

Trains, history and art draw crowds to Bordentown City

By Jeannie O'Sullivan Staff writer | Posted: Sunday, November 13, 2011 1:52 pm

BORDENTOWN CITY — Model train fanatics, art buffs, history lovers and bookworms found common ground at Railroad Days, a two-day festival hosted by Bordentown Heritage.

The multi-venue event, held this weekend along Farnsworth Avenue and Prince Street, paid homage to the John Bull locomotive, which first roared out of the city in 1831 and forever linked the community to the early beginnings of railroads.

It was also just plain fun, especially for hobbyists.

"There's no age limit, you can be 6 or 96. I'm 58 and I still love trains," Phil Hatrak, a member of the South Eastern Pennsylvania Garden Railway Society, said on Sunday. The club has more than 170 members of both sexes from the tri-state area, he said.

Hatrak served as "conductor" for a G-scale display in the basement of First Presbyterian Church of Bordentown. A passenger train, freight locomotive and Christmas trolley sped through a holiday village with trees, snowmen and dozens of lighted homes.

Visitor Chris Musso and his 5-year-old son Dominic were fascinated with the freight train, which held military tanks in honor of the Veterans Day observance on Friday.

"We've never seen anything like it," said Musso, of Florence.

By contrast, the display at First Baptist Church of Bordentown on Prince Street represented the grittier side of railroad life. The intricate scene designed by the New Jersey Southern N-trak Model Railroad Club included weatherbeaten trains, a junkyard filled with wrecked cars and workers laboring on a roof.

"In real life, there's dust, dirt and oil," said Michael Skelly, executive director of Bordentown Heritage and a member of the Collingswood-based railroad club. He emphasized the artistic detail of the trains, describing them as "rolling jewelry."

More than 1,000 visitors turned out for the events, which will be an annual event, Skelly said.

The celebration started Saturday with a 180th anniversary ceremony commemorating the first departure of the John Bull locomotive from Bordentown City. Historical presentations were made about the locomotive and the city's railroad roots.

The first tracks of the Camden and Amboy Railroad, which connected South Jersey with ports north of the state, were laid in Bordentown City. The railroad company purchased the British-made John Bull, a 10-ton locomotive said to be oldest steam engine in the world.

Pieces of the original railroad track are encased in the granite John Bull monument at Farnsworth and Railroad avenues in the city.

"There are hundreds of stories about people who lived here and worked on the railroad. These are the things you'll rarely read about in history books," said Skelly.

Saturday events also included a banquet at Jester's Cafe and a booksigning at Old Book Shop. Author Linda Barth signed copies of "The Delaware and Raritan Canal" and "The Delaware and Raritan Canal at Work." Several other railroad-themed titles graced the store's front window.

The model train displays and art exhibits operated on both days. Farnsworth Gallery displayed travel-themed photographs and paintings for the occasion and Artful Deposit Gallery hosted a multimedia show, "Plains, Trains and Automobiles," featuring photography, collages, paintings and sculpture.

Artful Deposit employee Chris Wilson said the biggest draw was the metal sculpture by artist Gary Bykowsky of Florence. "The Artful Motive" was a likeness of the John Bull.

The gallery has also sold several wooden John Bull commemorative plaques designed by Mark Rounds of Philadelphia, Wilson said.

Skelly said Railroad Days was a great way to tie together city's eclectic offerings.

"The aim is to bridge interests," he said.