would either arrive at the station or arrange for a delivery team to pick up the goods. Coal cars would proceed directly to storage yards that had individual sidings, but the station agent would process the paperwork.

Most inbound and outbound freight was for and from people and businesses that lacked individual railroad sidings. In addition to retailers on South Market Street, this would have included larger Elizabethtown manufacturers and shippers such as Kreider Shoe Manufacturing, W.A. Withers Shoe Company, J.M. Brightbill Planing Mill and Lumber Yard, J.J. Doyle Cigar Company, Elizabethtown Roller Mills, and Century Manufacturing Company, a maker of electrical signs. Even large employers that had their own railroad sidings, such as Klein Chocolate Company and A. Buch's Sons Company, a manufacturer of farm implements, would have used the Elizabethtown Freight Station for smaller, less-than-carload shipments.

One of the more unusual items handled through the freight station was automobiles—machines that would play a role in putting most railroad passenger service and some of its freight service out of business. Dick Helm, son of Elizabethtown Station Manager Joseph Helm, recalls a shipment of 1933 Pontiacs arriving at the freight station on flatcars. The automobiles were shipped without batteries, so the freight station crew had to use muscle power to push them off the flatcars, onto the station platform, and then down a ramp. The cars were then towed to Elizabethtown dealerships.

# Why was the freight station eventually closed?

When the Pennsylvania Railroad opened the Elizabethtown Freight Station in 1912, railroads were the best and most efficient way to move bulky freight long distances. Horse-drawn wagons and early trucks moved more slowly and carried far less freight per load. In addition, many roads were narrow, poorly maintained, and in bad condition, limiting their usefulness for long distance hauls.

However, the “Good Roads” movement was already underway—advocates had begun lobbying in the late 1800s for a state and federal role in building and maintaining quality roadways. In response, the Pennsylvania Department of Highways was formed in 1903 to aid with road construction.

With the passage of the Federal-Aid Road Law of 1916, the federal government appropriated \$75 million for roads and bridges, to be matched dollar-for-dollar by the states. A nationwide period of intensive roadway construction began and lasted until the beginning of World War II.

**The improved road system, combined with the mass production of affordable automobiles and trucks, took freight business away from the railroads.**



By the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s, many railroads were ailing and cutting routes.

Gasoline rationing and the need for war materiel temporarily revived the railroad freight business during World War II, but after the war its decline continued. Adding to the railroads' woes, in 1956 the Interstate Highway System bill passed, committing the federal government and the states to constructing a nationwide network of high speed, limited access superhighways, which further aided

the trucking industry at the expense of the railroads.

As demand for railroad freight service continued to diminish, carriers looked to consolidate their operations. In 1968, the Pennsylvania Railroad merged with its long-time rival, the New York Central Railroad, to form the Penn Central Transportation Company.

Two years later, the new company declared bankruptcy. To pay Penn Central's creditors, bankruptcy courts sold many of its assets. This included the Elizabethtown Freight Station, which was purchased by a local contractor in 1979. The Elizabethtown Freight Station became a warehouse, and was used by several businesses over the next 33 years.

# Why was the building removed?



Elizabethtown Amtrak Passenger Station, 2013

In 2005, the Borough of Elizabethtown (<http://www.ETownOnline.com>) released a master plan for downtown Elizabethtown that covered a wide range of issues important to the economic development of the community. One issue was the restoration of the Elizabethtown Amtrak Passenger Station (originally constructed by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1916) and expansion of its parking lot. Studies had shown that train ridership had been increasing for a decade with the parking lot generally full on weekdays. Parking lot expansion was necessary to accommodate increasing ridership.

Between 2009 and 2011, the passenger station was restored. In order to expand the parking lot, the Borough needed to acquire a property adjacent to the existing facilities; however, the Elizabethtown Freight Station building stood on the property. The master plan called for the relocation of the freight station. However, after much deliberation by the Borough, a suitable relocation site could not be identified. The freight station was removed in 2013, and the new parking lot, serving the Elizabethtown Amtrak Passenger Station, was constructed on its site as part of the modernization of Pennsylvania's Keystone Corridor.



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Elizabethtown Freight Station, circa 1920.

*photo courtesy of Elizabethtown Historical Society*