

Avi Runge  
Arch 243  
Professor Han

### Unfamiliar Agent One: Robert Sayre

Robert Sayre was an engineer, architect, and businessman deeply intertwined into the fabric of the Industrial Era in Bethlehem. Born in 1824 in rural Pennsylvania, he moved several years later to Mauch Chunk, now known as Jim Thorpe, which is around thirty five miles north of Bethlehem. His industrial roots started here as he started working for the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company as a lockmaster. This job would lead him further down this path and he eventually became a civil engineer, which would lead him to Bethlehem. Robert Sayre and Asa Packer would found a railroad company in 1846 which would go on to be named the Lehigh Valley Railroad seven years later. They moved the headquarters from Mauch Chunk to Bethlehem and would go on to have a profound influence in and around South Bethlehem specifically. In addition to superintendent and chief engineer of the railroad company, he was also one of the founders for the Bethlehem Iron Company. He would become vice president in 1891, eight years before it would become Bethlehem Steel. His influence by means of his involvement in the local industry was seen all over Bethlehem. He oversaw the development and was a trustee of Lehigh University, who Packer founded the school, played a part in the creation of St. Lukes Hospital, the Church of the Nativity, a girls school, and the Fountain Hill Opera House. In 1858, construction finished on the Sayre Mansion on Wyandotte Street, right in the heart of South Bethlehem, and Robert Sayre would live there until he died in 1907.

This background for Robert Sayre is significant as it gives a frame of reference for his impact on Bethlehem and the Lehigh Valley. More specifically, it ties into the buildings chosen for the fabric concerning Bethlehem's Industrial Era. As an agent in this context, Sayre not only interacted with the structures under this fabric, but quite literally had a part in building two out of three of them. The three places are the Wooden Match, Brighton Court Apartments, and the ArtsQuest Building within the SteelStacks complex. The Wooden Match is a restaurant in North Bethlehem which was formerly a train station for the Central Railroad of New Jersey, and it's current condition is congregation. This automatically connects it to Sayre through the theme of the railroad, although there are even more associations between the building and the agent. The Central Railroad of New Jersey, or the CNJ, leased the tracks from the Lehigh and Susquehanna Railroad, or L&S, in 1871 to better compete with the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Ironically, the L&S Railroad was a subsidiary of the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company,

the same company which started Robert Sayre's career and directed him on the path to becoming an engineer. Now competing with one of their own, these L&S tracks ran parallel to those of Sayre's Lehigh Valley Railroad, located on the south side of the river.

If Robert Sayre had used this building and taken a train from here, he probably would have thought of it in terms of how it functioned as a station. Upon arrival, he would have taken the stairs to the side of the building up and onto the platform, gotten his ticket from inside, then waited for the train outdoors. Sayre would've appreciated the long overhang above protecting him from the elements as he waited paying attention to the detail in the meantime. He would have observed the detailed trusses holding the overhang up, as well as the molding spanning about the upper parts of the facade. As a train station, many people probably would have been waiting for trains outside- if not for the whole duration of their time here, then at least for a good amount before the train arrived. For this, the detail of the building was beneficial, as those waiting would notice the intricacies of the facade. In this age without modern technology like cellphones, Sayre wouldn't be occupied by business calls or tend to his schedule, but rather notice his surroundings more. Even if it is a small building only meant for him to temporarily stop at, it was important for it to look good as it represented the brand of the Central New Jersey railroad and what they stood for. Before the train arrived, Sayre probably drew comparisons to his own company and maybe even the Lehigh Valley Railroad Station directly across the river. This other train station was not well liked as it had a pointed tower that looked disjointed and out of place. It was much larger than the current station, but it had to be, as it operated as a union depot and was a junction with yet another railroad- the North Pennsylvania Railroad. It was tucked away and sandwiched between a series of two railroads, so perhaps the lack of unity was inevitable here. Regardless, the CNJ station on the north side of the river served its purpose as a train station being a point of interval, and offered Sayre some perspective and comparison through its architecture.

The next building, which is for residence, is located right across the river on the opposite end of the Hill to Hill bridge. Now an apartment building called Brighton Court, it was once the headquarters for the Lehigh Valley Railroad. It overlooks the railroad's main line on the south side of the river and housed the principal offices for the company. Not only was Sayre responsible for the building as superintendent of the company, he also designed it himself. First, the ground floor to the third floor was constructed in 1885-1886, and the upper floors as well as the western wing was built from 1889-1890. However, it was only the headquarters for the Lehigh Valley Railroad for several years until it was sold to another rail company headquartered in New York. Regardless, Sayre had great influence in the placement and construction of this building. It is notable that his residence, the Sayre Mansion, is only one block and

less than a five minute walk from here. The office building is industrial and reflects the company it housed at the time, and with Sayre as the designer, it says a lot about him and what he wanted from the headquarters. He wanted his prestigious company to have a distinguished building for its headquarters, and Sayre sought out to do just that. It is located right next to the river which overlooks their own railroad tracks and their train station on the other side of Wyandotte Street. Built right into a hill, the building reflected Sayre's engineering skills as nearly a whole floor was eaten up by the ground. Above, the facade was covered with red brick adorned with trefoils and geometric patterns in a frieze that went across the eastern wing. Bay windows in the front and on the corner were also adorned with ornament, and these intricate details juxtapose the industrial nature of the building, ultimately representing what the Lehigh Valley Railroad company meant. Sayre likely designed it this way for the purpose of reflecting the company, but also because he would be seeing it everyday from his own house and presumably working there quite often also.

Robert Sayre was one of the founders for the Bethlehem Iron Company as mentioned earlier, which would go on to become Bethlehem Steel. There was overlap between the two, as the iron, and later on steel, formed the rails of the railroad, as well as constructed rail cars. At this time around the 1880s and 1890s, the rail network was well established and Sayre focused more of his time on the iron company and expansion into other sectors. However, Sayre probably didn't visit the site of the steel stacks often. If he did, he probably would have felt at ease despite the hustle and bustle of the factory atmosphere. This former warehouse models the industrial empire Sayre has built, and reminds him of his humble beginnings back at Lehigh Coal in Mauch Chunk. This factory symbolizes the working class here in Bethlehem and shows how many lives Sayre has touched through his vocation.

An agent interacts with many different fabrics and someone with as much influence as Robert Sayre experiences it in a much different way. Sayre is a unique agent since he shaped much of the fabric and went as far as designing one of these buildings himself. Buildings like the Lehigh Valley Railroad represent Sayre's livelihood, but they can mean something completely different for someone else, be it in 1890 or 1990. The architecture holds meaning whether an agent is observing it, or in Sayre's case, designing it. His extensive historical background is significant within this fabric and Sayre's influence alone reveals a lot about the location, the use of buildings at the time, and the people who have used them over time.

## Works Cited

"History: Sayre Mansion." *The Sayre Mansion*, 21 Oct. 2016, [sayremansion.com/history/](http://sayremansion.com/history/).

"Robert H. Sayre; An Industrial Pioneer." *WFMZ.com*, 69 News WFMZ, 10 Oct. 2019, [www.wfmz.com/features/historys-headlines/robert-h-sayre-an-industrial-pioneer/article\\_4d527f5c-341f-5489-8ef7-e248aa11a3c4.html](http://www.wfmz.com/features/historys-headlines/robert-h-sayre-an-industrial-pioneer/article_4d527f5c-341f-5489-8ef7-e248aa11a3c4.html).

The Morning Call. "Forging America: The History of Bethlehem Steel - Chapter 2." *Mcall.com*, The Morning Call, 30 Jan. 2019, [www.mcall.com/all-bethsteel-c2p2-story.html](http://www.mcall.com/all-bethsteel-c2p2-story.html).

Thomas, George E. "Apartment Building (Lehigh Valley Railroad Headquarters Building)." *SAH ARCHIPEDIA*, Society of Architectural Historians, 5 Sept. 2019, [sah-archipedia.org/buildings/PA-02-NO33](http://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/PA-02-NO33).