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ON THE RIGHT TRACK WITH COURTNEY B. WILSON

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Why is the 175th anniversary of railroading in America such a significant date in transportation history?

There are several reasons why it is important to take note of this occasion. First, the genesis of railroading in America was a risky experiment in adapting rudimentary technology to the American terrain. No one had ever attempted something on this grand scale before. The financial risk taken on by the public and private sectors is also noteworthy because of the partnership it represented with the goal of competing against the canal system that was drawing business away from the Port of Baltimore.

When you consider that railroads changed the face of the American land-

scape, this celebration becomes even more important. Railroads opened up communications, provided reliable public transportation for people, fueled the industrial revolution and generally helped create the modern America we know today.

Celebrating the anniversary is also appropriate in order to reconnect the public with railroading. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a cultural disconnect between the public and the railroads as passenger travel waned. Freight traffic moves largely out of sight of the public eye and therefore it is easy to forget how vital the railroads are to our nation's economy, the Maryland economy and the Port of Baltimore.

Lastly, throughout its history and into the 20th century, the B&O was a pioneering railroad and a leader in

innovation. The B&O was the first railroad to initiate regular passenger service and to introduce an air-conditioned car. It was responsible for so many innovations in freight and passenger car designs that its Mount Clare yards were dubbed the "Railroad University of the United States."

How significant is the B&O Railroad Museum collection?

Far and away, the B&O Railroad Museum contains the most important and historic collection in the Western Hemisphere. Some of the most significant pieces include the "Tom Thumb," which is a replica of the first railroad locomotive built in the United States, and B&O #25, a Civil War period locomotive built in 1857.