

With a Wheel and a Board: The Day the Train Station Moved Across the Street

By Beverly Tucker

I HAD HEARD RUMORS that something extraordinary was going to happen to the old Lexington train station. It was to be moved! — moved across the street from its present location. To me it seemed impossible, but there were those who knew more. When the moving date was announced, I promised myself that I would be there.

I knew this would not be an ordinary day. It was a good day, an amazing day, filled with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. How could the feat possibly be accomplished? In our historic little village of Lexington, so snugly nestled in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, yet another moment of history was about to take place.

I arrived in an adrenaline rush, with a packed lunch and a tiny camera. The day was on. There were many others who shared this morning's curiosity and had also prepared. Some brought food and chairs from home. Some had large hats to provide shade under the welcome springtime sun. Adults bent over to explain to their children, even

though they knew little about just what to expect.

The year was 2004 and Washington and Lee University was in need of a large space on which to build a new concert hall, to be known as the John and Anne Wilson Hall, in honor of a former president and his wife. But the abandoned train station sat on the ideal spot.

Frazier Associates had been hired to do a feasibility study. Months of research and analysis ensued and the outcome focused on the possibility of moving the train station to open up the required space. A committee had been formed to work with Historic Lexington Foundation to

understand the implications of such a project. With such a strong historic preservation ethic, this community was determined to save the train station.

The importance of the station, built in 1883, lay in the rise of railroad transportation after the Civil War and the changes thus brought about. The station marked the terminus of the Valley Railroad. The funding of the rail line was tied to Washington and Lee's former president, Robert E. Lee, who played an important role in securing assistance from Baltimore and later became president of the line, serving until his death in 1870. Eventually,



The simplest technology — wheel and board — moved the old train station to a new site.



It was an informal town holiday. Families came with picnic lunches and people mingled til late.

consolidation of railroads, reflecting the changing modes of transportation in the twentieth century, caused a slow decline and ultimate closing of the Lexington operation.

One hundred thirty-four years later, on that lovely day in May 2004, we find men and women, little children and even the neighborhood dogs all watching a compelling operation. All was quiet as the workers began to put the plan into action. We had imagined large pieces of equipment being brought in to make this happen. We stood in awe of what we were seeing: A simple, almost crude method of movement was engaged – without the assistance of any machinery.

It was so quiet.

We watched, we ate our lunches, we could not leave even for a minute. The station seemed to be waiting patiently to reach its new home, its fate, or at least the next chapter of its life. With an obvious

study and knowledge of what would be required, the workers simply started placing boards under the wheels they had attached to the building. Reinforcements wrapped the perimeter of the building, windows were opened, and railings were fitted to the sides. The men worked diligently, with only an occasional instruction or reassurance. Never once did they seem doubtful or anxious. The boards, now in front of the wheels, invited the wheels to roll forward as far as the boards would allow. Now the boards were mostly at the rear of the station. Then as they completed rolling over the boards, the same boards were moved from the back to the front to start the process over.

Over and over those boards were moved, back to front, back to front . . . late morning, mid-day, mid-afternoon, late afternoon, early evening, late evening. Over and over the boards were moved. Like the felted hammer on a piano wire, that

simple action did the work. It was dark when the move was finally completed and judged to be successful.

It had been an amazing day in the life of this community. Neighbors and new acquaintances bonded in the fraternity of the “Station Move.” We were friends who had shared this day and this experience. As the sun set on that incredible maneuver, we all felt grateful that we had been there and that it worked and the workmen were safe and the station was in one piece.

The station is still in one piece, looking better than ever, housing Omicron Delta Kappa honor society. The Wilson Concert Hall stands proudly on the land formerly occupied by the Lexington train station. The villagers are happy – and though you can’t catch a train in Lexington anymore, you can visit the wonderful old station, so carefully and lovingly preserved.

We savor the memory of the day the station moved across the street. It was a good neighborhood before but now it is even better

Beverly Tucker is a psychotherapist with a Ph.D. from Texas Woman’s University. She was president of Historic Lexington Foundation in 2015-16 and again in 2020-21. She wrote this article and took the photographs.