

Railroad Lantern

Railroads were one of the earliest modes of transportation to operate at all hours, including at night. Since night trains included a large headlamp on the locomotive, they could be seen from a distance, but workers also needed some indication of a train that had passed by. Even more, railroad workers needed to signal each other for various operations: when to stop, when to start, when to back up, and so forth.

It didn't take long before lanterns were created to do these jobs. Candles were out of the question, since nighttime operations were often out in the cold, wind, rain and snow. Lanterns burning either whale oil or some other oil were put to use and became common during the Civil War era. It was only after the discoveries of oil in western Pennsylvania in the 1870s that refineries began to produce kerosene, which then became the fuel of choice for lanterns.

British railroads led the way in defining lantern colors as standard: red meant stop, green meant go and clear meant clear. These definitions were adopted by most railroads, but lanterns were also made with blue glass and eventually yellow or amber glass globes. Blue meant workers were under or between stopped equipment and that it should not be moved at all. Professor William Churchill of Cornell worked with Corning Glass Works to develop better colors and better forms of glass for lanterns. Since a burning lantern got quite hot, chill rain or snow could cause the glass globe to crack or shatter, and eventually Corning developed Nonex glass (a predecessor of Pyrex) to help with the problem.

Most railroads had their own standards for what a lantern should look like and how it should be used. Both the metal parts, and sometimes even the glass globes might be embossed with the name of the railroad. Following World War II, the lanterns carried by rail workers were electrical and powered by batteries. This has led to an active market in collecting the older oil or kerosene lanterns. Our example is from the local Lehigh Valley Railroad with "LVRR" embossed in the metal, and has a handsome red globe.