



Princeton University Archives.

# THE PRINCETON

*From Camden & Amboy to NJ Transit*

JOHN R. WILMOT



1 "ALL ABOARD for Princeton," is the call to be heard from the conductor at Princeton Junction, N.J., half a dozen times a day. The train will be back in half an hour, having completed its round-trip run of 2.7 miles each way, ready to leave again on the nation's shortest scheduled rail service.\*

The branch has been operated by:

- The Camden & Amboy Rail Road & Transportation Company, 1865-1871.
- Pennsylvania Railroad Company, as lessee of the United New Jersey Railroad & Canal Company, 1871-1968.
- Penn Central, under several technically different names and also as lessee of the United New Jersey, 1968-1976.
- Conrail, as owner, 1976-1982.
- New Jersey Transit Corporation, which has assigned the line to its subsidiary, NJ Transit Rail Operations, Inc., 1983-present.

In its 122 years, the Princeton Branch has acquired at least two nicknames which are in use today: "PJ&B"

(Princeton Junction & Back) has quite a long history, while "the Dinky" is of more recent origin and seems to be favored by more than half of the media professionals and the public.

The New Jersey Transit Corporation, formed in 1979, is wholly owned by the State; its chairman is the transportation commissioner. In 1980, it acquired Transport of New Jersey, which operated a bus system virtually statewide and was merely a change in name of Public Service Coordinated Transport, a modern version of the Public Service Railway dating from the turn of the century. This system, including the 4.3-mile City Subway in Newark (operated with PCC streetcars), was transferred to a subsidiary, NJ Transit Bus Operations, Inc. This subsidiary has since added other routes. On January 1, 1983, Conrail was relieved of all passenger service, and the New Jersey Transit Corporation acquired all Conrail lines in the state on which passenger service was operated, plus Conrail's passenger trackage rights over Amtrak's Northeast Corridor. These lines

\*The Boston & Albany's Riverside to Newton Lower Falls (Mass.) service of 1.2 miles ran on a very abbreviated basis in the early 1950's.



TICKETS from author's collection anchor a panoramic drawing (left) of the Princeton University campus and station about 1907 and a night scene at Princeton Junction (below) in the fall of 1965 of PRR M.U.'s swooping out, reminding photographer of a Pacific Electric combo.

# BRANCH

Richard Steinheimer  
John R. Wilmot



ON September 16, 1961, a GG1 arrives Princeton Junction from New York as the Dinky awaits its connecting passengers.



are now operated by NJ Transit Rail Operations, Inc.

In the late 1820's, two groups were promoting competitive projects before the New Jersey legislature and elsewhere. One, led by Robert F. Stockton of Princeton, was backing the Delaware & Raritan Canal; the other, led by Robert and John Cox Stevens of Hoboken, was backing the Camden & Amboy Rail Road & Transportation Company. The Legislature granted each company a charter on February 4, 1830. A year later, on February 15, 1831, at the request of the two companies, the Legislature passed an act making them the "Joint Companies," a merger in fact if not in name.

The C&A opened its line between Bordentown and South Amboy in 1832 as part of a water-rail-water route between Philadelphia and New York. The C&A was one of the very first railroads to operate in the United States, but by the end of that decade there were literally dozens of short lines. In 1839, C&A opened a railroad along the bank of the canal between Trenton and Kingston, thence cross country to New Brunswick.

In 1804, Trenton & New Brunswick Straight Turnpike Company was incorporated and apparently soon completed a road between those two cities. The Philadelphia & Trenton Railroad (the line reaching Morrisville) acquired control of the turnpike company in 1833, with the intention of replacing the turnpike with a railroad. This invasion of its territory caused the "Joint Companies" to acquire control of the P&T, and through it, the turnpike company. In 1864 C&A built a straight-line railroad from Trenton to New Brunswick, 25 miles, not on the turnpike right of way but about 1 to 1½ miles east of it. With the completion of a railroad bridge across the Delaware River

at Trenton, there was a through route from Philadelphia to New York with the use of the New Jersey Railroad & Transportation Company beyond New Brunswick.

The railroad between Trenton and New Brunswick is not absolutely tangent, but nearly so—there are three curves which have no speed restrictions for passenger trains at 125 mph on the assigned passenger tracks. A PRR employees' timetable of 1937 shows no restrictions for passenger trains at 75 mph on assigned tracks. This is not to say that there has never been any easing of these curves since 1864, but it's extremely unlikely that they have required any great amount of work. They required none in the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project.

The turnpike company ceased to exist in 1903 because of the expiration of its charter. Some sections had previously been ceded to local authorities, and by 1928 the State took control of the entire road, which was designated State Highway 26 and later U.S. Highway 1. This stretch of U.S. 1 in the last 10 years has become a favorite locale for corporate and regional headquarters and accompanying hotels and conference centers.

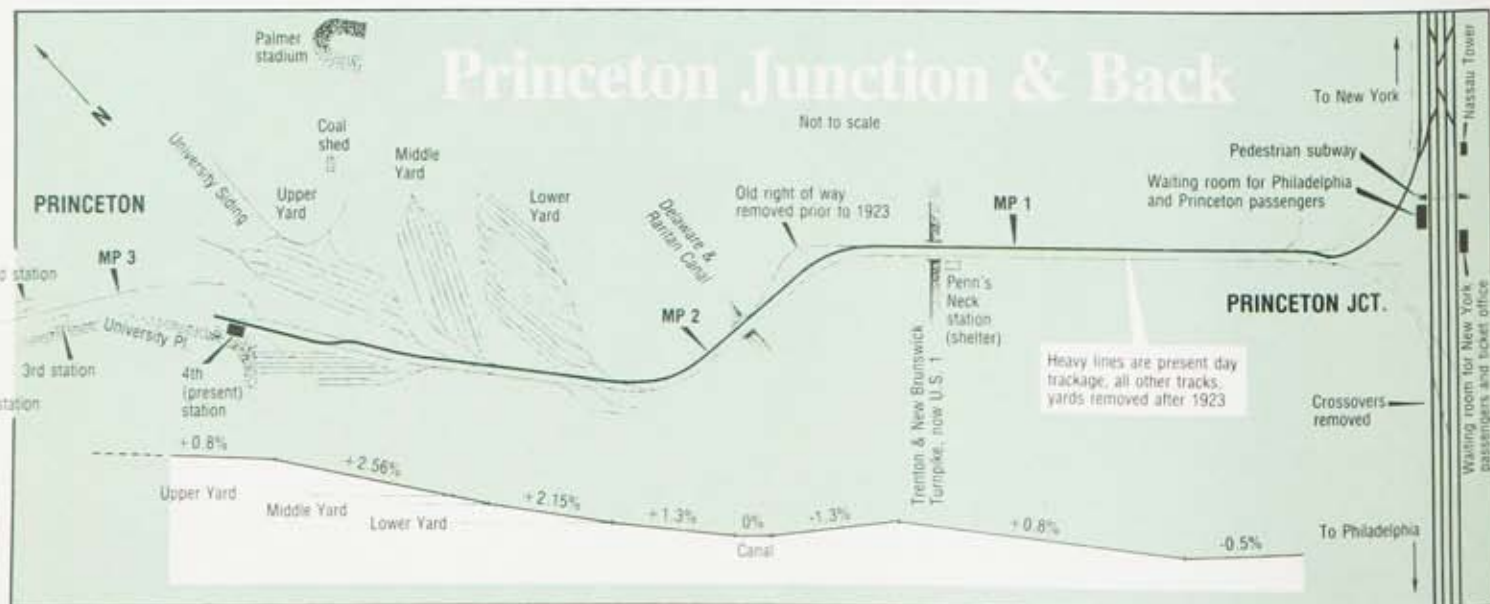
With the new Trenton-New Brunswick line in service, the C&A no longer served Princeton. The answer was to build a 3.2-mile branch at a right angle to the main line. The branch opened in 1865. It has been reported that the rail taken up from the old line along the canal was used for sidings on the main line and for a new line from Kingston to Rocky Hill, so perhaps this means that new rail was used for the Princeton Branch.

THE Princeton Branch, or Princeton Line, as it has been officially designated by NJ Transit, was 3.2 miles long when built. However, the present

Princeton station is the fourth to serve the town (excluding the one when the railroad ran along the canal, of which no drawing or photo is known). The first two moves to the south subtracted a little mileage, and the third subtracted enough to make the total one-half mile. These moves apparently were instigated by Princeton University (formally known as the College of New Jersey until 1896) for purposes of expansion. In 1963, there was a good deal of discussion about building a new station still another half mile farther south, but nothing came of it.

The first station was a wooden building built in 1865 for the opening of the branch. The second one, of masonry, went up in 1873, and apparently the freight station was adjacent to it. The third one was built about 1890 and had a courtyard for carriages opening on Railroad Avenue, which later became University Place. This station was on the west side of the tracks, which made the opening to the street possible. The fourth and present station, of masonry like the second and third, opened in 1920. Like the preceding station, it had a yard facing University Place, but for automobiles rather than carriages. In one respect this station is ideally situated—it has a high-level platform at the same level as the waiting room and the street. A separate building was provided for baggage and express, and the existing freight station was nearby.

An improvement program was programmed in 1905, principally for the benefit of the special trains run for the football games. A \$140,000 cost estimate was made for double-tracking, some realignment, and replacing the old-fashioned drawbridge with a newer one with higher clearance; \$75,000 was allocated for poles and wire for electrification, three large suburban cars, and two "trolley cars." The first part of this



TRAINS: George A. Gluff.



work was carried out—at what actual cost is not known—but the second part, the electrification, did not come until 1936, immediately after Pennsy's New York-Washington electrification. Something the 1905 realignment did not eliminate was a section of nearly one-half mile of 2.5 per cent grade up to the present station.

Item: On aerial photographs taken as recently as 1986 for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the right of way abandoned in 1905 shows up just as clearly as the present right of way, and with cropland of apparently the same lessee on both sides.

The drawbridge of 1905 still carries trains but is no longer functional, the rails having no cuts at each end. The Pennsylvania did not open the canal for the 1933 season because of the decline in traffic, and in 1937 under the terms of its charter, the canal was taken over by the State of New Jersey, which uses it only for transportation of water and as a park.

When PC's TDI timetable (those supported by advertisers) for February 1, 1970, appeared, it bore a note in fine print reading "Effective February 15, 1970, Princeton Station will be known as Princeton University and Princeton Junction will be known as Princeton." This caused a good deal of consternation, since Princeton Junction is in neither the Borough nor Township of Princeton. Shortly before February 15, a Penn Central vice president advised public officials that the change would not be made, but that it was too late to change the February 15 Form 12 official New York-Philadelphia timetable. Fortunately, no paint had been used to change the signs on the stations, and when Form 12 of March 16 appeared, all was back to normal.

The Princeton Junction station is undergoing a complete rebuilding, including a new station building and high-level platforms for all trains. In 1984, the university bought the Princeton station property for \$893,700, stating that it has no plans for development. The property protects the campus to which it is adjacent and provides room for future expansion. The university already has obtained authority to open a parking lot on vacant land on the property, which should give a boost to ridership on the branch.

Parking is a real problem in the entire area. Since 1960, four stations have been closed between Trenton and New Brunswick and only one opened. Also, the one intermediate station on the Princeton Branch has been closed, although it did not provide parking. A new station has been proposed near the site of the former Monmouth Junction station to provide parking and to be financed by a real estate developer.



Princeton University Archives

**COLLEGE** observatory faces C&A station and 4-4-0 at Princeton circa 1865.



Princeton University Archives

**DELAWARE & Raritan Canal** drawbridge supports C&A 4-4-0, flat-roof coach.



Princeton University Archives

**WITHERSPOON HALL**, built in 1877, overlooks Pennsylvania Railroad train.

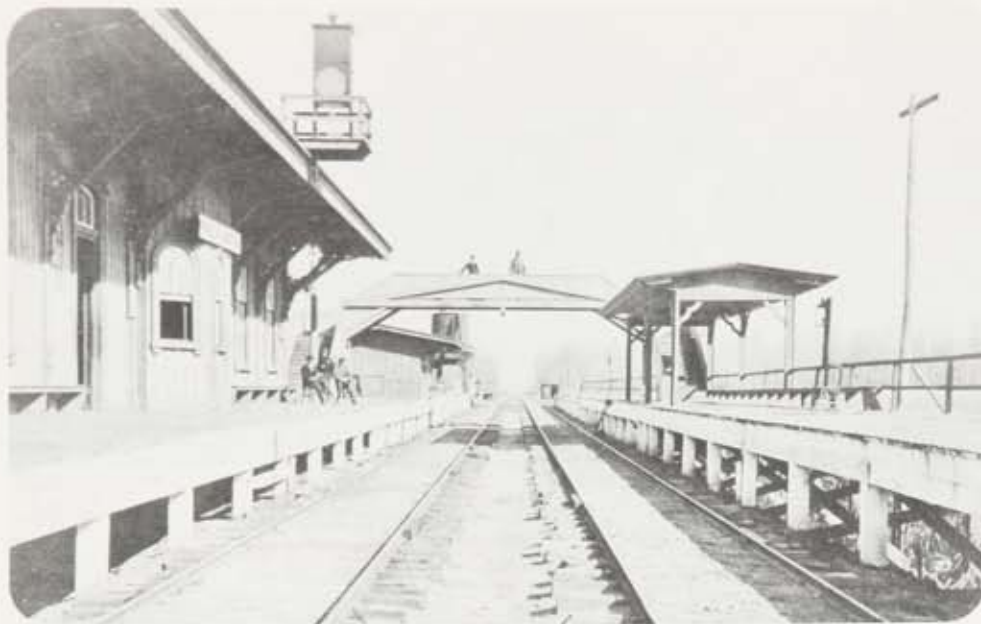
Princeton has the advantage of being the only urban place between Trenton and New Brunswick where a substantial number of people live within walking or biking distance of the station. Limited all-day parking is available, both on-street and off-street.

Princeton had businesses receiving

freight typical of a small town such as a coal yard, lumber yard, and feed dealer. The Pennsylvania's directory of on-line industries for 1945 listed six with side tracks and one at Penns Neck, where the branch passes over U.S. 1 on a bridge.

The location of the freight station





Princeton University Archives.

**PRINCETON JUNCTION** after Trenton-New Brunswick straight line opened.



Princeton University Archives.

**THE JUNCTION** soon after Pennsy takeover, expanded to three main tracks.



Princeton University Archives.

**STEAM** dusts new catenary in Princeton scene of three yards, team tracks.

during the time of the first passenger station is uncertain. It may have been in the same building as the passenger station, or it may have been in a small building on the east side of the track which is shown in old prints of the campus. When the second passenger station was built, the freight station was built 50 feet or so south of it. At some time during the use of the third passenger station, from about 1890 to 1920, the freight station, along with some team tracks, was built in a location near the present passenger station, where it remained until it was no longer needed.

According to reports, the passenger service started with six round trips per day to and from the junction. In 1923 there were 20, and in the April 27, 1986, timetable there were 37 on weekdays and 32 on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays.\*

For 40 years, standard passenger equipment on the branch was a pair of red Pennsylvania MP54 M.U.'s. There seemed to be some difference of opinion whether some or all of these cars were not allowed to run singly. Soon after Conrail took over in 1976, the equipment was changed to one Jersey Arrow stainless steel M.U., and at peak times for the university, an additional car is brought in.

As one set of equipment confined to the branch has always covered the scheduled passenger service, there was no risk of regular passenger trains colliding. But in the past, there was almost daily freight service and occasional special and work trains, so a manual block was established. It remains with a sign reading BEGIN BLOCK for trains leaving Princeton Junction and signs reading KS and ABL on the first and second catenary posts leaving the Princeton station. KS was defined by the Pennsylvania Railroad as a block-limit station controlled by Nassau Tower at Princeton Junction.

THAT not all the association between the railroad and the university has concerned football is borne out by several stories. In 1876, three students were returning from an evening in Trenton and missed the last train from the junction. They decided that they would have to walk but had gone only a short distance when they saw a handcar beside the track, and appropriated it. It took some pumping to get up to

\*No public timetable shows the schedule with train numbers. For those who are interested in this sort of thing, the present system follows a PRR pattern of more than 50 years. Weekday trains from Princeton are odd-numbered in the 4100 series from 4101, at 5:59 a.m., to 4177, at 11:59 p.m., and they run every half hour except for an additional train squeezed in during the morning and evening peaks, and with two numbers skipped for trips omitted because of crew meal times. Even numbers, as usual, are used for trains in the opposite direction. The 4200 numbers are for Saturdays, and the 4300's for Sundays and holidays. On NJ Transit, the direction from Princeton to Princeton Junction is westward, whereas previously it was southward. One seldom hears trains being referred to by number.





Robert Leigh and *The Princeton Recollector*.

**RARE non-Belpaire-boilered PRR Mogul 1071 heads Moses Taylor Pyne's Princeton-Jersey City special.**

the turnpike crossing, but then it was downgrade to the canal. Not until the last minute did they see, or remember, that the drawbridge was left open at night after the last train had passed. They jumped off without harm, but the handcar dived to the bottom of the canal. The handcar was found months later, and the students confessed at a reunion many years later.

When the university was all-male, and there was no women's college nearby, most of the students' dates came from out of town, and principally by train. The *Daily Princetonian*, a student publication, began its lead story on a Friday in 1946 with this: "With every journey of the P.J. and B., trainloads of beautiful women are arriving." In May 1963, as a Princeton-bound train approached the Faculty Road crossing (installed in 1961, it is the only grade crossing on the branch) an automobile was "stalled" on the tracks. As the train came to a stop, two men on horseback with bandanas as masks rode up and carried off two girls who were waiting on the steps of one of the M.U. cars. The culprits were never discovered.

On the morning of February 1, 1968, when John Bancroft, the regular conductor on the first trick, arrived at the station at 6:50 to take out the first train half an hour later, he found that a change had been made on the letterboard of one of the cars on the station side, since the train had tied up around midnight. Where the lettering had formerly read PENNSYLVANIA, with the aid

of some paste-on letters over SYLVANIA it now read PENN-CENTRAL. This must be the only instance of almost instant recognition of the merger.

On the night of March 31-April 1, 1976, a group of about 85 people, mostly students, held a champagne party on the last round trip of the night to welcome the birth of Conrail.

A student incident of a more ser-

ious nature occurred in 1976 after Princeton had become coed. Two students, one male and one female, apparently strolling the campus, came upon the single Jersey Arrow car tied up for the night. They decided to climb up on the roof. Just after they reached it, the man touched the pantograph, which was in contact with the 11,000-volt wire. This made a flash seen 2 miles away. It took rescue squads 40 minutes to remove him from the roof, part of the time with the power cut off. He had to be sent to a special burn unit in San Antonio, Tex. The woman who was touching his shoulder when the flash occurred was released from the hospital the same morning.

A case of ill luck, not attributed to students, took place in 1963. The two-car train was at the Princeton station about 11 p.m., the crew nearby in the office assigned to them. When they went back to start a trip, the train was not there. It was found at Plainsboro, a freight station 1.5 miles east of Princeton Junction and reached by a siding paralleling the main line.

THERE have been some out-of-the-ordinary movements on the Princeton Branch which would hardly be expected on a line about 3 miles long. In 1903, the Liberty Bell made a trip from Philadelphia to Boston with a diversion to Princeton, where it was on exhibit on a flat car from 11:45 a.m. to noon.

Woodrow Wilson had been a professor at Princeton, then president of the



Historical Society of Princeton.

**WOODROW WILSON leaves Princeton March 3, 1913, for inaugural next day.**



university, Governor of New Jersey, and near the end of a term in that office, he ran for and was elected President of the United States. His inauguration was held on March 4, 1913, so on March 3 he left his home (his home, since New Jersey did not have a governor's mansion at that time) and walked to the station, accompanied by a band and many townspeople, and there he boarded a special train for Washington.

Moses Taylor Pyne was a New York lawyer and a member of the Board of Trustees of the university from 1885 to 1921. He commuted to New York by a special train which consisted of one locomotive and one parlor car which awaited him and a few of his friends at the station in the morning.

Probably the last special movement on the Princeton Branch was in 1978 when the business car of a Southern Railway vice-president was parked at the end of the station platform, a few feet from the end of track, at the time a member of his family was graduating.

SOME employees of the Princeton Branch moved on and off it quite frequently, but the two in recent memory who stayed and became known by all regular commuters were John Bancroft and George N. (Buster) Dey. Each had 30 years' service—more or less—when he retired, much of it on the PJ&B.

John had a ready answer for almost any situation. On the first train one snowy morning, the president of one of America's largest airlines said to John as he walked down the aisle punching tickets, "Well, John, you were two minutes late getting away this

morning." John, with no hesitation, replied, "Yes, but we don't *stack* our trains when the weather gets a little bad."

When John retired in 1978, one of the commuters and his wife gave a party for him on the multi-acre grounds of their home, with a cash bar, buffet supper, and speeches from 5 to 9. Over a hundred people attended. The best talk was by Buster, who told of the time before Princeton became coed and dates arrived on Friday afternoon trains. One girl getting off a train from New York at the junction looked particularly dejected, and John asked her what the trouble was. She replied that the airline didn't have her baggage when she arrived in New York and she didn't know what she was going to wear to the dances. John told her to wait at the junction until he came back on the next trip, when there would be a girl there who now worked in New York and lived in Princeton, and who used to go to all the dances, and very likely she will have an extra dress this girl could wear. He said she always comes in on the next train from New York and looks about the same size. John was able to introduce the girls, and some months later the one whose baggage had been lost was on his train again. He said that he had been glad to learn that she was able to borrow a dress. She thanked him, but said that was not important, since she was engaged to marry the brother of the girl whose dress she borrowed, whom she met at the girl's home that weekend.

Buster, who succeeded John as conductor on the morning trick, retired about a year and a half later and was given a well-attended party by John and his wife.

PROPERTY exchanges and football games have linked Princeton University and the Princeton Branch during most of the existence of the line. The date of the first football special may be



recorded somewhere, but no one today seems to know when it was. A few years' statistics have been found:

Year/Game	Trains/Cars	Passengers
1898 Yale	31 - NA	16,662
1904 Yale	42 - NA	30,582
1923 Harvard	42 - 298	22,907
1959 Yale	7 - 104	NA

NA: Not available.

The source of the 1898 statistics gave no indication that that was the first year. No one seems to be sure of the date of the last specials, but it may have been 1959.

The first of three yards built to unload, store, and reload the football specials was built in 1900, and this may have played a part in the large increase in passengers between 1898 and 1904. The football trains were also the impetus for the 1905 improvements.

The discussion and statistics above deal with Princeton home games with Yale, Princeton's traditional rival, and Harvard. Other trains were run for games with other Ivy League schools, and perhaps Army or Navy. These were not necessarily from the college itself, but from a nearby city such as New York or Philadelphia, with a large

**SPECIAL TRAINS**



Avoid traffic and parking. Relax...join in the fun!

**PRINCETON vs. YALE**

**SATURDAY, NOV. 14**

COMFORTABLE COACHES  
REFRESHMENT CAR

Game Time 1:30 P.M.

BE THERE FOR THE KICKOFF!

Lv. New York 10:05 A.M. 10:45 A.M. 11:40 A.M.  
 (Penn. Sta.)  
 Lv. Newark 10:20 A.M. 11:00 A.M. 11:55 A.M.  
 Lv. Elizabeth 11:00 A.M. 12:03 P.M.  
 Ar. Princeton 11:10 A.M. 11:50 A.M. 12:45 P.M.

RETURN: Leave 30 minutes  
after game and 5:10 P.M.

**PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD**

**FIVE FOOTBALL SPECIALS** (including Seaboard heavyweight and streamlined combines on trains at left) lay over in the Upper Yard at Princeton during a game.

Princeton University Archives







John R. Wilmot



John R. Wilmot

**THERE'S** a chapel-like grace about Princeton's stone station in these views taken on April 6, 1968 (left), and May 7, 1966 (above).

number of alumni. There were also sometimes specials out of Princeton—to Yale, for example—but considering the size of the Princeton student body and the local population, they could hardly account for more than one train.

John W. Barriger III, best known for his advocacy of super railroads and presidency of the Monon and other roads, wrote an article for the December 1, 1923, *Railway Age* when he was a PRR student apprentice about how the Pennsylvania handled the football traffic at Princeton. The second main track was only used as such on football days; the rest of the time it was a siding. For the Harvard game of 1923 there were 28 specials dispatched from New York, 6 each from Jersey City and Philadelphia, and 1 each from Washington and Trenton.

Barriger reported that over 350 men, including train crews, were used in the operation, made up of a dispatcher, block operators, signalmen, switchmen, car inspectors, linemen, trackmen, patrolmen, and car cleaners.

Until 1914, Princeton's football facilities were not outstanding, and a sellout crowd was described as 29,000 in the stands and 1500 standees for the 1912 Yale game. In 1914 Palmer Stadium opened with a capacity of 41,000, and it attracted 36,500 for the opening game. The stadium's capacity has varied over the years. In 1924 it was 56,000; today it is 45,275. The 1986 Harvard game on a mild October day attracted only 20,500; the Tigers beat the Crimson, 14-3. Yale plays at Princeton in odd years. In 1985 on a rainy, windy day in November, the attendance was 9000 instead of an anticipated 18,000, but the Tigers won over the Bulldogs, 21-12.

The preceding figures on total attendance, which are much less than even only those who came by train in 1904 or 1923, show that the railroad

football traffic has fallen to nothing. The Middle Yard was returned to the university in 1954, followed by the Upper Yard in 1956 and the Lower Yard in 1962.

Three reasons, singly or in combination, explain the demise of Princeton football specials. First, as far back as the 1920's, more and more people were coming to football games by automobile. A second reason is that Ivy League football is no longer the brand that makes national headlines on the sports pages. And last, the Pennsylvania Railroad may have concluded that organizing such a large-scale operation just once or twice a year was not profitable in a declining market.

Another sport in which the university and the Pennsylvania had an affinity was track. Occasionally when the field track needed upgrading, the PRR would donate a carload of cinders from a roundhouse, with the result that the Princeton track was considered one of the best in the country.

Finally, mention should be made of the PJ&B Players, a group housed in the university's McCarter Theater . . . across the street from the station. It stages productions every year with a combination of professionals and amateur actors, dancers and musicians from Princeton and nearby towns.

What's in store for the Princeton Branch—or the Princeton Line, as NJ Transit calls it—after 121 years? A Princeton entrepreneur is offering to take over the line for a token amount, lease the equipment for a dollar a year, provide more service, and reduce the fares. Stay tuned. **I**

*JOHN R. WILMOT, 71, is a native of Detroit, attended high school in Asheville, N.C., with SR engineer Frank Clodfelter, graduated from the University of Illinois in 1938, and worked for four railroads and the Army before entering the transportation consulting field. A resident of Princeton, he rode the branch for 22 years.*



TRAINS: George H. Drury

**PLATFORM** was deteriorating in NJ Transit scene at Princeton taken May 2, 1983.