

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The restoration of the #9 steam engine was a work in progress for about 13 years and cost about \$1 million. Prior to the restoration it hadn't been in operation since 1981. It is designed to travel at 15 to 25 miles per hour. Fenwick Grove, Pumpkin Train excursion. Photos by Author.

On Track: Woodstown Central Railroad Offers Excursions Through the...

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

We pulled into the parking lot of the “Woodstown Central Railroad (WCRR),” to the sight of a backlit vintage steam locomotive puffing clouds of water vapor into a sunny sky. At that moment we had just stepped a century and a half back in time. We were greeted by a young man, Dillon Podlesny, whose job it was to switch the track so that the engine could be recoupled to the passenger cars to take us on our southerly route once we boarded.





Dillon Podlesny stands on the caboose platform. Photo by Author

He told us the crew would be running the "Pumpkin Train" to Fenwick Grove. He, like all the workers we spoke to, has a passion for locomotives. Dillion had also worked at the Wilmington Western Railroad and the New Hope Railroad prior to his current employment.

The train is run by the SMS Rail Lines, a freight company that operates out of Logan

Township's Pureland Industrial Park. Its primary business is hauling freight on the Penns Grove Secondary Line which connects to a national railway network. They run about 16,000 cargo cars a year with bulk materials.

Our adventure involved their tourist train, dubbed the "Woodstown Central Railroad," which runs the old Salem Railroad track, built c.1863. Our trip was their southern venture beginning at their station in South Woodstown and heading south to Fenwick Grove, which is owned by SMS. The Salem Line runs from Woodbury to the Port of Salem but the WCRR confines their trips primarily to the tracks from Swedesboro Brewing Company to Fenwick Grove. Southwest of Fenwick Grove, the tracks has turns that are too tight for the long passenger trains.

The WCRR has restored one steam and three diesel engines, a caboose that holds 16 passengers, an open-air car that holds 40, two coach cars which hold 65 passengers each, and two table cars, each with seating for 40 people.

SMS has hauled glass on the Salem RR tracks for some time, and recently they upgraded the line at a cost of one million dollars per mile. The train staff spoke highly

of Jeff Sutch, one of SMS's owners, commenting that he is very down to earth and affable. His motivation and nostalgia for the #9 steam engine may well derive from the fact that he ran the engine in the 1970s!

Today I was accompanied by my English travel buddy. There were plenty of other adults on board but most were with children and grandchildren. We felt a bit like big kids, maybe because our destination involved going to a park-like location, selecting a pumpkin, drinking cider, and eating a donut!

As we pulled away from the station the whistle blew, signaling our departure. You could sense the initial inertia necessary to get the weight of the train underway. At first we were bordered by farm fields, and then by state-protected forests colorful in their autumn splendor. Much of the land was privately-owned yet still forested or in farmland preservation. As we chugged along through the trees the steam from the engine enveloped them, and the backlight provided by the sun created an otherworldly air to the experience. Falling leaves fell into the open areas between the cars and into the cabs. Honestly, it was a bit magical.

When we got to Fenwick Grove we disembarked. The WCRR staff had a lot of activities for families to do, especially

considering we would only be there for 30 minutes. Aluminum farm feeding rings filled partially with corn as makeshift sandboxes were provided. Bales of straw were arranged to create a children's maze. A stand offered passengers cider and donuts. Two setups of a cornhole game were in constant use. Throughout the cleared property there were pumpkins so passengers could select a keeper. Many families availed themselves of picnic tables for sipping cider and munching doughnuts.





Upper: Matthew Tydings greets passengers. Photo: Unknown.

Lower: Matthew Tydings processes passengers' tickets. Photo by Author.

At the Grove the train takes advantage of a triangular configuration in the tracks to recouple the engine to the other end of the cars for the return trip. This enables the passengers to take lots of pictures of the engine, which is impossible to do when you are onboard.

While at Fenwick Grove the train's crew meticulously went over the engine: oiling, polishing, shoveling coal into the burners, and making sure hitching up was done properly. I'm in no way qualified to make

such an analysis, but they impressed this greenhorn.



The train's crew was most accommodating, taking time to answer my many questions. One trainman, David Steckel of Wenonah, had been an East

Coast tugboat captain for 48 years. In retirement he is a "trainman," or so his cap declares. He has been working for SMS for two and a half years and he revealed that he's "living the life, every little boy's dream," riding and operating vintage trains. He especially likes meeting interesting people from all over.

Matthew Tydings lives in Baltimore and commutes four days a week, putting in 10-hour days to walk in the footsteps of generations of family members before him who worked the tracks as well. He took time to describe the history of the train cars and track.

There were two families from Collingswood who had been together the previous night, neither knowing they were both coming to

ride the Pumpkin Train. Their two daughters looked as if they were sisters and are mistaken as such all the time. Both families had done the Pumpkin Train the prior year and were back for more. Steckel said these kinds of coincidences happen all the time.

The WCRR has only been operating for three years but I sensed that it was going to become a tradition for those on board. It was a fun morning, and in fact I hope to take my grand-niece and -nephew on their Christmas train. You may wish to check out the holiday excursions yourself! 🟦

(Please scroll for more information)





During the holidays children are encouraged to drop a note to Santa prior to Christmas.

This Holiday Season

The Woodstown Central Railroad offers themed rides and private bookings – something for the entire family. If you are looking for some holiday-themed fun, the train staff was very excited about the previous year's Yuletide Special that runs November 29th to December 23rd. Santa makes his way

through the train visiting with each family on board. These trips book up quickly, so plan as soon as possible. Check out their website at www.woodstowncentral.com for a wide array of events and options.

History of the Salem Railroad Line – Source: **www.WoodstownCentral.com**

"In the harsh winter of 1851-1852, Salem Creek experienced a dramatic freeze, prompting a pivotal turning point. The confluence of frozen waterways crippling boat shipments and the lamentable state of local roads culminated in the imperative establishment of a transformative railroad. This game-changing endeavor was initially set in motion through a charter in 1853 by the West Jersey Railroad, aimed at forging a crucial connection from Camden to Cape May via Salem. Despite the visionary intent, this ambitious initiative unfortunately faltered, becoming a mere footnote in history.

The Salem Railroad

- Charted March 13, 1856.
- Wanted to build from Salem to reach any point of the West Jersey Railroad mainline, preferably in Woodbury. However, chose a different location.
- Last 6.6 miles of railroad is Salem Railroad; original ROW can be seen from maps. Split off North of Mowers Station Road, just South of Tanalorne Farms.

- Opened in 1863, and had two locomotives. Leased to West Jersey Railroad as of June 1, 1868.” (Check out their website for a more complete history.)

Another Local Tourist Train Option



Friendly Competition: Seashore Lines Offers Santa Express

Also, on track with a year-round schedule of specially themed holiday events is the Seashore Lines. Santa Claus is coming to town, and he's riding the Seashore Lines from the Richland to Tuckahoe train stations.

A Christmas tradition continues with the 30th season of the Seashore Lines Santa Express, and you and your family are invited to celebrate the most wonderful time of the year by starting or continuing a family holiday tradition.

Learn more and book your trip
at <https://www.seashorelines.org/the-santa-express>