

Pennsylvania Railroad at Exchange Place

What is lost, what remains, what can be

Adapted from sources noted below

New Jersey historian John T. Cunningham referred to Hudson County as “a mantle of wheels” for its central role in transportation.

Exchange Place contributed to that characterization – it was a transportation center since colonial times. The first steam ferry service in the world was established in 1812 when Robert Fulton travelled between Paulus Hook and Cortlandt Street in Manhattan; it lasted until 1949. In 1838, the New Jersey Railroad terminal located here. When the Pennsylvania Railroad acquired the NJR, it replaced the terminal twice. The second terminal, built 1888-89, was the largest passenger terminal in the world at the time. Passengers could move directly between the trains and ferries without going outside.



PRR Railroad Depot at Exchange Place

After 1910, when Penn Station opened in New York, passenger train service to Jersey City dwindled. By 1962 it was ended. The main Jersey City terminal was demolished, leaving a large open space on the waterfront. ¹

PRR, Warehouse District, and Harsimus Branch

North of the Exchange Place station lay an industrial and warehouse district, which was served by the PRR Harsimus Branch freightway at 6th Street via a network of rail spurs fanning out through the Harsimus Yards from what is now BJ's parking lot. Remnants of these spurs can still be seen on Provost Street.² Some of the world's largest manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers built here, including Lorillard Tobacco, the largest taxpayer in the U.S. at one time, at the now demolished 111 First Street. Enough buildings remain to be “something of a sampler of later 19th and early 20th century industrial architecture.”³ These include examples of early reinforced concrete construction. Among buildings still standing are Butler Brothers (1906), supplier to five-and-dimes, at 350 Morgan Street, and the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company headquarters (1908) at 150 Bay Street.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exchange_Place_\(Jersey_City\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exchange_Place_(Jersey_City))

² http://www.padnajc.org/about_pad_full.html

³ Nomination of Warehouse District to State and National Register of Historic Places (draft), Rick James.

The warehouses were part of a cityscape that historian Rick James notes was “a continuous railyard, complete with track, cattle pens, grain elevators, piers and cranes for car floats and lighters...from Exchange Place up to the Hoboken line (and Lackawanna yards and station). Most everything east of Henderson Street was railyard.”

Harsimus Branch Embankment

The PRR passenger terminal is gone, as are most of the spur tracks of the Warehouse District, and the extensive rail yards that covered the waterfront have been replaced by new development. The District itself is diminished through recent demolition of key buildings. To the north and west of the District and Exchange Place, however, the Pennsylvania Railroad Harsimus Branch Embankment remains. This stone segmented structure, a monument to the Golden Age of Railroading and the height of the Pennsylvania Railroad’s power, runs for six blocks west from Manila to Brunswick Streets. A series of stone stanchions that once supported the line on iron trestles can be seen beyond Brunswick and across Newark Avenue.



PRR Harsimus Branch Embankment (green swath) looking west to east toward the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway and the Hudson River, with Manhattan in the distance

The Connection That Can Be

Today Exchange Place, the Warehouse District, and the Embankment are proposed to be reconnected via the East Coast Greenway (ECG). The ECG is a largely off-road walking and bicycling trail being assembled from Maine to Florida. It is more than 50 percent complete in New Jersey.

From west to east across Jersey City, the recommended spine route will use the Bergen Arches/Erie Cut through the Palisades, emerging under Dickinson High School; approach the Harsimus Branch at Newark Avenue; and use the Embankment surface at 6th Street, as the PRR trains once did, to reach the waterfront. The Hudson River Waterfront Walkway running north to south between 6th Street and Exchange Place is a designated segment of the spine route, and will bring Greenway travellers to ferry connections to Manhattan. These travellers will be able to experience the historic Embankment, the National Historic Districts of Hamilton Park and Harsimus Cove, the spectacular waterfront views of Manhattan, and stop off at a restored Hudson & Manhattan Powerhouse or warehouses transformed into art and entertainment venues as part of Jersey City’s Powerhouse Arts District. That is the vision.