

TRANSPORTATION HISTORY

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“Knowledge is of two sorts; one either knows a thing, or he knows where to find out a thing.”

This observation of Dr. Samuel Johnson should be of comfort to people curious about transportation history. By many measures transportation history has achieved a high level of public interest and involvement, and the topic is also the subject of substantial professional interest. At the same time, however, there is cause for some concern about whether the resources required for a high level of research in transportation history are adequate or are being jeopardized by the increasingly common weeding out of public records.

Public Interest in Transportation History

Within the last few years, prize-winning authors and movie and television producers have devoted substantial attention to such icons of transportation history as the Brooklyn Bridge; the Panama Canal; the journeys of Lewis and Clark; the Columbian voyages of discovery; the Mormon migration; and, naturally, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Although such productions may not focus primarily on transportation history, they serve to integrate that history with other themes of public interest.

It is possible to gauge the public's interest in transportation history by reference to a host of examples, ranging from the most popular museum in America—the National Air and Space Museum, visited by some 9 million people each year—to the broad public attraction to “old” U.S. Route 66, stretching from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean. The public's interest and the services, facilities, and programs aimed at responding to that interest cover the gamut of transportation modes.

Transportation Museums

The countless places where the public has access to the physical past are essential elements of transportation history. As is observed in the *Harvard Guide to American History* (1):

In addition to the written sources of history, there exist a variety of nondocumentary sources of information and understanding in the form of three-dimensional survivals from the past—both man-made and natural. To view Ford's Theater or drive through the Donner Pass, to examine a flintlock musket or the *Spirit of St. Louis*, to observe the tools and processes related to spinning and weaving yields a wealth of facts and impressions, available in no other way, about the events, people, and ideas of the past.

North American Automobile Museums, a publication of Automobile Quarterly, Inc., identifies 238 automobile museums in North America (220 in the United States and 18 in Canada) (2). Located within 45 states and 8 provinces, these museums range in size from immense to very small. In addition to displaying automobiles, many of these museums serve as a rich source of the artifacts, relics, and objects of every kind that are associated with the automotive age. The level of patronage of these museums is unknown, but is probably limited more by a lack of public awareness of their existence than a lack of interest.

Similarly, the *Guide to Tourist Railroads and Museums* lists more than 350 such railroads in 49 states and 7 provinces (3), ranging in length from a few hundred feet to a 640-mile line between Vancouver and Calgary. Some of the museums, such as the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, are highly sophisticated. The guide notes that almost all tourist railroads and railroad muse-

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ums were created during the last 50 years; before then, if people wanted to ride on an old-fashioned train, they just boarded one. Railroad history is noteworthy for a visible professionalism, evidenced by groups such as the Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, Inc., and comprehensive summaries such as *The Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (4) and *The American Heritage History of Railroads in America* (5).

In states known for their association with a particular mode of transportation, those historical connections are generally highly visible to the public. "Commemorating Pennsylvania's proud railroading heritage," the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation is issuing a distinctive automobile license plate featuring a steam locomotive (6). Nearly half of the price charged for the plates will be used to underwrite the education and exhibit program of the Pennsylvania History and Museum Commission.

According to the Council of American Maritime Museums, there are more than 300 maritime museums in 38 states and 42 more in 4 Canadian provinces. As is the case for the other modes, these museums vary in size, budget, and sophistication. Some, such as San Francisco National Historical Park, conceived 50 years ago, benefit from federal funding assistance and provide a substantial level of service. The San Francisco park, for example, has 35 acres of waterfront with nine buildings and 50,000 square feet of exhibit space. Its \$3 million budget covers about 100 full- or part-time consultants, a collection of 5,000 archeological pieces, 120,000 ship plans, 250,000 photographs, and 20,000 general historical artifacts.

A parallel situation exists with regard to aviation. *The North American Aircraft & Aerospace Museum Guide* lists more than 200 museums in 46 states and the District of Columbia (7). Another 18 museums can be found in 6 Canadian provinces. The focus of these museums is on aircraft, but several of the museums are dedicated to individuals and groups important to aviation history. In addition to museums, the guide now includes a half-dozen "terminal queens"—airports that display vintage aircraft. Like museums for the other modes, aviation museums rely on the efforts of volunteers and historical societies. The American Aviation Historical Society, founded in 1956, has more than 4,000 members, and has been publishing a journal since the organization's inception. There is also a parallel International Society of Aviation Historians, begun in Great Britain shortly after World War II.

Indeed, the role of volunteers in activities related to transportation history would be difficult to overstate. At the National Air and Space Museum, for example, the ratio of volunteers to paid staff is roughly two to one. The museum's 138 docents alone nearly match the approximately 150 permanent employees. Within the facility's archives are about 30 volunteers and 15 permanent employees.

Other Facilities

Though museums by their nature often concentrate on the rolling stock of transportation history, there are many other ways in which the larger-scale aspects of transportation history can be brought to the public's attention. Roadside rest stops, for example, are often located with an eye to transportation history. One Wyoming rest area provides overlooks and historical interpretations of the nearby visible remnants of the Oregon Trail. Not far away is another roadside rest stop adjacent to pioneer-inscribed Independence Rock, a landmark of several western migration routes. Indeed, for many years the state's highway maps have shown the routes of both famous cattle-drive trails and migration paths. In a similar vein, a number of states preserve historic bridges at rest areas and use state highway maps to point out covered bridges.

Perhaps the largest example of retention of a historic transportation right-of-way is the recent show of both public and private interest in preserving the atmosphere and some of the facilities of old U.S. Route 66 between Illinois and California. Comparable efforts to preserve and rehabilitate historic rights-of-way are evidenced by tourist railroads and such unusual sites as Maryland's College Park Airport. In the latter case an entire airport, the first in the country, has been rehabilitated and preserved as a historic site by the local planning agency. The C&O National Historical Park encompasses a 185-mile strip from Washington, D.C., to Cumberland, Maryland; it is run by the National Park Service and a cooperating private organization, and includes interpretive sites.

Rich resources for transportation history can also be found in places where that history is incidental to the primary focus. Writing on maritime history research, one historian notes, "The traveler will also come upon interesting collections in such unexpected places as public libraries, art galleries, and great universities." The author observes further that these dispersed collections often provide local flavor missing from the great collections (8).

Paper Records and Other Issues

Much of the substance of transportation history resides in the physical traces of past events preserved through the resources noted above. Yet a great deal of that history is to be found only in the record of public and private deliberations and decisions. To a great degree these are paper records, some of which are now at risk.

The demise of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) brings this issue into focus. When the ICC closed its doors, its library became available for relocation. For some that library constituted a significant historical resource. As it happened, however, many of those who considered taking over the library found that the cost of relocation exceeded the benefits to be derived. An inspection showed that the facility substantially duplicated material available elsewhere in Washington. The collection, or parts of it, has since found a home, but the incident raised a fundamental question: What transportation records are essential, how essential, and to whom?

Other issues characterize the state of the art of transportation history. Although museums and libraries can be counted, it is more difficult to judge how well they carry out their interpretive role and whether the professional skills needed to operate them are being developed. Whereas entertainment has now been supplanted by education as the focus for most American museums, their ability to do the latter job well is still uncertain.

The state of the art is also uncertain in another important respect: the power and potential of the Internet to serve the needs of a diverse and dispersed corps of professionals and others eager to use and enjoy the benefits of transportation history. The Internet may provide the best way to tap the broad spectrum of research resources that characterize transportation history today.

Future Directions

The broad range of facilities described above attests to the public's interest in transportation history. Yet that interest is focused more on the



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Among transportation relics of the Railroad Hall of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., is Southern Railway's engine No. 1401.

objects of transportation—automobiles, locomotives, ships, airplanes—than on transportation itself and its role in society. It is probably an overstatement to say there are few museums that focus on the story of transportation, but it is safe to say that their numbers are limited. This gap should be of concern to transportation professionals.

If we are convinced that the public should know about the role of transportation in society, we must ask what story should be told. Moreover, it is not clear that our storytelling abilities and institutions are up to the task. In an increasingly video-driven world, the sophistication of the materials being used may not be keeping pace with the sophistication of the public. We must find better means of telling the story in interesting and concise ways while not oversimplifying or resorting to excessive reliance on flashy sound bites.

As we look at the future of the field of transportation history, our most serious concern must be for the loss of the archives that are so essential to understanding the past. We can be relatively secure about the objects of travel; these transportation artifacts appear to have enough economic value (particularly in terms of tourism) to ensure that they will be with us for a long time to come.

With regard to archiving, however, there is no guidance as to what to save or in what media. There has recently been congressional recognition of these needs, and the profession is better served today than in the recent past. Transportation historical agencies are directly funded under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, and many historical activities are now eligible for funding under the TEA-21 program. More significant, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics has been given a mandate to establish a National Transportation Library that will embrace and serve to focus many archival functions.

Although archivists will have a strong sense of what needs to be preserved, each profession has responsibility for ensuring that the materials important for its purposes are retained. The many

new forms of storage and preservation, all apparently so permanent, may give us a false sense of security about our ability to preserve the key documents of the past. We need both institutions and technology to deal with the aging written source materials of transportation history. Archival technology to find and preserve what needs to be saved is important, as are stable institutions to maintain what is preserved, particularly as digital media become obsolete with technological changes.

The greatest threat to our ability to access key documents of the past will be the disinterest of the organizations involved. The profession must focus on demonstrating the importance of this issue by showing the value of the historical work of the past. Imbuing the transportation professionals of today and tomorrow with a sense of the past will make them better preservationists and better professionals in the future.

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