

The Newtown Line: Analyzing a Geography of Abandonment in Suburban Philadelphia

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Running for about 15 miles through several municipalities in Bucks and Montgomery counties is a commuter rail line. The line begins in Fox Chase, a neighborhood in Northeast Philadelphia, where it winds through largely residential low-density townships before it ends in the borough of Newtown. This rail line is known today as the Newtown Line. At one point, it served scores of railroad patrons traveling to and from Philadelphia, as well as some minor freight customers.¹ Today, most of it has been converted into a trail to and what remains, largely in Northampton and Newtown Townships, sits unused and overgrown with brush. The single-tracked line runs right up against white picket fences and suburban landscaping, crossing neighborhood streets, finding its way into otherwise sequestered dormitory subdivisions.

Portions of the line abut largely intact stations with small parking lots, now crumbling from disuse. A few of these stations have modern signage with remnants of transit maps still visible. The impression of this abandoned infrastructure, a rail line which follows a route connecting well-established suburban communities, is puzzling. Its location and current state create

an unusual feeling of dissonance in the spatial landscape. Why is an otherwise unassuming commuter railroad line, running through what seem to be communities perfectly deserving of passenger rail service, sitting so tragically abandoned? In this essay, I answer this question in several parts. First, I discuss what the line was, touching upon its intended purpose and history. Then, I discuss how the line changed as new urban demands of the surrounding area rendered it obsolete. Finally, I analyze the future of the line in the context of a new postmodern geography of the Philadelphia region, and what it will never be again—a commuter rail line.

The Newtown Line was originally conceived as competition to the Pennsylvania Railroad's, or PRR, Philadelphia-New York route. At the time, this was the only railroad connecting the two cities. Originally an ambitious project by a group of speculators to provide rail service to New York, the Philadelphia, Newtown, & New York Railroad reached Newtown by 1878 but never made it further.² For a time, it was a pettifogging instrument of railroad obstructionism. In the latter half of the 19th century, a third company known as the Reading Railroad planned to complete a line between Jenkintown and Bound Brook, NJ to provide its own service between Philadelphia and New York. To continue its monopoly of Philadelphia-New York railroad service, the PRR acquired this same ex-rival Newtown route to block the Reading's Jenkintown-Bound Brook route.³ When that attempt failed, the PRR sold the railroad, and it was incorporated into the

Reading system. The Reading Railroad Jenkintown-Bound Brook route ended up crossing the Newtown Line at an at-grade junction, an arrangement which continued to the line's abandonment and is still visible today. This back-and-forth, in which the railroad continuously switched hands between companies, assured that the Newtown Line would settle late into the Reading Railroad's system. Tracks to connect trains from the Newtown Line's Philadelphia terminus in the north of the city to Reading Terminal would not be completed until 1892. Thus, it had the distinction of being one of the last railroads completed in the 19th century.⁴

Subsequently, the Newtown Line never ranked highly on the Reading Railroad's list of infrastructure priorities, despite the fact that it was surrounded by other similar suburban-urban routes. When the Reading Railroad electrified—meaning, provided overhead catenary wires to deliver power—most of their passenger railroad lines in the 1930s, the company decided to skip the Newtown Line. For its entire existence, it remained a largely single-tracked line with two sidings. As commuters were whisked into Center City Philadelphia by steel-clad soot-free electric multiple units on other Reading lines, Newtown-bound trains continued to utilize steam power until the 1950s.⁵ This arrangement reflected the largely rural scope and limited population which the line served. There was very little industry in the area which required freight service, nor was there very much bedroom community development which necessitated

well-invested commuter rail service along the line's route.⁶

After the Second World War, Philadelphia and the surrounding region had developed into a Fordist geographic landscape. Substantial government investment to roadway corridors coincided with increased automobile use, and Philadelphians continued to settle in newly-minted suburbs. The Reading Railroad catered to commuter rail traffic via its Philadelphia-bound rail lines, with the train service running to inner-ring north-of-Philadelphia suburban municipalities such as Abington, Glenside, Jenkintown, and Elkins Park. These dormitory communities were home to workers who commuted to and from Philadelphia via the Reading system. Beyond these proto-suburbs, however, Bucks and Montgomery County townships like Northampton remained rural and undeveloped. Here, the Reading Railroad did not provide the same scope of service, and therefore further infrastructure investment was not as widely carried out. The final two lines electrified by the Reading Railroad—the largely rural routes to West Trenton and Doylestown—were completed just before the Great Depression hit in 1932.⁷ Predictably, no further investment by the Reading Railroad into its Newtown Line occurred thereafter.

By the 1960s, Philadelphia city officials took note of increasing traffic in the Northeast sections of the city, areas whose planning had been largely guided by a Le Corbusian “garden city” vision of urban design. The Northeast to this day very

suburban in nature, dominated by townhome-style dwellings, wide-median boulevards meeting front yards, shopping centers with parking lots, and little rail-based transit. Understandably, traffic was exacerbated by commuting patterns in the Northeast, creating major jams. To accommodate faster service required of this high demand, Philadelphia city government decided to significantly upgrade service to Fox Chase. This entailed the portion of the Newtown Line which ran within city limits, namely from where the line diverges from the Reading Railroad mainline in Olney to the Fox Chase station Northeast Philadelphia. At the cost of \$2 million, Philadelphia upgraded the railroad between Reading Terminal and Fox Chase to enable electric train service.⁸ Today, the Fox Chase Line shuttles thousands of Northeast Philadelphia residents to and from Center City Philadelphia. Just north of Fox Chase, where tracks once led to Newtown, is now the start of a trail. Once completed, more than half of what is left of the railroad will become trail.

The 1960s city-led service increase along the Philadelphia portion of the Newtown Line was not met with an equal increase in service north of Fox Chase. Northern suburban municipalities did not generate the same amount of ridership that suburban Northeast Philadelphia could—as, beyond the city limits, the line ran through rural townships in Montgomery and Bucks County. From the 1970s until the shuttering of service in 1983, when the line changed hands from the Reading Railroad to SEPTA in the aftermath of 1970s federally-overseen

railroad reorganization, trains to Newtown ran in one or two car sets and were lightly patronized.⁹ This was likely due to the rural and lightly populated nature of the surrounding area, which did not encourage much ridership. What is most unfortunate is the timing of the real property development which would later explode in the middle Bucks County area. From 1960 through 1970, the population of Northampton Township grew by 163%, and from 1970 to 1980 the township grew an additional 73%. Neighboring Newtown Township felt the shockwaves or suburban growth a little later: it grew 126% from 1980 to 1990, and from 1990 to 2000 it grew an astounding 202%.¹⁰

Intuitively, these substantial changes to the areas along the line seem to justify the need for passenger rail service.

Unfortunately, this growth came too little too late for the Newtown Line. In the rise of post-Fordism, commuting patterns and general patterns of settlement have changed for Philadelphia and its hinterland.

Population growth in Northampton and Newtown has slowed considerably since the settlement boom of the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ Suburbs rich in primarily single-family residences like Northampton have seemed to “max out” in growth; relatedly, major employers like Newtown’s Lockheed Martin have left their home municipality in response to corporate restructuring brought about by new global economic demands.¹² These changes, combined with the easily-accessible Delaware Expressway completed in the mid-1960s, have made train travel to and from Philadelphia on a commuter-rail-scale functionally

unnecessary. Middle Bucks and the northern Philadelphia suburbs are no longer home to solely Philly-bound commuters—many areas host those who work in other Delaware Valley exurbs and nearby Northeast megalopolitan centers, like Trenton or New York.¹³ These changes have made a commuter rail line to Center City Philadelphia significantly less desirable, and therefore less plausible to pursue, in the 21st century.

Multiple attempts have been made to revive train transportation to Northampton and Newtown Townships, and all have failed. Studies were completed in 1991¹⁴, 1995¹⁵, and 2006¹⁶ for reinstating electrified rail transit, diesel-powered rail transit, and bus rapid transit services respectively. Ultimately, nothing has materialized from these studies. The largest obstacle of such a revival has been the portion of the line running through Montgomery County. This area is already well-served by SEPTA commuter rail stations that operate on schedules much more frequent than those that were offered by a single-track Newtown Line. Residents of these municipalities are expectedly more intrigued by the possibility of recreational facilities, like a trail, than transportation infrastructure that would otherwise be redundant in the geographic context of Montgomery County.

Unfortunately, this arrangement means that trains will never again run to Newtown as long as residents of the towns along the line do not support its reactivation. These parts of Montgomery County are still largely rural and have a deeply-ingrained appreciation for preserved open space,

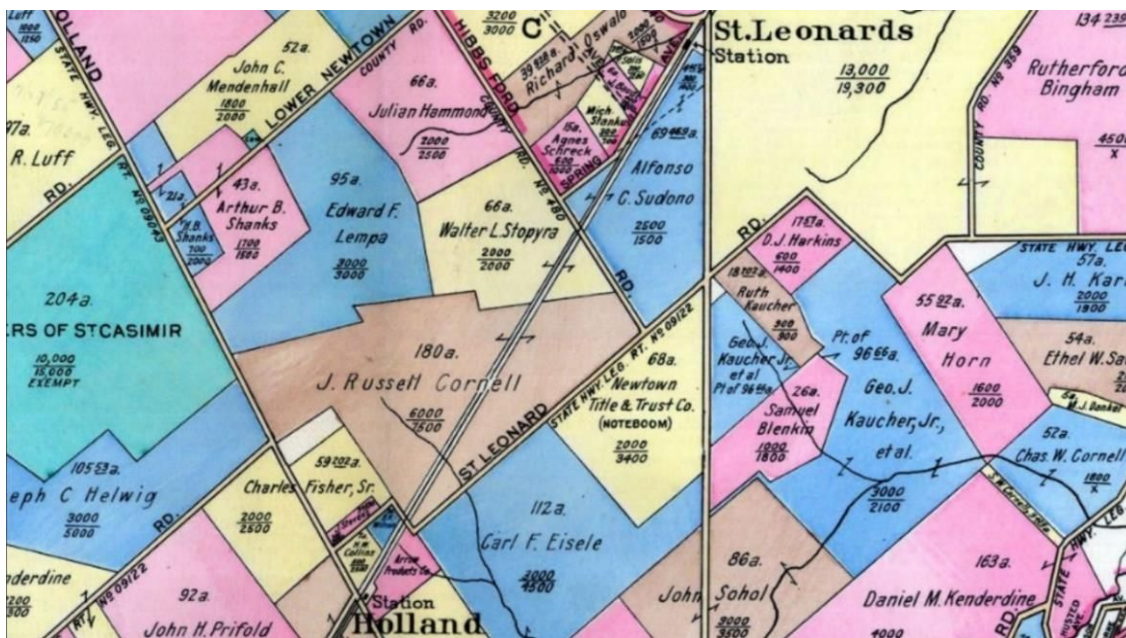
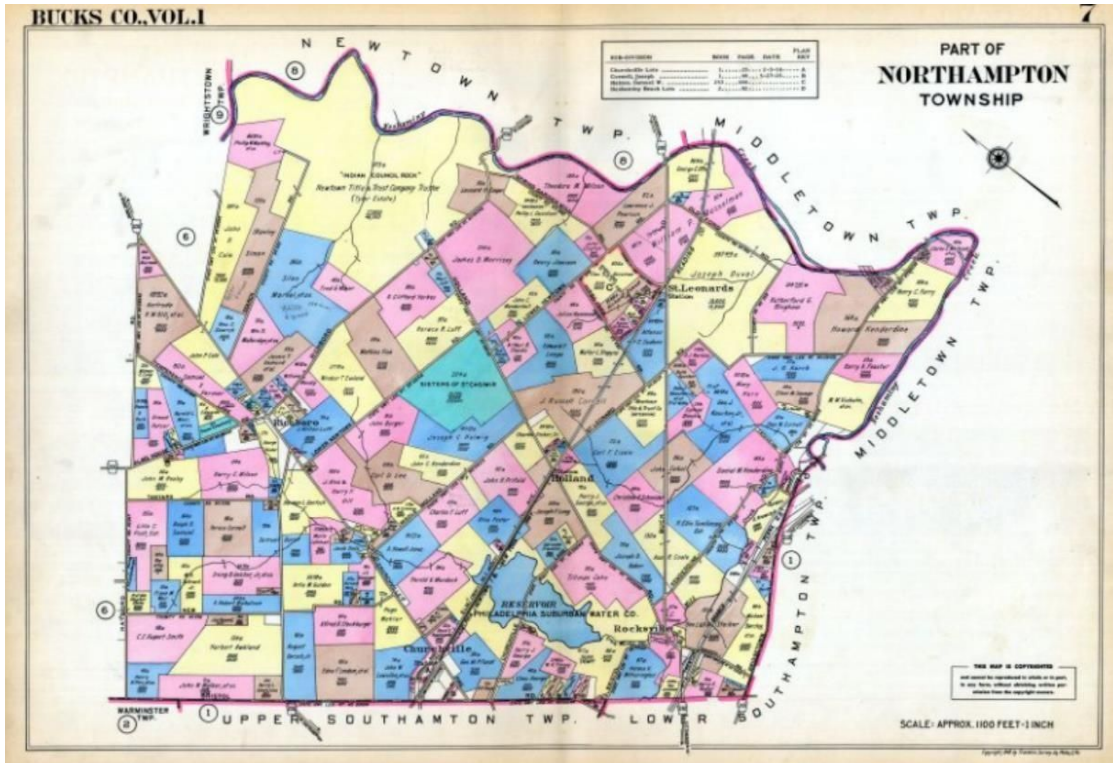
historic sites, and park and trail systems. Priorities for residents in these municipalities are much different than the priorities of those in Northampton and Newtown. Those with Bryn Athyn and Huntington Valley addresses, suburbs where average incomes creep up into the six-figure range, have no interest in getting public transportation back into their communities.¹⁷ Since the likelihood of garnering public support in these communities is zero, by effect, the likelihood of getting trains to run to Northampton or Newtown is also zero.

With this in mind, it is more than a pragmatic view that the Newtown Line should become a trail along its entire route—it appears to be the only possible direction for its reuse. As a recreational trail, the line could be used not only for the enjoyment of residents, but also as a vehicular cycling route. The line's route has the distinction of running through multiple local parks, including Rockledge Park in Rockledge, Lorimer Park in Abington Township, the Pennypack Trail through Bryn Athyn, Tamanend Park in Southampton, and the Churchville Nature Center in Churchville. The Newtown Line could act as a recreational cross-county trail between these suburban park facilities. Additionally, the route connects two rail lines—the Fox Chase Line at Fox Chase station and the West Trenton Line at Bethayres station—with multiple bus routes. The Newtown Line could act as a limited-access highway for bikes, integrating transit with many suburbs of Bucks and Montgomery Counties.

In our post-Fordist world, where the

suburban-urban patterns of commuting and consumerism popularized by industrialist Henry Ford are long gone, bikes have become the new green form of personal transportation. As the Newtown Line sits abandoned, with its restoration to railroad service unlikely, its next use should be the bike trail that many have pushed for.¹⁸ At any rate, it mostly has become a bike trail; the only portion that remains is the portion of the railroad running through Northampton and Newtown Townships. The route the line takes through these municipalities, once the path of billowing steam locomotives and bustling trains hauling of commuters, is now

nothing more than the property line of some suburban backyards. The Newtown Line is odd in this way: it does not seem like it quite belongs in the landscape in which it resides, and in many ways, it never has. If achieved, completing the conversion of the Newtown Line into a bike trail will bring harmony to this geographic dissonance by giving the line a grander purpose than it ever had. Until then, the tracks sit covered in weeds and brush—completely obscured to all but those who have lived long enough to know what they are.



Pictured above is a 1948 Franklin Survey Company map of then-rural Northampton Township. This map can be accessed via the provided URL. On the map, the line runs southwest-northeast from the “Holland” to “St. Leonards” labels. Though these were both stations, only Holland was still in use by 1983.¹⁹ The photos taken at the Old Jordan Road crossing straddle two land tracts on this map, which were likely both farms. 1948 predates all local suburban development; on the map, Old Jordan Road is called “Hibbs Ford Road”. The many colored polygons indicate various landowners of the farms that once made up the township 70 years ago.²⁰



Pictured above is the Southampton train station facing 2nd Street Pike. Work has begun on removing the tracks, presumably for a planned trail. According to a bulletin board off to the left in the photograph, a local historical society known as the Southampton Railroad Station Society maintains the railroad station. I am not sure what the large metal structure in the center of the picture is, but I believe it is related to the steam-powered locomotives that once used this line.



The Churchville train station is now used as a private residence. This was taken from the station parking lot, which is still maintained with painted lines for spots. A sign reading "Churchville" is still in front of the station, in 1980s-esque Helvetica script. The rails are also still visible.



This picture was taken on Old Jordan Road in Holland, Pennsylvania facing due south. This crossing is, peculiarly, in the middle of a suburban neighborhood. The line disappears into landscaping and is incredibly nondescript. One can sense that the homes surrounding the railroad were built without any consideration for the Newtown Line, as if the route had no purpose for those who lived near it. A “No Dumping” sign has been placed near the tracks.



Another image of the crossing at Old Jordan Road in Holland, Pennsylvania. One can see how hundreds could pass by this crossing in their cars and think nothing of it, living their entire lives not knowing it was once an active rail line carrying passengers to Center City Philadelphia.



A panorama taken facing roughly southeast at the Old Jordan Road crossing. The grey metal box in the center-right of the photo is some sort of disused railroad equipment, possibly for controlling railroad signals or railroad crossing lights. The signs placed in the way of the tracks are both “No Dumping” signs. The railroad runs through the middle of a backyard—an above ground pool, a swing set, and a barbecue grill sit just out of frame to the right. Out of frame to the left, at most 20 feet from the tracks, is a private drive and residence. As a small shout out to the rail line that borders its yard, the house across the street has a train-themed mailbox.



A closer look at the crossing at Old Jordan Road, as well as the “No Dumping” signs. The tracks across the road sit in the middle of a lawn. It appears that the grass around the rail line is maintained. I highly doubt that SEPTA (owner of the right-of-way) does this landscaping.



Besides the crumbling station platform and railroad tracks barely peeking above gravel, this SEPTA transit sign is the only evidence of a train station ever being at Newtown.



A better view of the train platform at Newtown. This photo is facing southwest, towards Lincoln Avenue and Penn Street. Visible is the Newtown station sign, a “Caution: Look Before Crossing” sign at the left, and some sort of derelict railroad equipment to the right of that. The rest of the site is overgrown with trees and brush. Off to the left, out of frame, is a contracting company site which appears to be sitting on what was a former rail yard.



Taken at the end of the Newtown Line. This picture is taken facing south, as the tracks disappear into the overgrowth before reemerging at Lincoln Avenue and Penn Street. I am unsure what the concrete platform was for. A bus shelter for a little-used SEPTA route is out of frame to the right. That route is the 130 bus, which runs from Newtown to the Frankford Transportation Center.



Taken at the corner of Lincoln and Centre Avenues in Newtown, Pennsylvania. The track is the end of what was, until 1983, the Newtown Line.



The end of the Newtown Line at Centre and Lincoln Avenues. Pictured is a post-2000s suburban townhouse development, built on the site of what I recall was a former rail yard for many years.

NOTES

¹Greg Harrison, "The Newtown Branch," *Abandoned Rails: The Newtown Branch*, Accessed October 21, 2018, http://www.abandonedrails.com/Newtown_Branch.

²"A Brief History of the Newtown Branch Operated by the Reading Railroad," *Newtown Branch History*, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.srrss.org/docs/Literature/NewtownBranchHistory.PDF>.

³"Delaware and Bound Brook Railroad Company Records 1776," *FINDING AIDS: Archival Collections at Hagley Museum and Library*, Accessed October 21, 2018. <https://findingaids.hagley.org/xtf/view?docId=ead/1776.xml>.

⁴"A Brief History of the Newtown Branch Operated by the Reading Railroad," <https://www.srrss.org/docs/Literature/NewtownBranchHistory.PDF>.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Part of Northampton Township* [map], 1:1,100, In: *Bucks County 1948 Volume 1*, 1st ed, Philadelphia: Franklin Survey Company, 1948, 7, <<http://www.historicmapworks.com/Map/US/18012/Plate+007+++Northampton+Township/Bucks+County+1948+Vol+1/Pennsylvania/>> (21 October 2018).

⁷"Reading Railroad, Bee Line Service," *Reading Railroad*, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.american-rails.com/reading-railroad.html>.

⁸"A Brief History of the Newtown Branch Operated by the Reading Railroad," <https://www.srrss.org/docs/Literature/NewtownBranchHistory.PDF>.

⁹Jeff Werner, "CHUGGING TOWARD A NEW USE: Next Stop for Defunct Newtown Rail Line in Bucks County May Be as an 8.5 Mile Multi-use Recreational Trail," *The Advance of Bucks County*, October 06, 2016, Accessed October 21, 2018, http://www.buckslocalnews.com/the_advance/chugging-toward-a-new-use-next-stop-for-defunct-newtown/article_a2e9a80d-45d6-51b4-8684-d9e5f81d977e.html.

¹⁰Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Data Services, *Population Change in The Delaware Valley, 1930-2000*, 82nd ed. Philadelphia, PA, DVPRC.org, 2006, April 2006, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.dvrpc.org/reports/DB082.pdf>.

¹¹Jonathan Lai and Laura McCrystal, "Census Data Show Chester County's Hot, South Jersey's Not. Here's How Towns Are Changing," *Philly.com*, June 11, 2018, Accessed October 21, 2018. <http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania-new-jersey-census-data-population-growth-2018-20180611.html>.

¹²Natalie Kostelni, "Lockheed Martin Sells Large Newtown Site to Pharma Company," *Bizjournals.com*, March 5, 2015, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/blog/real-estate/2015/03/lockheed-martin-sells-large-newtown-site-to-pharma.html>.

¹³Jonathan Lai and Laura McCrystal, June 11, 2018.

¹⁴United States, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, *A NEW LOOK AT RESTORATION OF RAIL SERVICE TO NEWTOWN*, Philadelphia, PA: Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, 1991, Accessed October 21, 2018 http://newtownline.pa-tec.org/documents/1991_NewtownStudy.pdf.

¹⁵ United States. Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, *Travel Demand Analysis of the Newtown Line*, Philadelphia, PA: Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, 1995, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://www.dvrpc.org/reports/95002.pdf>.

¹⁶ United States, Bucks County Planning Commission, *Newtown Bus Rapid Transit And Pedestrian Trail Concept Study*, Pittsburgh, PA: Michael Baker International, 2006, Accessed October 21, 2018, http://newtownline.pa-tec.org/documents/studies/2006_BRT_Study.pdf.

¹⁷ “Bryn Athyn, PA,” Bryn Athyn, PA | Data USA, Accessed October 21, 2018, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/bryn-athyn-pa/>.

¹⁸ Justine McDaniel, “Bucks Rail Trail Runs into Opposition,” Philly.com, December 13, 2016, Accessed October 21, 2018, http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20161213_Bucks_rail_trail_runs_into_opposition.html.

¹⁹ Greg Harrison, “The Newtown Branch,” http://www.abandonedrails.com/Newtown_Branch.

²⁰ *Part of Northampton Township* [map], 7, <<http://www.historicmapworks.com/Map/US/18012/Plate+007+++Northampton+Township/Bucks+County+1948+Vol+1/Pennsylvania/>> (21 October 2018).