



Haverford Township Historical Society



THE RED ARROW BUSWAY

By Richard D. Kerr

The Philadelphia and West Chester Traction Company (P&WCT) was an outgrowth of the privately-owned Philadelphia and West Chester Turnpike Road Company, which built and operated a turnpike from the western border of Philadelphia, adjoining Upper Darby Township at Cobbs Creek (just west of 63rd and Market streets) to Newtown Square. The P&WCT operated an electric trolley line along the south side of West Chester Pike all the way to West Chester starting on May 6, 1896. Through the incorporation of the Ardmore and Llanerch Street Railway Company, the company built a second trolley line through Haverford Township. It branched off the West Chester line at Darby Road in Llanerch and then ran along Darby to the Grassland neighborhood, now called Oakmont. From that point, it went cross-country and then into Lower Merion Township until it reached its terminus in Ardmore. Service to Ardmore began on May 29, 1902. The company later built additional trolley lines radiating from Upper Darby to Media and Sharon Hill.

Starting in the 1920s, automobiles and motorbuses began seriously encroaching on the domain of trolleys. In response, P&WCT company president A. Merritt Taylor incorporated a bus subsidiary called Aronimink Transportation Company and developed bus lines to complement the trolley lines. By 1935 the word "Traction" had become obsolete, so the various companies were merged into a new entity known as Philadelphia Suburban Transportation Company. In 1937 a new brand identity and logo gave the consolidated trolley and bus operations the popular name "Red Arrow Lines."

In time, the original West Chester trolley line was cut back, eventually in 1958 to the Llanerch car barn and bus garage site in Haverford Township, west of Darby Road. Bus service to West Chester took the place of the trolleys beyond this point. A continuing loss of business on the remaining Ardmore line led the company to file with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission in 1965 for permission to abandon it. Over a year later permission was finally granted, and the last regularly scheduled passenger trolley service on West Chester Pike, through Haverford Township, and serving Ardmore, ran on December 29, 1966, just days after a major blizzard of snow paralyzed the area.

The Red Arrow Lines did not just take down the wires and tear up the tracks. The company president at this time, Merritt H. Taylor, Jr., had a novel idea to maintain service to Ardmore in the section where the trolleys had not run along roads. The Red Arrow paved the trolley right of way, thereby creating its own private "bus only" road northward and eastward from Eagle Road in Oakmont. It was the first "busway" in North America and perhaps the world, and it received widespread publicity. Red Arrow's busway gave its bus service a fighting chance to match the former trolley's congestion-free schedule speed through this section, and to avoid zigzagging through alternate narrow public roads to reach Ardmore. To keep its private road private, the Red Arrow innovated again. It bought used railroad crossing gates from a Chicago area interurban railway. These were installed across the busway, instead of across the intersecting roads as done at railroad crossings. One was placed across each end of the busway (Eagle Road and County Line Road) and a pair at each intermediate crossing (Merwood Road, Haverford Road

and Belmont Road). The Red Arrow equipped the gates for remote radio control and outfitted its buses with radio actuators, so its bus drivers could raise the gates for their buses to pass through. The Red Arrow Busway was placed into service on March 31, 1967. Buses on the busway continued the stopping pattern of the trolleys, stopping at the former trolley station locations.



Red Arrow #4, a snow sweeper trolley with spinning horizontal brushes, pauses at County Line Road station after the blizzard of December, 1966. This location became the eastern end of the busway three months later. (photograph by Robert Coolidge; used with permission.)

Faced with continuing business losses, Taylor finally had to relent, and agreement was reached for the public Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) to purchase and take over the Philadelphia Suburban Transportation Company. On January 29, 1970, its equipment, facilities and operations became SEPTA's Red Arrow Division. Service on the busway to Ardmore continued, but over the years the second-hand crossing gates became unreliable. Having become more of a liability than an asset, they were left in the raised position and eventually were removed.

This pioneering busway remains in operation today. It has been joined by others, as the public transit industry has realized the benefits of it and other concepts like "exclusive bus lanes" and bus priority at intersections. These design characteristics let "bus rapid transit" run in a faster, smoother and less traffic-impeded manner than traditional on-street bus routes with frequent stops, and at a lower capital cost than building an equivalent "light rail" line. The Red Arrow Busway in Haverford Township showed the way.



SEPTA Route 103 bus leaving the southern end of the Haverford Township Red Arrow Busway, crossing Eagle Road onto East Darby Road, in September 2013. (photograph by author)

Explore for More... Red Arrow Busway

See two vintage photos of trolleys on what is now the busway, from *Philadelphia Suburban Trolleys* by Kenneth C. Springirth:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=LSC-XxNb5QYC&pg=PA36&lpg=PA36&dq=Ardmore+busway>

Ride a bike down the busway from Eagle Road to Haverford Road, via helmet cam video on Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrLljeVZ2x8>

Read more about modern “bus rapid transit” (BRT):

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bus_rapid_transit

It’s not online, but try to track down a print copy of *The Red Arrow* by Ronald DeGraw (Haverford Press Inc., Haverford PA, 1972), and flip to page 355 and thereafter.

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Revised September 14, 2013