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Source: *IA. The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1981), pp. 55-60

Published by: Society for Industrial Archeology

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40968011>

Accessed: 29-09-2017 15:51 UTC

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Museums: Viewpoint

Preserving a National Symbol: The Steam Locomotive

John H. White

Around 4,000 steam locomotives, freight, passenger, and transit cars are preserved in the United States. They are stationed across the land as monuments to our industrial past. Large collections have been established in such unlikely locations as Duluth, Green Bay, and Kennebunkport. Small towns like Chandler, Ariz., and White River Junction, Vt., have steam locomotives on display in public parks isolated on short pieces of track. Even a few public museums house valuable specimens, which are guaranteed long-term preservation. Many groups of enthusiasts operate steam trains on a regular basis much to the delight of the general public, many of whom (including most young adults) have never seen a steam locomotive nor even an electric streetcar in everyday service. Some farsighted collectors are already saving diesel-electrics, knowing that, one day, they too will be an endangered species. With so much activity, so much enthusiasm, and so widespread a preservation movement, everyone interested in railroad history has reason to be grateful for what has already been accomplished. We can never forget our debt to the wise railroad officials and dedicated rail enthusiasts who, many years ago, set aside relics as being worthy of preservation. The variety, age, and technical value of these historic specimens has done much to enrich our national patrimony. America, like ancient Rome, is a nation of builders and doers; like them, our contribution to human progress is best represented by our engineering heritage. But, sadly, our mechanical relics are not likely to survive through the ages as well as have the aqueducts and arenas of imperial Rome for reasons to be explained later in this paper. First, let us look at what has been saved.

Fortunately, examples of the most important types of locomotives and cars have been saved. The classic 19th-

century American type (4-4-0) has been saved in relatively large numbers. Examples of such machines built by such famous builders as William Mason, Richard Norris, and Thomas Rogers can be seen today. There is even an example of a rare (1858), inside-connected, American type on exhibit at Danbury, Conn. The more modern period is well represented by abundant numbers of Super Power engines from Lima and mighty 600-ton articulateds from the shops of Alco. Freight, passenger, and transit cars are well represented in enthusiast museums. One can lament that the first U.S. Mallet (1904) was accidentally scrapped as late as 1936, even after being set aside for preservation, and that no single example of a wooden sleeping car was saved. But, in the main, one can see an example somewhere of the most important railway specimens providing you are willing to travel across North America to do so. There is no single collection that can claim to be truly representative, at least not on a national basis.

Although one hesitates to be critical, it must be admitted that the decisions regarding what to save and what to scrap were not always done in a rational manner. We have quantity but not necessarily quality. The odd and curious tended to be saved rather than the standard and representative. Hence, we find that an inordinate number of geared, logging locomotives and business cars have been saved. And decisions were too often influenced by chance, whimsey, or sentiment. An example of this occurred some time ago when a major western line was scrapping its last steam locomotives. The management, having decided to save one machine for display, asked the employees to vote on which one was to be so honored. In the scrap line stood magnificent Hudson, Northern, and Mountain types, but the employees selected instead the most heavily altered and least significant engine available, the roundhouse shop goat.



The Daniel Nason, 1858, a rare inside connected American Type locomotive miraculously escaped the scrapper's torch. For many years it was preserved by the New Haven Railroad which unaccountably sold it to a private fairground in Danbury, Connecticut. Such a treasure deserves a more suitable showcase. Courtesy National Museum of Transport.

Most preservation is done with the pious notion that the present can learn from the past. However dubious the truth of this widely believed notion, it is the basis for most popular histories, museums, and antiquarian groups. Unhappily, I must report that few railway relics accurately represent their original place in time. Nearly all have been rebuilt many times during their long years of service—which is informative in itself. The economic life of a boiler is about 25 years, and so an engine in service for 50 years or more would have received not only extensive running repairs but at least one new boiler. Master mechanics also had a penchant for experimentation. They also seemed to have an irrepressible urge to eradicate the work of their predecessors; Bissell fervently rebuilt every old engine on the road to erase the design features of his hated rival, George Griggs. There was an old saying amongst shop men that engine rebuilding consisted of “Jacking up the bell and rolling a new locomotive under it.” This was in fact true of most engine rebuilding. Examples are abundant: the Smithsonian’s venerable *John Bull* has some of the original

parts fabricated by the Stephensons in 1831, and our exhibit label goes to some lengths to explain the changes rendered in 35 years of service; the famous locomotive, the *General* (1855) so widely displayed as an original relic of the Civil War should be shown as a machine of the mid-1870s; the great New York Central speed queen, the 999, is composed of new parts, save perhaps for portions of the frame. Naive observers marvel that the old No. 1, built in 1885, had a feedwater heater, a power reverse, and an electric headlight, not realizing that these improvements were added late in the engine’s career. Look critically. Be skeptical when examining preserved relics; few survive in their original form.

That a machine is altered during its operating life is understandable, but museum visitors should be aware of the fact, and they should also beware of faulty restorations. In general, the documentation needed for an accurate reconstruction is not available even if the money and skilled workers could be found to do the job. Original drawings



Outdoor display exposes valuable antiques to the weather and vandals but it remains the fate of the great majority of preserved railway relics in North America.

and specifications are destroyed when a machine becomes obsolete. Usually not even a photograph exists to show the machine in its original configuration. Restorers are forced to depend on what the specimen itself reveals through old paint samples and the like or on documented evidence available for sister engines. But even in cases where adequate records exist, much mischief is done by careless workmanship, indifferent management, and plain old-fashioned bad judgment. When the *General* was restored in recent years, the restorers decided to convert it to an oil burner, to add a diesel-powered air compressor, and to put a steel frame under the tender. These changes were done so that the engine could be more readily operated, apparently without the slightest regard for the historical integrity of the piece itself. In a like manner, paint schemes, component parts, and interior furnishings are casually altered by amateur restorers, who do so because they think the engine looks better even though the changes in no way reflect the actual specimen.

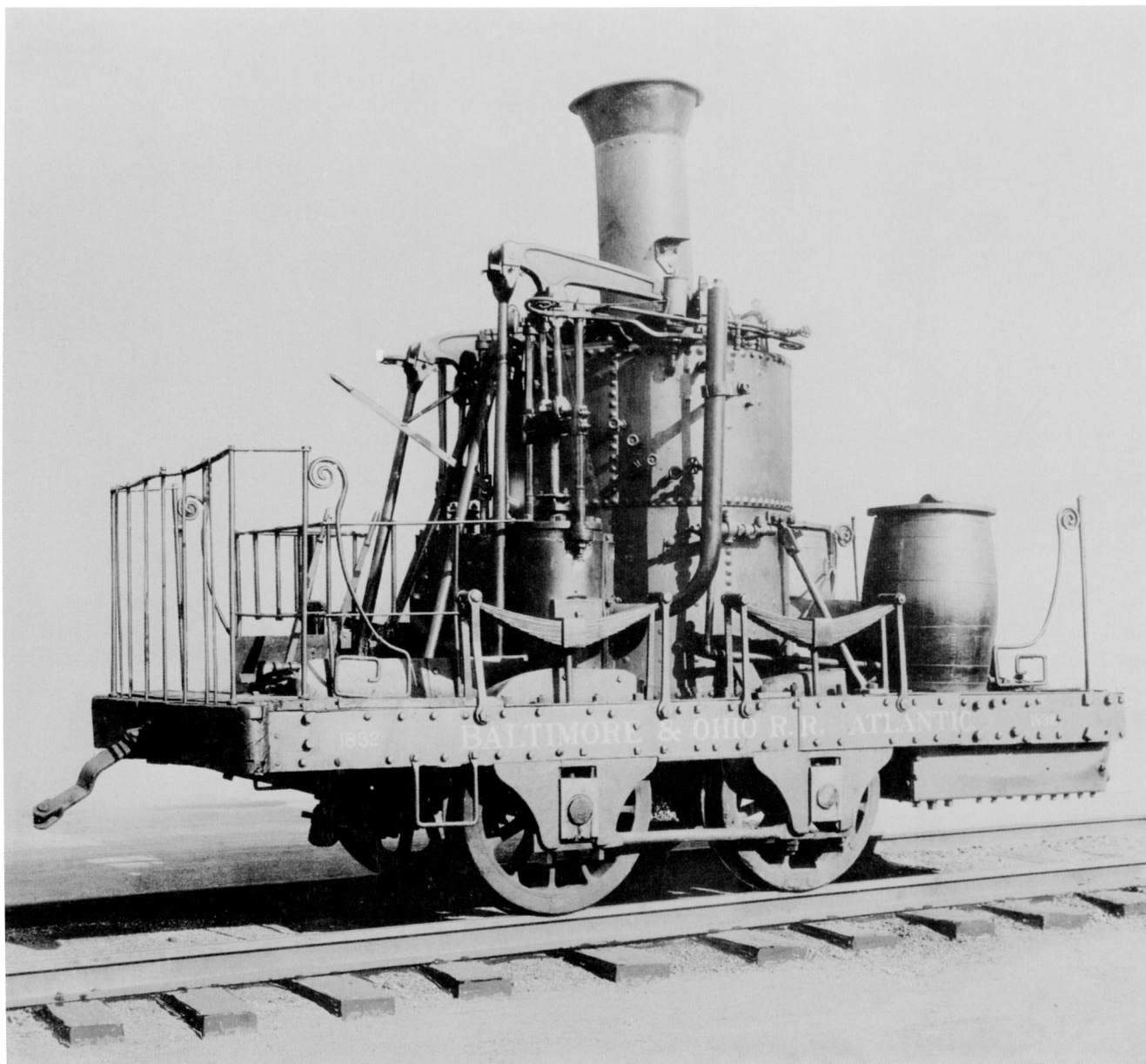
Other misguided persons feel that a good restoration involves replacing as much of the original as possible with new material. A trolley museum boasted that one of its cars would have almost nothing left of the original vehicle once the restoration was completed, as if this were a desirable objective. Why not simply scrap the original and build a replica? The fundamental object of preservation was already missed by this group.

Forgery is not exclusive to the world of banking or art; it also permeates such unlikely spheres as railway relics. Its history is surprisingly long. Amongst the earliest practitioners was an ex-newspaper man, Major Joseph G. Pangborn. He was selected by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to assemble and publicize their exhibit for the 1893 World's Fair. Pangborn was an able publicist but his talents as a museum curator are open to question. What the Major could not find, he decided to create. A series of full-sized, wooden and canvas models answered most of his

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needs, but in two instances he decided to remodel existing relics to round out the display. He seized upon two ancient grasshopper-type engines of the 1830s being used at the time as shop switchers. One was rebuilt to represent an earlier engine, the *Atlantic*, while the other was more drastically transformed into the *Mazeppa*. Pangborn was also given to changing the names of engines that didn't suit his fancy and to inventing colorful stories to make the exhibit more newsworthy. All harmless fun, I suppose, but sadly, the confusion created by the good Major lives on today.

The successors of Pangborn's approach to railroad history flourish today. They are busy creating 19th century-style *Frontier Queens* from late model industrial locomotives. The grotesque proportions and ornamentation of these recreations are offensive and vulgar. That such travesties should exist on tourist railways is perhaps excusable, but that creations not much better are in collections of more substantial institutions is less so. Many years ago a prominent industrialist was seeking a mid-century, American type of Mason manufacture for his new industrial



Museums can create their own problems by remodeling originals to represent lost specimens. The engine shown here is actually the Andrew Jackson rebuilt in 1892 to represent in a most inadequate fashion the Atlantic of 1832. Courtesy B&O Railroad.

museum. Frustrated in his effort to locate such a machine, he apparently decided to create one. An aged, four-wheel switcher was acquired, and through a heroic reconstruction, it was transformed into a squat, elongated reproduction of what its creators hoped would reflect the elegance of Mason's original design. The workmanship was magnificent, but the proportions were all wrong. The piece was finally exposed as a fraud, but it remains on exhibit without any proper identification.

Occasionally, a change of number plates and a new paint job is sufficient to create a fake. For instance, a fair wanted to display a Texas and Pacific locomotive but were unable to find one in time. So they purchased a New York Central engine and transformed it instantly by adding a capped

stack, some new plates, and lettering. The Pennsylvania Railroad wanted to show its record-setting 7002 Atlantic type at the Chicago Railroad Fair but found that the original had been cut up years before. Again, the artist's brush recreated the long absent relic. A similar machine was substituted. Today it stands inside a museum in its phony livery.

One more possibility that the wary viewer of relics must be alert to is the unintentional misidentification of a specimen. The Chicago and North Western Railway's *Pioneer* is a case in point. This machine has been exhibited as a relic since 1883 and has consistently been misrepresented during all of that time, not deliberately as in the other instances mentioned earlier, but through faulty information supplied by what would seem to be an irrefutable source, its maker,



Museums can inherit problems. A dignified, early 20th-century business car was redecorated by a nostalgic enthusiast who yearned for a Victorian private car. The result is an unsettling fake that neither represents the original appearance nor the intended back dating. Courtesy California State Railroad Museum.

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the Baldwin Locomotive Works. Precisely how the story was established is unknown, but Baldwin, after a considerable search, suggested that the *Pioneer* was built for the Utica and Schenectady Railroad in 1836. Superficially, the identification seemed plausible, and who would dispute the suggestion of the engine's manufacturer? Over the years, the story became ever more firmly established, being repeated in countless published sources. More recent studies show that the *Pioneer* cannot be the U&S No. 7 but is most likely an engine built for the Tonawanda Railroad in 1840. The confusion regarding the *Pioneer* illustrates the need for more scholarship in almost every instance to properly document railway relics preserved in America.

Bad restoration and the existence of a few fakes should not obscure the true worth of preserving relics nor the urgent need to do more for their long-term preservation. The enthusiasts have rescued so much precious material from the junk yard; now it is time to help them save their collections from the elements. Most pieces stand out of doors, exposed to weather and vandals. You need only walk down the weed-grown tracks where the rusted giants of the past are slowly crumbling to understand the urgency of the situation. Locomotives are not solid steel. Their boilers are covered with a sheet metal lagging over a thick blanket of asbestos. Rain water creeps in under the jacket, soaking into the asbestos like a giant blotter causing the engines to rust from the inside out. More than a coat of paint every few years is needed to preserve them; they must be put under shelter. Those machines in public parks are the most vulnerable because maintenance is at its most indifferent and vandalism at its most active. Several have already been scrapped.

Clearly, we cannot hope to save everything, but certainly we should work for the long-term preservation of the more important pieces. But so long as railway relic preservation is dominated by the buff, the community at large is likely to view the movement as something of a joke. This is an unfortunate attitude, but I find it to be the general view outside rail fan circles. The rail buff is generally seen as an unsophisticated, slightly foolish, if harmless soul, questing after his childhood and forever chasing off in his engineer's cap with camera in hand. This view is held in spite of the fact that preservation plays an important part in American life today. Millions are given each year to refinish architectural monuments and community leaders respond generously to appeals for assistance. The arts likewise can count on major public and private funding. And industry, which shows no inclination to aid transport museums, gives over 100 million dollars annually to art groups. But why do they not support transport museums with equal enthusiasm? The reason, I would contend, is that such museums do not possess the prestige or respectability of art- and science-oriented institutions. This will only come by professionalizing the transport museum. So we must advance beyond collecting to serious exhibiting and interpreting the relics of the past.

The private collector has done a remarkable job in salvaging antique rolling stock and our debt to him is enormous. But it is time to establish museums that would not only guarantee long-term preservation but educate the public to appreciate these artifacts as symbols of America's industrial past rather than merely as quaint toys from another era.