

## Harris Interlocking Tower Fact Sheet

**Opened:** April 26, 1930

**Ownership:**

- 1930 to 1968 - Pennsylvania Railroad
- 1968 to 1976 - Penn Central Railroad
- 1976 to 1992 - Amtrak
- 1992 to Present - Harrisburg Chapter, National Railway Historical Society

**Purpose:** To control rail traffic through what was once a maze of tracks at the north (railroad west) end of the Harrisburg Passenger Station.

**Method:** By use of an “Interlocking Machine” to control all switches and signals in the area. The Interlocking Machine functions as an analog computer that ensures that two trains cannot be routed on a collision course. The Interlocking Machine has 113 levers that are used to control the switches and signals.

**Territory:** Originally 3,250 feet in length extending from the middle of the Harrisburg Passenger Station platforms to approximately Herr Street. The territory varied in width from 4 to 16 tracks wide.

- 1945 - 87 switches and 106 signals
- 1982 - 18 switches and 29 signals
- 1991 - 4 switches and 10 signals

**Traffic in the 1930's:**

- More than 100 scheduled passenger trains per day with multiple sections of many trains greatly increasing that number.
- Approximately 25 freight trains per day.
- Numerous light engine and switching movements.

**Traffic Today:**

- Two passenger trains per day pass the tower. Several more arrive at the station and reverse, but do not pass the tower.
- Typically, approximately 50 freight trains per day pass Harris Tower in a 24 hour period with this number increasing during the peak freight season in the fall.
- There are also numerous light engine and switching movements.

**Historical Significance:** Harris Tower marked the western terminus of the Pennsylvania Railroad's electrification of its passenger lines. It was at Harris that westbound trains would have their electric locomotives (like the venerable GG1) removed and replaced with steam or diesel locomotives before continuing their journey westward, with the process reversed for eastbound trains.

Harrisburg was also a point where trains were split and combined. Eastbound trains would be split into New York / Philadelphia and Baltimore / Washington sections, again with the reverse occurring for westbound trains. All of this combined to make Harris Tower a very busy and very important point on the Pennsy system.

**Staffing:** The construction of Harris allowed the PRR to close three nearby towers, reducing manpower to 18 men. At its peak, Harris was a three shift, 24/7 operation. At the time of its closing Harris was down to one man working a single, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. shift.

**Phase out:** Following World War II, with the advent of the Interstate Highway system and passenger jet aircraft, passenger rail travel diminished sharply. With the decrease in traffic levels, the amount of trackage at Harris was gradually reduced. Switches and signals were removed from service and their controlling levers were physically bolted in place.

A \$9 million rebuild of the interlocking by Conrail in 1989 left Harris with very little trackage to control. Amtrak, the owner of the building, subsequently moved the functions of Harris Tower to nearby State Tower, located in the Harrisburg Passenger Station building.

Harris Tower was closed on November 15, 1991.

**Today:** Trackage immediately outside the tower is the western terminus of Amtrak owned steel from Philadelphia to Harrisburg. The two tracks on the opposite side of the railroad property are Norfolk Southern's Harrisburg Line from Harrisburg to Reading. At Reading, the Harrisburg Line continues to Philadelphia while the NS Reading Line connects to Allentown. From there trains travel to the New York area by way of the NS Lehigh Line.

In 1927, a train traveling from New York to Chicago passed under the control of over 100 towers like Harris, staffed by 916 men.

Today, towers are rapidly being replaced by Centralized Train Control (CTC) systems that allow a handful of dispatchers to control switches and signals over hundreds of miles of railroad. Norfolk Southern maintains one such dispatching facility just north of Harrisburg. Amtrak operates their CTC facility in Wilmington, DE and it is anticipated that in the near future, all the Amtrak owned trackage between Harrisburg and Philadelphia will be placed under CTC control and the few remaining towers on the Amtrak line between Harrisburg and Philadelphia will be permanently closed.

It is for this reason that Harris Tower has been preserved and is retained as an example of railroading in a bygone era.

Harris Tower is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.