

Harrisburg Chapter

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**ONE OF A KIND INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT
HARRIS RAILROAD SWITCH TOWER
OPENS TO THE PUBLIC**

Located in downtown Harrisburg at the corner of 7th and Walnut Streets (across from The Forum) Harris Railroad Switch Tower, will officially open to the public as an interactive museum on Saturday, June 7th. Harris Railroad Switch Tower is a railroad control tower built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1930 to control all train movements through downtown Harrisburg, PA. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the tower once controlled the switches and signals that routed more than 100 passenger trains a day through the Central Pennsylvania area.

The tower is historically significant because it marked the western terminus of the electrification of the Pennsy's passenger lines. It was there at Harris Tower that the venerable GG1 electric locomotives (one of which is on display in the nearby Harrisburg Transportation Center) would be removed from westbound trains to be replaced by steam and later, diesel locomotives before the trains could continue their westward journeys.

The tower was used by the PRR, the Penn Central Railroad and Amtrak until closing in 1991. Upon closing, the Harrisburg Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society purchased the building and began the process of restoration. Now, after thousands of hours of work by the Chapter's volunteers the tower will be open to the public.

The center piece of the exhibit is the tower's Interlocking Machine and Model Board. The Interlocking Machine is the device that actually controlled the track switches and signals and the Model Board is the lighted map of the area trackage that pinpointed the location of the trains and showed how the signals were set. We've all seen these devices in old movies where the switchmen would throw the levers to route trains onto sidings and so forth. What makes Harris Tower especially interesting is the huge amount of trackage the tower controlled. The Interlocking Machine at Harris has 113 levers and its Model Board contains more than 450 indicator lamps!

What makes Harris Tower truly unique is that the entire Interlocking Machine and Model Board are operable! Visitors to Harris Railroad Switch Tower can actually operate the levers of the Interlocking Machine and see what happens by way of the lighted Model Board display, exactly as it was done decades ago. The Interlocking Machine and Model

Board have been tied into a computer simulation system that is programmed with the actual Pennsylvania Railroad train schedules from the early 1940's. It was during this time - the War Years - that Harris tower was busiest. As "virtual trains" arrive in the area they are displayed by way of the indicator lights on the Model Board. It is then up to the visitor to throw the proper levers to route the trains to their correct destinations. In this way, rather than simply viewing a static display, visitors to Harris Tower can actually operate the equipment and experience for themselves what it would have been like to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad in its heyday. To the best of our knowledge, **there is no other exhibit like Harris Railroad Switch Tower anywhere in the world.**

Located at the corner of 7th and Walnut Streets, the tower is still adjacent to very active railroad lines making Harris a perfect vantage point for youngsters and railroad buffs to view and photograph nearly 50 Norfolk Southern and Amtrak trains each day from a safe location, regardless of the weather.

Harris Tower will be open to visitors of all ages on Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., from June 7th through November 1st. Admission is free. For additional information or for group visits, contact the Harrisburg Chapter of the NRHS at 717-232-6221 or by e-mail at HarrisTower@verizon.net.