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Mobility Industry

Insights by

Michael L. Sena

THE DISPATCHER

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American cities are losing their hearts

American cities, large and small, which had real “downtowns” and “central business districts” functioning as the cities’ cultural, business, commercial, social and spiritual hearts, have been losing them during the past fifty years. It was a gradual process for some, a quick one for others. But the centers of American cities across the country are going and many are gone. The centers of cities are not being replaced by a few sub-centers; there are now hundreds of mini-centers dotted around a metropolitan region. Every village, neighborhood, or event venue cluster has become one of many substitutes for the facilities and activities that used to take place in the ‘downtown’. Some of these substitute places are long-lasting, while others come and go with the opening and closing of the magnet that attracts our wandering attention. As post offices and banks close to walk-in customers, as physical stores, especially department stores, are replaced by delivery vans, and as offices that were concentrated in city centers are now dispersed or located in our homes, and as the restaurants, delis, barber shops, gift shops, and other services that supported the daily trade follow them out, the raison d’être of the center has disappeared. This will permanently change the design of and need for transport, both public and private.



*Philadelphia
The City of Brotherly Love*

PHILADELPHIA IS THE largest city in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and is currently the sixth largest city in the United States. It was the most populous city in the United States until 1790, when it was relegated by New York City. Then Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and Phoenix passed it by. It will soon be downgraded further as San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, and Austin (the new home of Tesla and people fleeing Silicon Valley) rise above it and move it out of the top ten.

Philadelphia is the *City of Brotherly Love*, (from *philos*, Greek for ‘loving’, and *adelphos* for ‘brother’) founded by Quakers in 1682 under the leadership of William Penn (ergo, *Pennsylvania*, which means

'Penn's Woods'). The city and the colony only reluctantly joined in the revolution against British rule because of its pacifist Quaker beliefs, although the city is where the Declaration of Independence was signed.¹ A large part of the credit for this should go to Benjamin Franklin, who was not a Quaker (see sidebar). It also served for periods of time as the capital of the new nation up until 1800 while Washington, D.C. was under construction.

It was Philadelphia's big heart that helped it grow

If you are in search of America in general, and its old cities in particular, those that had a heart, Philadelphia is a good place to start. It grew for three reasons. First, it was in a central position, between the Yankee colonies in the north, the New Netherland colonies to the east, and the Tidewater and Deep South colonies in the south.² Second, the Delaware River was navigable from its mouth on the Atlantic up to Philadelphia, which meant that the city's port was protected from the ocean and from enemies. Third, and probably most important, the city was open to everyone. Penn, a Quaker pacifist, arrived in 1682 in what became Philadelphia. He signed a peace treaty with Lenape chief Tamanend, establishing a tradition of tolerance and human rights. In 1684, the ship *Isabella* landed in Philadelphia carrying hundreds of enslaved Africans. The Quakers would not countenance slavery. In 1688, they passed the Germantown Petition Against Slavery, the first organized protest against slavery in the New World. Its large free black community aided fugitive slaves. The country's first independent black denomination church in the nation, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was founded there.

Philadelphia soon became the biggest shipbuilding center in the colonies. In the mid-1800s, the city's population was swelled by immigrants from principally Ireland and



Benjamin Franklin was not a Quaker. He was baptized on the day he was born at the Old South Church's Cedar Meeting House on downtown Washington Street, Boston. In Philadelphia, he occasionally worshiped at Christ Church, the Church of England parish established in colonial Philadelphia in 1695. It was later reorganized into the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America.

¹ The Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, with 12 of the 13 colonies voting in favor and New York abstaining. The date that the Declaration was signed has long been the subject of debate. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams all wrote that it was signed by Congress on the day when it was adopted on July 4, 1776. That assertion is seemingly confirmed by the signed copy of the Declaration, which is dated July 4.

² See the [May 2022 issue of The Dispatcher](#), page 16.

Germany and later Italy and Poland who came to work. Philadelphia's major industries included the BALDWIN LOCOMOTIVE WORKS, WILLIAM CRAMP & SONS SHIP AND ENGINE BUILDING COMPANY, and the PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD. Westward expansion of the PENNSYLVANIA RAILROAD helped Philadelphia greatly increased domestic commerce and helped the city in its competition with its chief rival, New York City. It was coal and iron from Pennsylvania that were the main cargos. The city had many iron and steel-related manufacturers, and its industrialists even owned iron and steel works outside the city, like the BETHLEHEM IRON COMPANY. The largest industry in Philadelphia was textiles. Philadelphia produced more textiles than any other U.S. city, and in 1904 the textile industry employed more than 35% of the city's workers. Other big industries included cigar-making, sugar, and oil. The city's major department stores were opened at this time along Market Street. John Wanamaker Department Store was one of the first of the great emporiums in the United States.

Off to Philadelphia in the morning³

In late May, after four days in Princeton, where I had gone to take part in the *SMARTDRIVINGCARS SUMMIT* – which was cancelled, but I found other interesting things to do there – I drove to the Philly area to spend a few days with my cousin and his wife in a town called Devon along the Main Line.⁴ I passed through Trenton, NJ (another old city that was also briefly the capital of the U.S. and which used to make what the world took but doesn't anymore) and crossed the Delaware River close to where General George Washington and his troops almost froze and starved to death, before rallying and eventually beating the British (with lots of help from France and Spain, who had their own axes to grind with Great Britain).

I drove on Interstate 95, (aka the Delaware Expressway) that snaked through the city in an uncovered cut. I could see the tops of the city's tallish buildings

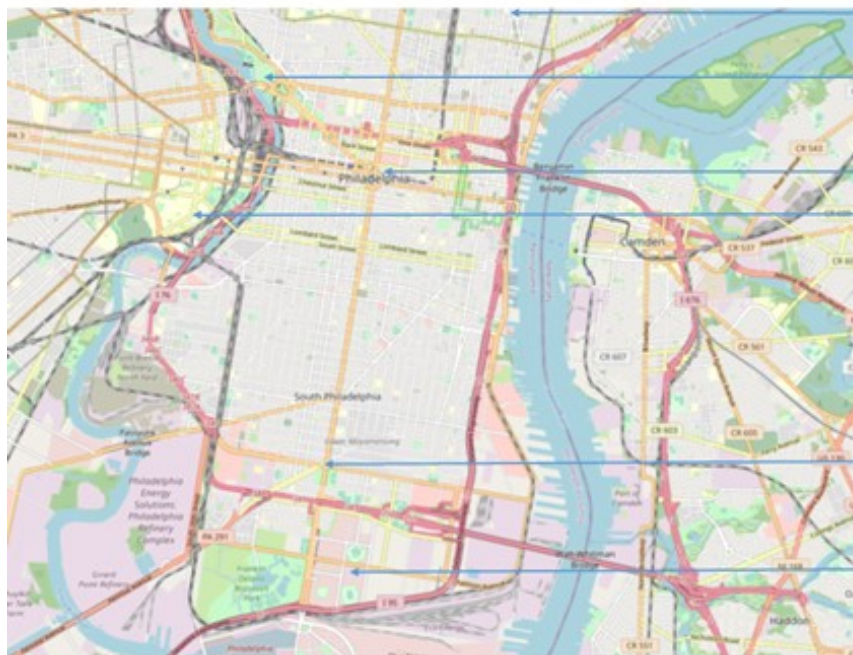


South Philadelphia Sports Complex

³ The title of a song written by John McCormack

⁴ The Philadelphia Main Line, known simply as the Main Line, is an informally delineated historical and social region of western suburban Philadelphia, PA lying along the former Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line

in between the overpasses, but I couldn't feel their nearness. As I moved with the traffic flow on the busy Interstate, I tried my best to keep from making a wrong turn and ending up in Wilmington, Delaware. (I have nothing against Wilmington, Delaware, it just was not on my itinerary.) But I did make a wrong turn, exited the Interstate and found myself in the middle of the South Philadelphia Sports Complex (shown on the previous page) with arenas and stadiums for all of the city's major professional teams: football (Ameri-



- Temple University
- Rocky's Steps
- City Center University of Pennsylvania
- Oregon Avenue
- Sports Complex

can), baseball, basketball and ice hockey.

Before its development, which began in the late 1920s, the sports complex area was a 'shanty town'⁵ known as "The Neck" of the undeveloped League Island area, formerly Pas-yunk Township. Oregon Avenue was the southern border end of the city up to the 1920s. In 1926, the city's officials decided that the area south of Oregon Avenue would be the site of the 1926 Sesquicentennial International Exposition, celebrating 150 years since the founding of the United States of America. Massive exhibit buildings and other structures lined the extension of Broad Street. However, following the close of the Exposition, they were all demolished save for Philadelphia Municipal Stadium, that stood until 1992.

Philadelphia City Hall



⁵ Shanty town is a term first used in North America to designate a shack, or improvised building. The term shanty is likely derived from French *chantier* (construction site and associated low-level workers' quarters).

I was on the southernmost end of Broad Street, one of the two principal streets in Philadelphia, which meets the other, Market Street, at the city's City Hall. From where I was, if I squinted, I could just make out the top of the landmark positioned exactly in the crossing of the two thoroughfares. I had no reason to go there right then. Whether or not we would spend time in Downtown Philadelphia would be up to my cousin and his wife.

Philadelphia, like many of the country's older cities, started going through rough times in the 1960s. It got a boost in 1976, the U.S. Bicentennial year, when the first "Rocky" film was released. Rocky Balboa (played by Sylvester Stallone), known as the 'Italian Stallion' in the movie, is a local boxer who is going to fight heavyweight champion Apollo Creed for the title. It's a David and Goliath story, with Philadelphia playing a supporting role. While Creed works out in an expensive gym, Rocky runs up the steps of the city's Museum of Art. The film is a metaphor for the economic and racial struggle that was occurring in many of the post-industrial American cities at the time, including Philadelphia. The fictional Rocky Balboa was immortalized in a bronze statue by artist A. Thomas Schomberg in 1980 for a scene in the "Rocky III" film. After the filming was complete, Stallone donated the statue to the City of Philadelphia. Since 2006, the statue has been located at the bottom of the stairs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (shown right), and there is a near-constant stream of people waiting in line to get their pictures taken with the "Italian Stallion."⁶



On the streets of Philadelphia⁷

The last time I was in Philadelphia, actually in the city on its streets not just riding through or around it, was forty-three years ago, around the time of Rocky III. The city wasn't on my list of places to work after I finished my graduate studies. There are no automotive, cartographic, or any other types of businesses that needed my consulting services. (The closest was MAPQUEST in Lancaster, PA, which was a client.) Until my cousin moved there, I had no friends or relatives in the

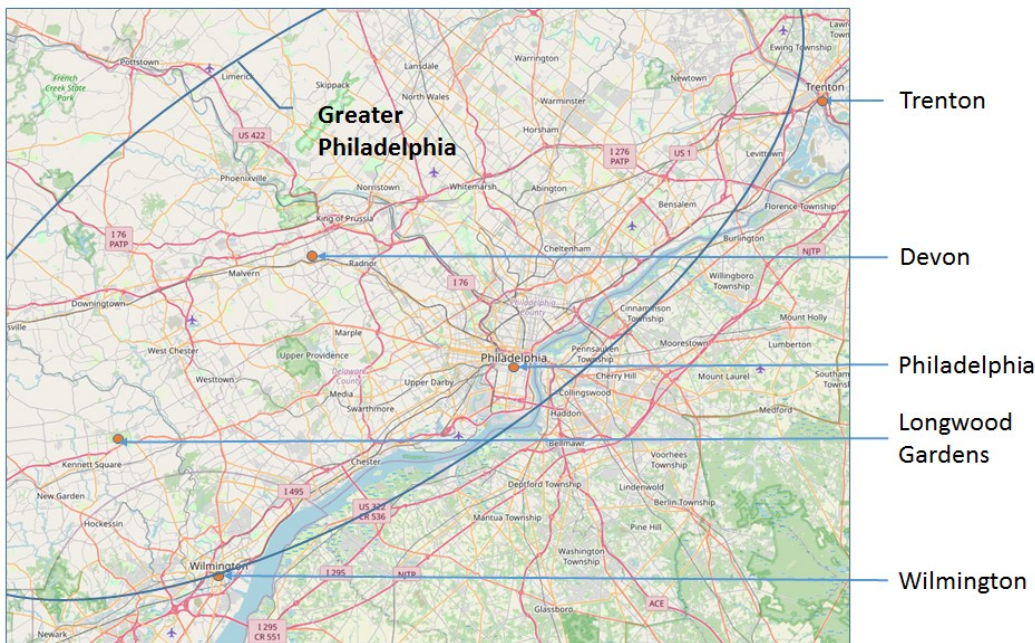
⁶ <https://www.visitphilly.com/things-to-do/attractions/the-rocky-statue-and-the-rocky-steps/>

⁷ A line from the Bruce Springsteen song, *The Streets of Philadelphia*

city to visit. It fell off my map. It seems to have fallen off a lot of peoples' maps. Between 1960 and 1990, Philadelphia lost 22% of its population, at the same time as it experienced the great exodus of people with European heritage, who comprised 70% of the population in 1960. They left for the Philadelphia suburbs or for places farther afield. This occurred during the great immigration of people from the south, principally with African heritage, who made up 50% of the population in 1990. Today, European descendants are 34% of the population of the city.



While the city was shrinking and undergoing other changes, Greater Philadelphia was growing. Between 1950 and 2023, the population of Greater Philadelphia, defined by the five-county region of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties (all of which voted for Joe Biden in the 2020 election), increased from 3.1 million to 5.8 million. Chester County, in which The Main Line is located, grew from 159,141 in 1950 to 534,413 in 2020, a 340% increase! This is where my cousin lives, in a town called Devon, in the approximate geographic center of Greater Philadelphia.



Devon Horse Show and Longwood Gardens vs. Rocky

In the middle of the afternoon I made it to Devon. It had been eight years since I last saw them. They had moved three years earlier, from a town north of New York City where they had lived for forty-odd years, to be close to their daughter and her family, especially their two grandchildren.

As it turned out, the daughter's rowhouse was only a few hundred meters from where I exited the Interstate at the southern end of the city earlier in the day. The daughter and her husband had lived close to the center of Philadelphia until a few years ago when the first child arrived, and had moved to the edge for more space, lower cost and the possibility of having a place to put their car. We saw them all on a Facetime call the afternoon I arrived, had a virtual guided tour of their three-story row house streamed to my cousin's iPad, gave them all virtual hugs, and hung up. They were leaving for a Memorial Day Weekend vacation to Cape May, NJ, so we would not be visiting them if we did travel into Philadelphia.

The next morning, over breakfast, my cousin and his wife listed the alternatives for how we could spend the day. We could take the train into Philadelphia, walk the streets, maybe see an exhibition at the Museum, have dinner at one of the city's restaurants, and take the train back to Devon. Or, we could go to the Devon Horse Show and Country Fair, which had started on Wednesday. The Show has been held in Devon since 1896, and is the oldest and largest outdoor multi-breed horse show in the U.S., running for twelve days. I had heard about it. It has sort of a Royal Ascot feel about it, with hats and polo types, mixed in with carnival rides. Or, we could go to Longwood Gardens, about forty kilometers south of Devon. It was the home of Pierre S. du Pont, American entrepreneur, businessman, philanthropist, and member of the du Pont family that made a fortune bigger than the state of Delaware where its headquarters are located. We settled on Longwood Gardens. It was clear that traveling into Philly on a hot early summer day when there would be Memorial Day tourists – if his grandchildren were not going to be there – was not my cousin's top pick.

Pierre purchased the large land holding in 1906. In an area about the size of Central Philadelphia, he created a place where he could entertain and impress his friends. He transformed a simple country farm into one of the country's leading horticultural display gardens. It was opened to the public in 1956, two years after Pierre died. We spent the afternoon walking through forests filled with trees that had been brought to the site, formal and informal gardens inspired by Italian, French and English gardens with flowers



A Show Hat at the Devon Horse Show and Country Fair.



from around the world in full bloom. The finale for our visit was in the main fountain garden (shown right), where the fountain sprays were synchronized to music. A spectacular experience. We finished off the day with dinner at a very pleasant restaurant in the neighboring community of Wayne.

I didn't walk the streets of Philadelphia

When I left Devon on Saturday morning with Scranton as my next destination, I thought about not spending time in Downtown Philly. I could have gotten a Philly cheesesteak, tomato pie or soft pretzel anywhere in Greater Philadelphia if I wanted to, which I didn't. I'd seen the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall when I was eight, and living and working in Boston for eighteen years filled my need to experience the oldest architecture that America has on offer. South Street's mix of the same stores and fast food joints found in cities from Shanghai to Manchester didn't inspire us to journey into the city. I would have gone if my cousin's and his wife's hearts were in it, but they weren't.

Maybe the three of us had been spoiled. My cousin's wife was born and raised in New York City. My cousin attended Columbia University and has lived in or around NYC from the time he was eighteen until just a few years ago. I visited him often during the seven years I was just forty miles away in Princeton. We all agreed that a city center should be bustling, vibrant and full of energy. It should be a place of commerce, interpersonal intercourse, and interaction where great plans are hatched and the sparks of big ideas are fanned into flames of action. If you want quiet contemplation, go to Walden Pond like Thoreau or to the River Test like Izaak Walton. If you live in Manhattan, Central Park is a nice respite, but it's not the reason you live there, and if you visit Manhattan to spend time in Central Park, you are missing the point by a mile.

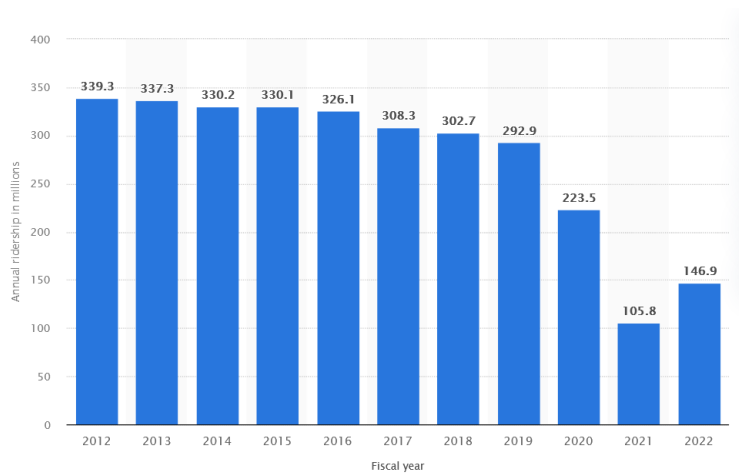
Central Philadelphia was a bustling center of commerce and intellectual stimulation in its early days, up to about the time American Bandstand began airing on TV in 1952, hosted by Dick Clark. It is not such a city anymore. Trying to transplant the heart of a fictional character in a movie into a city that needs resuscitation was simply banal. The central business district's office vacancy rate is 18.6%, a point higher than

New York City’s record 17.4%, which indicates that the city is in contraction mode. It’s certainly not bad that retirees are moving into the city’s former offices that have been converted to condominiums and lounging in its small squares. It doesn’t hurt that young professionals like my cousin’s daughter are buying row houses and wheeling their toddlers to day care and pre-school centers in cargo bikes so they can have quiet in their home offices for Zoom calls. But the city—any city—needs people working and meeting and making things and shopping in its stores and eating in its delis and lunch counters and restaurants and going to symphonies and operas and plays. It needs leaders who are not caretakers, but builders; not event organizers, but people who understand that their biggest job is making sure the infrastructure operates with the highest efficiency; not circus ring masters, but experts in cooperation and compromise. Otherwise, you have a place that is just a bunch of residential blocks and assorted attractions that are just a part of the greater region.



SEPTA’s railway map: a relic of a distant past

All roads lead to City Hall. That is what is obvious in the rapid rail transit map. There is a short, orange tail leading to the one place to which everyone in the region wants to travel, the Sports Complex. It wasn’t just the pandemic that caused ridership to fall on SEPTA’s transit system. There was a steady decrease from 2012 until the floor dropped out in 2020. It is still at less than 50% of pre-pandemic days. Will it ever return, or is its fate still unlearned? Greater Philadelphians don’t want to travel to City Hall anymore. They want to go to the Devon Horse Show, to Longwood, and to the Phillies, Eagles, Flyers and 76ers games at the Sports Complex. Buses and trains alone won’t get them there.



*Annual number of paid passengers transported by the Philadelphia transit authority (SEPTA) from 2012 to 2022 (in millions)
Source: Statista (2023)*

Things will be great when you're downtown⁸

I was in my hometown of Scranton for the second week of my two-week visit to the U.S. I drove through what was the center of Scranton on the day I arrived, exiting Interstate 81

⁸ A line from Petula Clark’s 1964 hit, “Downtown”.

onto the Joseph R. Biden Expressway (formerly the Scranton Expressway) which ends in Biden Street (formerly Spruce Street). Both were renamed after Joe Biden became President Biden. He was born and spent the first ten years of his now eighty years in Scranton.

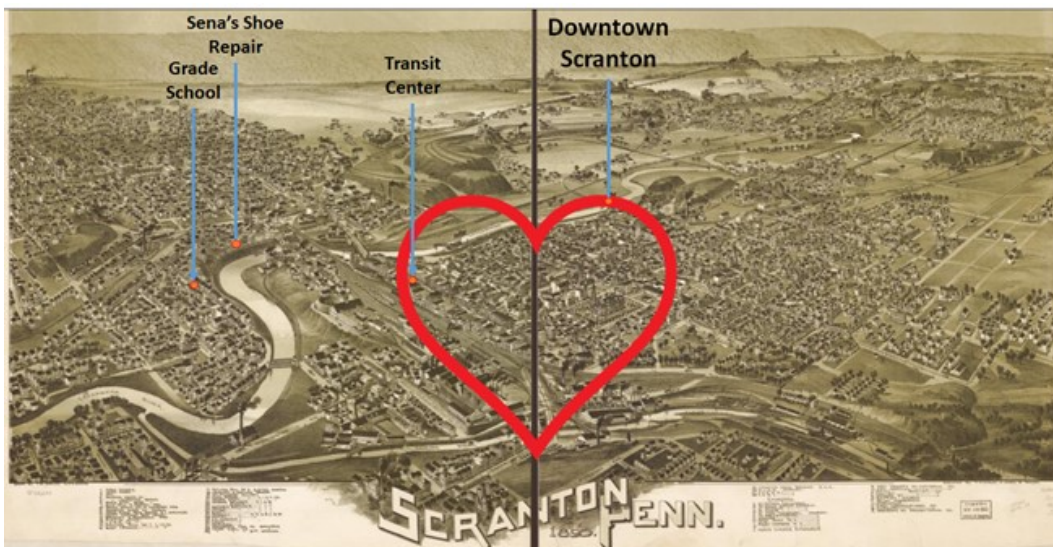
There is little left in what was the center of Scranton from the time that either I or President Biden grew up there. The two department stores that competed during the Christmas holidays to thrill the city's children with their Santa Claus window displays have been empty for more than thirty years, and all the theaters, clothing stores, small specialty shops, delis (except for the Coney Island lunch places I talk about in the [May 2023 issue of The Dispatcher](#)) are closed or torn down. Steamtown Mall, which was built over the souls of three blocks of the city's oldest buildings in its physical heart, is mostly empty. Steamtown, operated as a National Park, is a wonderful attraction that preserves the buildings where steam locomotives once were made, but it has not breathed new life into the city.

On my sister's living room coffee table was a book that someone had written and self-published on all the schools in Scranton that had ever been built, including the grade school and high school that my sister and I had attended. It included photographs obtained from archives along with short descriptions of the schools' histories. The city's grade schools were beautiful, neighborhood schools built in brick and stone. Most of them are gone or converted to other uses. Although the high schools are still there, only ours is still a high school. My sister lamented the fact that the church our grandparents helped to found, Scranton's *Italian Mother Church* as St. Lucy's is called, is closing. Like the schools, the churches were all within walking distance. I never heard of anyone taking the bus to church. Everyone walked to their grade school.

It is a totally different picture in the surrounding region, especially in the northwestern suburbs. Clarks Summit's center has all the vitality missing in downtown Scranton. A cousin (I have many cousins on both sides of my family) and her husband own a restaurant there that is fully booked every weekend. They had started in downtown Scranton fifteen years ago, but abandoned the city after five years for

lack of customers. Besides dinner at my cousin's restaurant, I had two breakfast meetings in two different places in Clarks Summit with high school friends who have lived there for most of their lives. All of my visits and dinners with family and friends were in surrounding towns and boroughs.

The aerial view map below shows the City of Scranton as it was in 1890, around the time my grandmother and grandfather came to the city from Italy.⁹ The heart of the city was already built. During the next thirty years, the DELAWARE LACKAWANNA AND HUDSON RAILROAD station, a new city hall, and the central library would be added. More houses would be added in the bare spots, but the map shows the city in almost the same form as it was when I lived there between 1947 and 1965. I spent the first thirteen of those years in a house on the same street where my father was born and where his father had his shoe repair shop. The grade school my father, sister and I attended was a five-minute walk away. It was a fifteen-minute walk to the heart of the city. President Biden's childhood neighborhood is not shown the map. It is beyond the upper right corner.



I did not venture into downtown Scranton during the seven days I was in the city. I didn't need to and I didn't want to, not even for old time's sake. The experience of seeing empty stores and empty lots has just gotten too painful. My favorite hobby store that hung on for decades stopped

⁹ Credit Line: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. T. M. Fowler & James B. Moyer [1890] - <https://www.loc.gov/item/75696533/>

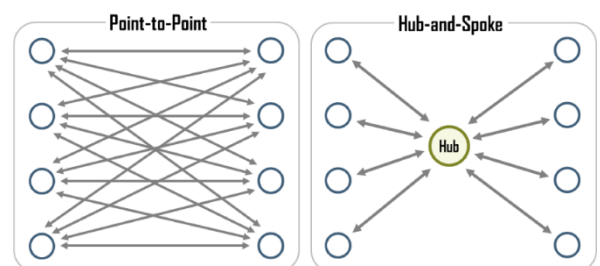
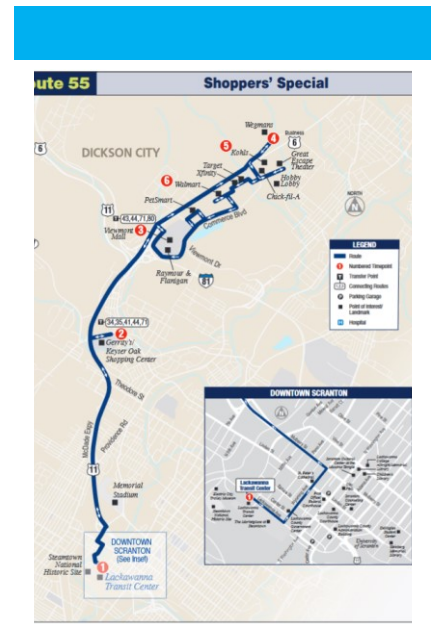
hanging on and closed during the Pandemic. Many of the office buildings that remain are being converted into condominiums or rental apartments, maybe for doctors, nurses or students at the new medical school, or for professors at the universities. The presence of the doctors and professors, as well as their places where they work, have not done anything to improve the commercial vitality of the downtown. It's deader than a doornail.

The COUNTRY OF LACKAWANNA TRANSIT SYSTEM (COLTS) built a new transit center a few years ago. It's sort of in what used to be the city's downtown. Most COLTS bus routes start and end there, which means if you are going anywhere other than a place on the route closest to where you live or work, you will have to make a trip 'downtown', even though there are few reasons to do so today. The "Shopper's Special" route tells the story of what the heart of Scranton has become. The bus takes riders to the Viewmont Mall in Dickson City, which was the beginning of the end for Scranton's central city when it was built about three miles outside of the city at the end of the 60s.

Downtowns are no longer destinations

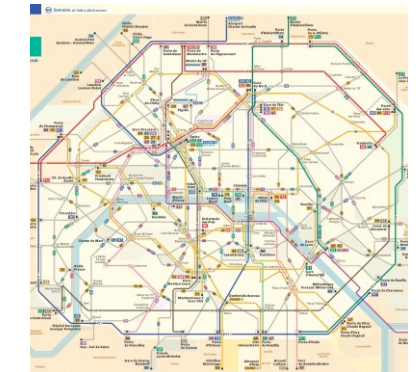
City centers once were destinations; they aren't anymore. They have become transit interchange points where trains and buses take all passengers because it was to the city centers that passengers once wanted to go, but no longer do. This is especially true in large cities like Philadelphia. However, even in small-to-medium-sized cities like Scranton, transit authorities persist in organizing their bus routes around what once was the main attraction but which has become a sideshow. Scranton's new transit center built several years ago within what once was the city's downtown is a topical example of this thinking.

It is difficult and expensive to pull up tracks. It is not difficult to reroute a city's buses. Single transit interchanges, especially those that are in what used to be central cities, simply add wasted time to a passenger's journey. Bus ridership has diminished, and running mostly large, empty buses is a waste of tax payers' money. If a transit system does not believe it has the possibility of converting to on-demand transit that would allow point-to-point rides, it should



at least make it possible for riders to get to their widely dispersed destinations by abandoning the hub-and-spoke bus route design and creating a net that can connect all points more directly to each other. It can start by creating multiple transit points around the entire city, outside of what was at one time the center.

Cities that have never had a single center, one heart, like London, Paris and Stockholm, can serve as good examples of how to adjust to multiple centers. The terminal stations for all of the trains that serve the British capital are dotted around Inner London. The Circle Line on the Underground connects most of them, and the bus lines crisscross the city.



Paris transit routes are a combination of concentric rings and a grid. Stockholm has multiple transit points on each of the principal islands and the 'mainland'.

Don't cry for me, Pennsylvania

Don't shed a tear for lost downtowns, whether they are in Pennsylvania or anywhere. Think of it as gaining a lot of new friends rather than losing one. Eventually, the old centers will find their place among the others in and around the city. If destiny is kind, the essential parts will remain and they won't turn into hollow tourist traps with sports bars and offices converted to Airbnbs. We won't go to them to shop or work, but to breathe a bit of the history of how it all started, when American cities had one, beating heart.



About Michael L. Sena

Through my writing, speaking and client work, I have attempted to bring clarity to an often opaque world of highly automated and connected vehicles. I have not just studied the technologies and analyzed the services. I have developed and implemented them, and have worked to shape visions and followed through to delivering them. What drives me – why do what I do – is my desire to move the industry forward: to see accident statistics fall because of safety improvements related to advanced driver assistance systems; to see congestion on all roads reduced because of better traffic information and improved route selection; to see global emissions from transport eliminated because of designing the most fuel efficient vehicles.

This newsletter touches on the principal themes of the industry, highlighting what, how and why developments are occurring so that you can develop your own strategies for the future. Most importantly, I put vehicles into their context. It's not just roads; it's communities, large and small. Vehicles are tools, and people use these tools to make their lives and the lives of their family members easier, more enjoyable and safer. Businesses and services use these tools to deliver what people need. Transport is intertwined with the environment in which it operates, and the two must be developed in concert.



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