

PREFACE

Considered in retrospect, The Pennsylvania Canal, built by the Commonwealth during the mid-1800's, may seem little more than a somewhat strange and highly unsuccessful experiment in public ownership. No constant and profitable public revenue resulted from its operation, and recurrent problems and difficulties marked its maintenance by the Commonwealth. On the other hand, the canal spelled prosperity for many an iron master, coal mine operator, lumberman, and merchant; its part in the history of the people of Pennsylvania was a not inconsiderable one.

The Pennsylvania Canal was both the symbol and the expression of an era of trade and industry. It was the means of uniting Erie and Pittsburgh, of linking the life of the Susquehanna River region with that of the eastern seaboard cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. The building of the canal transformed Pennsylvania's scattered and distant watershed into one unified trade-and-passenger-carrying line of transportation, encompassing the valleys of the Delaware, the Susquehanna, the Juniata, the Conemaugh, the Kiskiminetas, and the Allegheny rivers. As a public facility, it kept the Commonwealth abreast of its neighbors, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Ohio; and it enabled Pennsylvania to rival its neighbors in the extent of their enterprise.

During the time the canal was a state-owned property, moreover, it appears to a certain extent to have somewhat unintentionally served as both a college of engineering and as a training school for men who subsequently rose to political leadership in the Commonwealth.

The canal's first professional builders acquired certain techniques from engineers employed earlier on the Erie Canal in New York State and, in turn, passed them on to the generation of railroad builders which followed. The apprentice assistants to the canal engineers, having acquired their own first skills from the earlier surveyors of farmsteads and of public roads, became the great builders of American railroads, such as John Edgar Thomson and William Milnor Roberts.