

The Papal Weekend In Paoli

September 26–27, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Colonial period, as a way stop on the turnpike connecting Philadelphia and Lancaster, the small village of Paoli, in Chester County, has served as a transportation center. During the 1830s, it became one of Pennsylvania's original "train towns" on the Philadelphia & Columbia Railroad during the earliest days of the Main Line of Public Works. For many decades, Paoli, 19 miles west of Philadelphia, served as an important passenger stop on the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line connecting Pittsburgh and Chicago. And from 1935 into 1938, Paoli was the western limit of the PRR's electric catenary. During that period every westbound passenger through-train briefly stopped in Paoli to change its electric engine for a steam locomotive ... and vice-versa eastbound.

Unprecedented travel records were set in Paoli during the years of World War II, and in the post-war period. As eastern Chester County's population has markedly increased, Paoli's role as an important suburban commuter station grows year by year. But for a single weekend in September 2015, Paoli stood poised to break all prior records for passenger transportation as the town prepared to become a magnet center for thousands upon thousands of visitors from across the Americas and the world.

How this weekend event came to be, and how it may be remembered, is the purpose of this story.



At 8:55 am on Saturday, September 26th, SEPTA Silverliner IV #127 pulls into Paoli station on Number 1 track as hundreds of pilgrims await permission to board.
Courtesy of the author.

BACKGROUND

On February 11, 2013, the world first learned the news. Pope Benedict XVI, the pope to millions of Roman Catholics worldwide, was resigning his duties because of age and infirmity ... the first time a reigning pontiff had resigned in almost 600 years. But a short month later, on March 13, 2013, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina was elected the new pope of the Roman Catholic communion, and chose for himself the papal name Francis, after his hero, St. Francis of Assisi. It soon

became apparent that this new "Holy Father," with his "no-frills" expressions of his faith, and his sense of compassion, accessibility and genuine humility, was an inspiration to both Catholics and non-Catholics. Dr. John Sniegocki, professor of theology at Cincinnati's Xavier University, summed it up this way: "A simple lifestyle, a simple papacy, resonates with people and gives more impact to his broader words and critiques of global systems."¹

The Vatican made it official in November 2014. This charismatic Pope Francis would be visiting the United States the following year, and as part of that tour would be visiting Philadelphia to attend portions of the World Meeting of Families. It would be only the fourth visit to our nation by a sitting pope, and Francis' first visit to the United States since becoming pontiff.

The World Meeting of Families (WMOF) was founded in 1992, and every three years since has been held in different cities around the world to encourage and strengthen the bonds of the family unit across the globe. The WMOF had become the world's largest gathering of Catholic families, and this 2015 meeting, anticipated to be the largest in its history, was to be the first time the event would be held in the United States.

Pope Francis' whirlwind trip to the Americas would begin with his arrival in Cuba on September 19 for a three day visit. He would then continue to Washington, D.C. on September 22 to spend two days meeting with the President, speaking to a joint session of the Congress, and attending to many religious duties. On September 24th the pope would fly to New York City to address the United Nations General Assembly, participate in a multi-faith service at the 9/11 World Trade Center Memorial and Museum, and celebrate Mass at Madison Square Garden.

And then finally, on Saturday morning, September 26, Francis would fly into Philadelphia for a two day visit before returning to Rome on Sunday evening the 27th. On his arrival, the pope would celebrate Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of Sts. Peter and Paul, speak at Independence Hall, and visit the Festival of Families on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. The following day, after meeting with bishops at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood and visiting prisoners at Philadelphia's Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, the pope would celebrate a public Mass at the conclusion of the World Meeting of Families at Eakins Circle on Benjamin Franklin Parkway. It was predicted that as many as 150 nations would be represented at this Philadelphia event. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (August 2nd) anticipated that "as many as two million people ... are expected to travel to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to see Pope Francis." Another retrospective recalled the earlier announcement that "... 1.5 million people could pack into Center City for a Mass on Sunday, effectively doubling Philadelphia's population for the day."²

PREPARATIONS IN THE DELAWARE VALLEY

If proved accurate, such crowds would be almost without precedent in Philadelphia. The city would be on its highest alert, and the Delaware Valley began to hunker down for the onslaught.

Because of recent terroristic threats and outrages, from papal assassination attempts to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, all three stops on the pope's North American tour — Washington, D.C., New York City and Philadelphia — had been designated National Special Security Events. As U.S. Secret Service Director Joseph Clancy described,³ the Secret Service has the "authority and responsibility to design and implement the security plan" for each destination. During the papal weekend in Philadelphia, Clancy said, there will be a "pretty obvious police presence" in Center City, including "counter-snipers on rooftops and bomb-sniffing dogs." The FBI's hostage team would be on hand, as would the National Guard, Pennsylvania State Police, and of course the Philadelphia police.

It soon became evident that getting around the Delaware Valley that weekend was going to be very difficult indeed — whether for the faithful attending the papal festivities, or just for ordinary folks trying to get to work or visit family.

¹ Bruinius, Harry, "Pope Francis' political style on display: humble gestures, not fiery rhetoric," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 25, 2015 <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0925/Pope-Francis-political-style-on-display-humble-gestures-not-fiery-rhetoric>, (accessed January 16, 2016)

² Malone, Scott. "Philadelphia 'back to normal' after historic papal visit." Reuters: September 28, 2015 – <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-usa-mayor-idUSKCN0RS20320150928> (accessed March 20, 2016).

³ Farr, Stephanie. "U.S. Secret Service director talks papal security." *Philadelphia Daily News*: September 16, 2015 http://articles.philly.com/2015-09-16/news/66572959_1_clancy-pope-francis-security-plan (accessed January 29, 2016).

Draconian transportation and security restrictions were soon announced. Driving into that part of Philadelphia referred to as the "traffic box," a 4.5 square mile zone encompassing much of Center City and University City, would be impossible, and vehicular traffic into and out of "the box" would be halted. Major arterials including portions of the Schuylkill Expressway, the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, the Vine Street Expressway, and all Center City exits from Interstate 95 would be closed.

That left public transportation, and specifically the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), as the sole option for carrying the anticipated throngs.

The Philadelphia Inquirer of August 2, 2015 highlighted SEPTA's plans for carrying out their Herculean task. To haul the anticipated surge of the faithful, SEPTA would double its rail capacity during the papal weekend. But there was a downside. Only 18 of SEPTA's 153 Regional Rail stations would be open during the weekend, severely limiting access to the increased service schedule. On one of SEPTA's busiest Regional Rail corridors, the Paoli/Thorndale line, express trains to Philadelphia would only pick up passengers at the Paoli station and the Radnor station. Scheduled service from these stations into the city would occur every half-hour from 5:30 a.m. to noon on each of the two days, with SEPTA placing three additional trains in reserve just in case. The drop-off/boarding station for the Paoli/Thorndale Line in Center City would be limited to only the 30th Street Station.



Boarding commences on yet another SEPTA train on Saturday morning, September 26th. Many national symbols were in evidence, including a girl on the left covered with the Maple Leaf of her native Canada. *Courtesy of the author.*

Anyone planning to use Regional Rail during this weekend would be required to purchase a \$10 special pass, called a "One Day Papal Visit Regional Rail Pass," prior to the weekend. Such a pass would be required for each day of the pope's visit. SEPTA announced that these passes would be available for sale through a one-day lottery conducted on the SEPTA website starting at 12:01 a.m. Monday (August 3). Lottery participants could request up to 10 passes per entry, but "may only enter once. Winners will be chosen at random and notified by e-mail on Aug. 6."

The initial outpouring of joy surrounding the pope's visit began to be dampened by these announcements, and public enthusiasm began to wane. From an August 15, 2015 article in *USA Today*: "Instead of a cause for celebration, Mayor Michael Nutter & Co. made the papal pilgrimage sound more like the apocalypse. It was a communications debacle of epic proportions. Officials talked of a mammoth 'traffic box' in Center City in which no cars would be allowed to enter, of closed bridges that would result in long hikes for people coming to see the pope. Confusion about logistics ran rampant. There were rumors of a 'papal fence.' Restaurateurs worried quite publicly about getting food supplies, about how their employees would be able to get to work."

"This is how bad it got: *The Washington Post* warned that 'Philadelphia risks reinforcing the notion that it is a second-rate stopover between Washington and New York City, both of which will host His Holiness and appear to be taking his arrival in stride.'" ⁴

⁴ "Philly works to avert pope visit debacle." *USA TODAY*: September 15, 2015

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/columnist/rieder/2015/09/09/rieder-philly-works-avert-pope-visit-debacle/71929740>

⁵ *Main Line Suburban Life*, September 27, 2015

PREPARATIONS IN PAOLI

SEPTA predicted that Paoli, the only SEPTA station in all of Chester County, would experience the highest ridership of all its 18 Regional Rail stations in use over the weekend. At the beginning of September, Tredyffrin Police Superintendent Anthony Giamio summarized the township's estimate that nearly 20,000 riders would pass through the Paoli station during the pontiff's visit. Just days after Giamio's pronouncement, the Tredyffrin Board of Supervisors declared a state of emergency for the period of the papal weekend, and township police and other emergency responders began to prepare for the expected traffic and congestion.⁵



ABOVE: Staging Zone #1 was packed with pilgrims by late morning on Sunday, September 27th

BELOW: Paoli Plaza, designated a one-way corridor for drop off/pick up only, was busy indeed on Saturday morning, September 26th.

Courtesy of the author.



Tredyffrin Township announced that during the weekend in Paoli, traffic would be closed on always busy North Valley Road between Bracken Avenue and Paoli Plaza in order to allow the railroad bridge to be pedestrian-safe. Paoli Plaza was designated a “one-way” street westbound from North Valley Road to Greenwood Avenue, strictly for use in dropping off and picking up passengers. Parking in Paoli would be severely curtailed, with dozens of adjacent streets in and around Paoli to be prominently posted with township “No Parking” signs and the threat of towing. The modest lot on Bracken Avenue provided the only public parking near the Paoli station. While travelers were advised that additional public parking was available at the SEPTA station at Daylesford, regrettably no one seemed to have considered the reality of the one-mile distance from Daylesford back to Paoli, and no shuttle service was provided to transport drivers from their parked vehicles to join their passengers at Paoli station.

The one-acre parking area immediately surrounding the Paoli station was to be cordoned off to all traffic, and instead divided into a security checkpoint and several passenger waiting “zones.” Passengers arriving in the station area would first pass through a screening checkpoint where SEPTA passes would be examined. They would then be directed to enter the nearest open waiting zone. In this way, passengers in “Zone One” would board the next arriving train, allowing those in “Zone Two” to migrate into “Zone One” to await the following train, etc.

All the anxiety of traffic gridlock and parking confusion was to have commercial impact upon the community that weekend. Many local merchants in Paoli decided to close their establishments out of an abundance of caution.

ONE REPORTER’S OBSERVATIONS IN PAOLI

As a former president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, with an avid interest in, and knowledge of, Paoli, I wanted to be a witness for what seemed to be developing as one of the significant events in the town’s history.

Saturday morning, September 26, dawned partly cloudy and in the mid-50s — a beautiful early-fall day. As I headed toward Paoli on Lancaster Avenue from the west before 8:00 a.m., I did not know if traffic blockages and other security delays would even allow me to proceed into town. To my relief, I needn’t have worried. Traffic was, to my eye, even lighter than that expected on a normal Saturday morning in Paoli.



Throughout the weekend many groups of Catholic sisters and novitiates arrived into Paoli for the short train journey to see the “Holy Father.” This group of young and smiling Catholic sisters cross North Valley Road at Paoli Plaza under the watchful eye of officers of the Tredyffrin Police Department and members of the Pennsylvania National Guard’s 28th Division. *Courtesy of the author.*

But now, where to park? There was a proliferation of "No Parking" warnings erected by the townships along most main and secondary streets in the area. Predictably, entrepreneurship was alive and well. I saw several private parking lots with signs announcing "\$40 – Parking All Day" and even one advertising "\$75 All Day Papal Parking." Fortunately for me, and a great many others, just two blocks west of Paoli station, an Episcopal church, the Church of the Good Samaritan, boldly proclaimed "FREE POPE PARKING."⁶

So, with my car safely parked at "Good Sam," I set out on foot along Lancaster Avenue towards the Paoli Station. It was quickly apparent that security at and near the station was unprecedented, highly visible and on alert. I saw police officers from Tredyffrin, Easttown and Willistown townships, the Chester County Sheriff's Department, and emergency responders from the Paoli Fire Company all in evidence. Also in strength, in their camouflage uniforms, were soldiers of the Pennsylvania National Guard, placed on active duty by the governor to assist local law enforcement with traffic and security.

Even before I reached the station area, I began to hear something singular and new. Classic rock and roll selections, many with religious themes, were creating a party-like atmosphere for the pilgrims thanks to DJ Tom Dalton. He had set up a platform overlooking the passenger loading zones, and as he played cut after cut, he made it seem like a celebration. As I got closer to the waiting pilgrims, I observed several spontaneous conga lines during that weekend, seemingly made up of total strangers. Dalton was certainly making the wait more enjoyable.



A joyful group of Sisters and students from Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas, cross Lancaster Avenue on their way to the staging zones at Paoli station, Saturday, September 26th. *Courtesy of the author.*

⁶ I later learned that "Good Sam" received many letters of appreciation for its spirit of generosity that weekend, including this one: "... I wanted to thank you and your congregation for your kindness this past weekend. Like many in the area, I was bringing my family to Philadelphia to participate in the world meeting of Families and hopefully to catch a glimpse of Pope Francis. In my haste I had brought our parish tickets but forgotten the SEPTA passes. Morale was low as we rushed home to retrieve them, particularly after we had seen lot after lot blocked for parking. My husband and children wanted to give up, but when we returned to town with the passes we noticed your church lawn also surrounded by yellow tape — but with a large cardboard sign declaring "Free Pope Parking." My husband thought it too good to be true until he drove to the other side and saw an identical sign at that entrance as well. I sent my daughter ahead to note the name of the church so I could write a letter of thanks. I had to smile when she called out "The Church of the Good Samaritan!" How apt."



One of the prominent if unofficial “Ambassadors” to the thousands of visitors arriving into Paoli was Tredyffrin Police sergeant Timothy Barrar, shown here with four members of the contingent from Harare, Zimbabwe, Africa. *Courtesy of the author.*

Paoli Plaza was now designated a “one-way” thoroughfare westbound from North Valley Road for dropping off passengers, and I observed a continual stream of vehicles disgorging their occupants under the watchful eye of security personnel. I noticed many automobiles and buses with out-of-state tags, and at least one bus from Ontario, Canada. Observing the way these arriving pilgrims glanced around to get their bearings, I discerned that, for most, this was their first visit to Paoli, Pennsylvania. And as a local resident, I was proud that their first impression of this new place included a fine-tuned and extremely courteous organization there to support and protect.



After passing through the security checkpoint manned by volunteer “Ambassadors” in green vests, a steady stream of pilgrims flow toward Staging Zone #1 to await the next train into the city. By Sunday morning, September 27th, the crowds waiting for transportation had nearly required the use of Staging Zone #2. Acme Markets had received permission to establish a large kiosk to sell food and drink to the faithful. *Courtesy of the author.*

The faithful continued to flow across Valley Road toward the “waiting zones,” and I noticed all skin colors, different nationalities, much ethnic clothing and various religious habits. I sensed anticipation, excitement and even joy. I noticed several police officers, notably Tredyffrin Police Sergeant Timothy Barrar, greeting every group of pilgrims with a broad smile and a quiet welcome — so different from the hard-edged security presence that might have been expected. His smile, and those of other officers, were reciprocated in profusion by the new arrivals. I watched as each passenger had her pass efficiently checked by one of the many “Ambassadors,” after which she would be directed into the nearest collection zone to await the next train into the city.

I walked up Valley Road toward the crest of the railroad bridge, and observed below a considerable number of SEPTA Transit Police patrolling near the boarding platforms, accompanied by at least two K-9 handlers and their dogs, trained to recognize the scent of explosive materials. And I could see across the railroad tracks many Amtrak police officers in and around the old passenger shelter (See my accompanying article entitled *A Rare Re-Platforming Through Paoli*).



While the pilgrims wait for the next train, a K-9 unit officer and his dog help to provide protection on the Paoli platform accompanied by volunteer “Ambassadors” wearing yellow vests, Saturday morning, September 26th *Courtesy of the author.*

And so the routine of arriving, waiting and boarding continued throughout that first morning. The following day, again with brisk autumn temperatures under mostly cloudy skies, the flow of pilgrims passing through Paoli increased, but the routine, and the courtesies, remained the same. During both days, only “Zone One” was actually used, and the wait for the next train minimal; at no point did I observe the arrival of sufficient passengers to warrant the need of a second zone.

IN RETROSPECT

It’s an aphorism that hindsight is always 20/20. With the facts available to SEPTA at the time, the Authority should well have been concerned that even its doubled resources could have been overwhelmed by the literally hundreds of thousands of people that were predicted to flow into Center City. And officials of Chester County and its affected townships were correct to anticipate the worst for Paoli.

In press conferences leading up to the papal weekend, Philadelphia had released estimates of between 1.5 – 2 million visitors. The actual turnout fell well below the 1 million mark. Immediately after the papal weekend, city officials and Secret Service representatives addressed the security measures used over the weekend, which many had called excessive and unreasonably burdensome. “Unfortunately, it’s one of those necessary evils when you’re planning big events,” said Andrew Beach, the Secret Service agent in charge of security for the weekend. “We were not only responsible for the pope’s safety, but also the safety of all those attendees.”

Another event organizer noted that if an incident had occurred during the weekend with security too light, there would have been an equal backlash from the public. "They couldn't win no matter which way they went," said Donna Farrell, executive director of the World Meeting of Families.

Philadelphia's Mayor Michael Nutter, addressing the lower-than-expected turnout for the pope's visit, laid blame on the media for its over-eager reports on security measures. "I think that, in some instances, you all scared the s*** out of people with some of the stories," Nutter said.⁷

But regardless of the reasons, the attendance predictions never came close to fulfillment, and if blame was being accounted, there was plenty to share. Unquestionably, the announcements in August that:

- a) commuter tickets could only be obtained by lottery;
- b) parking at the 18 Regional Rail stations would be "extremely limited;"
- c) transit riders, after exiting their train in Center City would still have to walk up to two miles to the papal site; and
- d) security at and near the papal sites would be hyper-vigorous and intrusive

created an early and unexpected hesitation by many of the faithful who had initially planned to attend the festivities. Ticket sales never came close to SEPTA's original estimates, and only a fraction of the passes purchased were actually used. On Friday morning, September 25th (the morning before the pope arrived in Philadelphia), Andrew Busch, public information manager for SEPTA, was quoted in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* as saying that only 120,000 of the 328,000 special papal passes had been sold thus far. He urged procrastinators who still wished to attend the papal events to get the passes that still remained available for sale — but they would have to be purchased on that day only. No papal passes would be sold over the weekend itself.



As they await the next SEPTA train, this representative group of pilgrims, no doubt mostly unknown to each other just an hour before, laughingly mingle together and take photographs as if they were old friends. Those with orange hats hailed from Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, Africa
Courtesy of the author.

⁷ Marin, Max. "Nutter addresses aftermath of Pope visit." *AL DÍA News* Sep 28, 2015
<http://aldianews.com/articles/pope-philly/nutter-addresses-aftermath-pope-visit/40730>

Yet, by Friday, September 25th, despite hesitations and fears, 6,868 papal passes had been sold for use from Paoli on September 26, and an additional 8,768 passes for use the following day, Sunday the 27th. On any given weekend one would expect to see less than 1,100 commuters and visitors traveling in and out of Paoli. Yet, on the eve of this special weekend, more than 15,000 SEPTA passes had actually been sold for use from Paoli.

But then another reversal. Many pass holders never showed up. On Saturday the 26th, only 3,534 passes (51.5%) were actually used out of the 6,868 purchased. On Sunday, of the 8,768 passes sold, just 57.7%, or 5,062 passes, were used. Yet, this must be kept in perspective. Consider that on an average weekday, the always busy Paoli station has a flow of some 1,200 passengers traveling in and out on SEPTA's Regional Rail. On this special weekend, even with far lower than expected ridership, the flow of the faithful in and out of Paoli during this papal weekend was still 400% greater than on any average business weekday.⁸

EPILOG

I have traveled most of my adult life, and whether at airports or train stations, I observe that most travelers tend to keep to themselves, building an island of detachment with the aid of their cellphones or laptops — focusing on anything except where they are at that moment.

But on those two mornings in September, I watched as thousands of pilgrims and visitors arrived into Paoli, many after long, overnight journeys. They patiently waited to pass through the security cordon, and then waited again without complaint in the loading zone for the next commuter train to arrive. I watched men, women and children, all talking happily among themselves, making spontaneous conversations with total strangers, smiling and taking selfies with people they'd never met before — and would probably never see again. There was a sense of discernible excitement and anticipation in the air, that something good was going to happen, and that spirit was contagious.

It was not until months after the event, while writing this article, that I came upon a remarkable piece of journalism by CNN's Religion Editor Daniel Burke, describing the phenomenon of Pope Francis' visit to America in the fall of 2015. I share it in part:

"He introduced himself as a brother, a son of immigrants, a neighbor from beyond our southern border.

He came to meet us, to look into our eyes and share our struggles.

For six days the earth seemed to tilt toward the man wearing the plain white cassock and the Mona Lisa smile. Wherever Pope Francis went, we eddied and pooled around him, cheers rising from the crowd as he approached.

And we walked to see him.

The families caring for sick children who needed a spiritual shot in the arm. The priests who wanted to see their humble Holy Father. The immigrants who hear echoes of their voice in his softly accented Spanish.

After a summer of racial injustice and riots, a season of political scapegoating and talk of building walls, he came to build a bridge — to be a bridge.

And he was. For at least these six days, he brought our messy multitude together: singing, dancing, laughing, crying, hoping, praying.

*And before he flew back to Rome, he blessed our ambitious and chaotic country. And he asked us, as he always does, to please pray for him."*⁹

Though I did not attend the papal festivities in Philadelphia, I nevertheless felt that my presence in Paoli that papal weekend had made me a witness to something extraordinary.

⁸ All statistics based upon a telephone conversations with SEPTA's Public Relations Office, October 8-9, 2015

⁹ Burke, Daniel, CNN Religion Editor. "How the Pope brought our messy multitude together." CNN September 29, 2015
<http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/28/us/pope-francis-u-s-trip-impact>



ABOVE: In what would become one of my favorite images of the weekend, I happened to look up toward the crest of the North Valley Road bridge. A Sister waited patiently for the arrival of her group, and, silhouetted against the sky, she presented to me the impression of the mystical Madonna.
BELOW: Happy pilgrims from many lands enroute to their visit with the pope in Philadelphia. *All photos courtesy of the author.*

