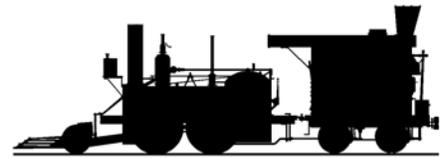
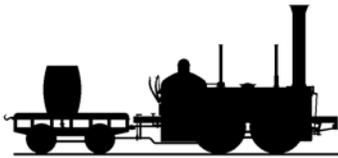


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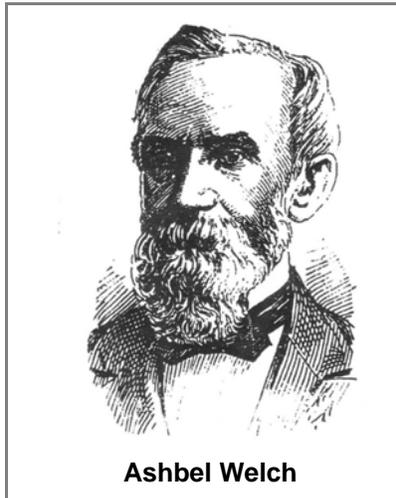
Spring 2011

Camden & Amboy RR Personality

Ashbel Welch - From Canals To Railroad Developer

By John Kilbride

Author's Note: Infrequent readings on the development of the Camden & Amboy Railroad introduced me to an individual who appeared in its histories after the line was built but was judged to have made valuable contributions to its development. In consideration of our organization's idea to encourage research and provide an outlet for the publishing of such findings, it is most appropriate Ashbel Welch (1809-1882) be featured as the first of a series of Camden & Amboy Railroad personalities.)



Ashbel Welch

"... he was to become at an early age an eminent builder of canals and railroads, an energetic and ingenious leader in the development of transportation ..." is the description written by J. Roscoe Howell, author of *Ashbel Welch, Civil Engineer*, in a series of articles he wrote for the New Jersey Historical Society, and reprinted by the Lambertville Historical Society, after being "challenged by the director of the Trenton Free Library". The writing took him 15 months to complete. *(That publication is the primary source of this article!)*

Born in 1809 in New York State, the youngest of four sons to a farmer who descended from Governor William Bradford of the Plymouth colony, Ashbel became fatherless at age 17 and, perhaps influenced by his oldest brother - Sylvester, an engineer working on the Erie Canal - planned to

further his studies in mathematics and "natural philosophy". Enrolling at the famed Albany Academy, he met Joseph Henry, a professor, later to direct the organization of the Smithsonian Institution. Professor and student would collaborate on many subjects throughout their lives. Circumstances at home, by then Utica, forced him to drop out of school and earn a living to support his family.

Joining Sylvester in the construction of the Lehigh and Delaware Canal in 1827, Ashbel became a rod-

man, and spent most of his working day with axe, saw and bush knife, clearing away the route's forest for sightings. Within two years, he was promoted and handling the surveying instruments. Work was nearing completion in 1830 when the Welch brothers were called back home, needed to handle the death of their mother.

By 1832, Ashbel was in New Jersey, hired by a former L&D Canal colleague now working on the Delaware & Raritan Canal; Ashbel was placed in charge of digging the feeder waterway, working north from Trenton. Ashbel selected Lambertville for his headquarters and began working on the 23 mile route. (Sylvester went west and was appointed chief engineer of the Allegheny Portage Railway, part of the 400-mile canal route between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.)

A canal concept in New Jersey had been