

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 1, 2016

The Last Passenger Train to Cape Charles: *Weekly News* stories of October 1 and October 8, 2012, featured the "Delaware Road," the north-south railroad built in 1859 that opened southern Delaware to the outside world. Merged, with all the railroad's branches, into the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) before 1900, the line was extended far beyond Delaware to the south, passing through Salisbury and Pocomoke City, Maryland, en route to its southern terminus at the town of Cape Charles, Virginia, about eight miles up the Bay from the actual southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula. The PRR also operated the ferries across Hampton Roads (the mouth of Chesapeake Bay) from the railroad's end to Old Point Comfort and Norfolk. These ferries carried foot passengers, wagons, and later automobiles, in addition to railroad cars, both freight and passenger. The ferry crossing took about two hours. (Norfolk Southern Corporation, successor to the Pennsylvania Railroad in that area, still operates railroad ferries today, carrying freight cars across Hampton Roads.)

In the first half of the 20th century, a passenger could take a sleeping car from New York to Norfolk via this route. It was reasonably comfortable but a rather slow trip for the 300-plus miles. For some reason the trains on the Delaware Road (Delmarva Division) did not average much over 30 m.p.h., with the two-hour crossing at the mouth of the Bay to conclude the trip. The trains ran down the main street of Cape Charles, directly to the ferry piers at the end.

In 1930, I crossed on one of these ferries with my parents in our 1928 Packard Model 443 from Old Point Comfort to Cape Charles. Although owned and operated by the railroad, our ferry was a large modern boat that carried only cars, trucks, and people. Soon after that, however, a new ferry service was established for motor vehicles from Kiptopeke, about eight miles south of the town of Cape Charles, from which the distance to Little Creek, in the suburbs of Norfolk, was a much shorter and faster crossing.

In the early 1960s, a massive 18-mile-long bridge-tunnel was being built to replace the Kiptopeke-Little Creek Ferry. It was thought that this would open the Eastern Shore of Virginia to commercial development, so prevalent on the other side of Chesapeake Bay. In May 1963, the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce, of which I was a member at that time, sponsored a special passenger train to run from Wilmington to Cape Charles, with a bus connection to Kiptopeke to take the ferry and view the construction. Lindsay Greenplate and I were on the trip. The eight-car Diesel-powered train left Wilmington before 8 a.m. and stopped in New Castle, Middletown, Clayton, Dover, and Harrington to pick up Chamber members. Since there was a 30 m.p.h. speed limit on the freight-only track south of Salisbury, it was 1 p.m. by the time the train stopped in the middle of the main street in Cape Charles. Quickly we were transferred to the Kiptopeke Ferry and began the trip toward Norfolk. It was a warm and somewhat hazy day, and visibility was limited. The new bridge-tunnel was being built just to the east of the ferry route, and we could see the huge fills required for the four islands needed for the entrances and exits to the tunnels. Bridge construction and long causeways were also evident.

We did not get off the ferry at the Norfolk end but immediately retraced our route to the train awaiting us in the town of Cape Charles. It was about 10 p.m. when we arrived back in Wilmington, but we had a great day on the Last Passenger Train to Cape Charles.