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The Saga of B&M No. 1246

New Life for a Sad Old Coach

by David Woodbury

When the Steamtown Foundation finally pulled out of Vermont for Scranton, Pennsylvania in the mid-1980s, it didn't take all its equipment along. After the final moves, several remaining engines and cars were sold, but a steam "big hook" crane and a number of old wooden boxcars of Rutland and Boston & Maine origin, plus the carcasses of several steel Long Island Rail Road "Ping Pong" coaches were left behind, to meet the junkman's torch. When the smoke cleared, just four cars remained. All wooden passenger cars, these included a de-trucked B&M combination car that had been used as an office, plus an ex-Rutland coach and combine/RPO and one B&M combine that had been converted from a coach for work train service about 1950. The de-trucked car was soon burned and disposed of, leaving three. These sat for several years at the old Steamtown site, becoming ever more derelict, and a nuisance to the Green Mountain Railroad, which had become their owner when the party that had purchased them from Steamtown failed to move them off the property.

Eventually, one Rutland car found a good home at the Strasburg Railroad in Pennsylvania, noted for saving and operating wooden coaches. The other Rutland car went to a private owner, and it is as yet undetermined what's happened to it since. The B&M coach-turned-combine, in the worst shape of the three, was purchased by David Woodbury, who has single-handedly made progress at restoring the seemingly hopeless derelict. He continues the story:

I first noticed the car at the old Steamtown Riverside site in 1988, as scrappers continued clearing the site. Though glimpsed only briefly from a Green Mountain excursion train, the vision of the sad old car worked on me the next couple of years. Having grown up along the B&M, and still living near a long-abandoned branch, I hated to see what was once a fine example of the carbuilder's art reduced to a pile of splinters and scrap iron. I contacted Green Mountain Railroad President Jerry Hebda, who explained that the cars' present owner had failed to move them to his New Hampshire tourist railroad as planned. In addition to incurring storage charges, they were attracting vandals and other undesirables, and causing the railroad a lot of unneeded headaches. If not purchased and moved soon, they would be destroyed.

photo by David Woodbury

A rotting derelict, No. 1246 was one of the last cars remaining at the old Steamtown site in Vermont, seemingly unwanted by anyone and a prime candidate for scrapping. The car had been converted to a combine for work train service in 1950.

After nine months of negotiations, the ownership situation for the B&M car was settled by paying the railroad $999 for storage and the previous owner $1. Thus, in November 1991, I became a railroad tycoon, owning my very own "private car".

Another stipulation in the agreement said the car must be off railroad property within 90 days. After considering the idea of renting nearby storage space from someone else, I decided the best scenario would be to truck the car to my 29-acre site in New Boston, New Hampshire, some 50-odd miles to the east of Bellows Falls.

Although New Hampshire is known for its overall fierce opposition to regulations and taxes, most communities have typical planning ordinances. Town planners ok'ed placing the car on my land providing it was set back from the road the same distance as required for a house.

By January 1992, a contractor had excavated and placed ballast in the spot to lay the track and place the car on. At the same time, I contracted with mover Jim Robinson to transport the car and sell me enough ties, plates, spikes and rail. The track materials were soon delivered, and I set to the business of laying them with the help of neighbors.

Luckily, the weather turned out perfect for what we wanted to do. The ground was soft when we were digging and laying track, but quickly froze solid enough for the trucks and cranes not to sink into the mud, and there was no snow on the ground.

The move was to be on Monday, February 3, so Jim and I went over to Bellows Falls a week ahead to prepare the car. Rotting particle board was ripped off the windows, also the remains of the roofing material, and anything else that might fall off during transit. A long length of PVC pipe was nailed to the roof to deflect any wires we might encounter. The Green Mountain was to move the car on its own wheels to their North Walpole, New Hampshire yard, so we could load it onto Jim's break-apart lowboy trailer.

On the Friday before the move, we went over and found the car spotted just right. Jim had a crane to lift the car off its trucks, which were loaded onto a flatbed trailer and secured for the weekend.

Being substantially longer than Jim's lowboy trailer, the carbody presented a special problem. Ultimately, the gooseneck and front portion of the trailer were separated from the rear axle portion, and the car securely chained to the two trailer parts, its steel underframe supporting the two disconnected halves. The result was an over height, over length load that was fortunately not overweight.

Jim had scouted the entire route and knew that the bridges were sound and corners (rural roads are narrow in New England!) not too sharp to negotiate. His only doubt was a steep hill just a mile and a half from my house. While his truck had the necessary power, loose gravel on the road caused worry that the tractor might spin its wheels and stall. Ultimately, the problem was solved with an extra push from the previous contractor's bucket loader. The effort was captured on videotape, along with most of the rest of the event.

On the day of the move, everything went well and we were done by early afternoon. Jim demonstrated his truck driving talent by swinging the 67-foot car exactly into position after backing up the last quarter mile. The crane set the trucks on the rail, then the car on the trucks. Thus, on February 3rd, 1992, I now owned my own "railroad" replete with private car. The fun, and my "education" in the car repair school of hard knocks, was just beginning.

The car was full of junk, and five loads of unrelated stuff were taken directly to the dump. That still left a lot of junk, but stuff that would one day be needed in its restoration. This was put aside, and an assessment was made of the work to be done, which, of course, turned out to be twice as much as expected.







photos by David Woodbury

Above photos show the car's exterior **(top)**, structural framework **(bottom)** and interior woodwork **(middle)**. A lot accomplished, but still a long way to go!

It was obvious that the roof had leaked for years. My foot went through the floor in one corner. I first began replacing the platform decking and steps. Not just the treads, but the steps entirely, for safe entry into the car.

Repairs to the roof then became priority one, beginning at the spot where my foot went through the floor. Ripping off the old canvas roofing material went quickly. Underneath, the decking was rotted, and underneath that, the curved carlines, which give the roof its shape, were gone also. Yellow poplar, the common wood for such pieces, is easy to work and stands up well when protected, but exposed, it deteriorates quickly. Eventually, I would replace the carlines and roof decking for half of that side of the car. Fortunately, the upper monitor roof and other side of the car needed little attention except to replace the tack board into which the edge of the roof fabric was nailed. Below them, the letter boards, which had once proudly proclaimed "Boston & Maine" in gold leaf, were in tough shape and had to be replaced. Removing the old ones was difficult and wrestling the new parts into position, at 50-plus pounds apiece, was equally hard. By the end of 1992, I had built a wooden scaffold on one side of the car, and had replaced the structural parts of the roof, steps and platform.

During the winter, I debated the merits of a rubber roof versus canvas. Unfamiliar with both, I had been assured that rubber was expensive and only to be applied by experts. An article in ***Locomotive & Railway Preservation*** detailed the re-roofing of a steel coach with canvas, and it sounded like the results were satisfactory, so I contacted a local canvas contractor. Having never re-roofed a railcar, he was dubious, stating that the canvas produced today was nothing like the same product of years ago, but after reading the article and making a few calls, he agreed to sell me the material and help install it. It would be up to me to nail down the edges and apply the black waterproofing. By the fall of 1993 it was complete, looked good and didn't leak.

Unfortunately, one side of the roof began sagging noticeably again, in the area where my foot had gone through the floor. While the side looked solid enough, there obviously wasn't enough support to hold everything up in that area. Since the deteriorated siding had to be replaced on that side of the car anyway, there was no harm in going in for a look. Inside, several structural parts were badly rotted. The sill was nearly gone in places. Soon, an 18-inch wide strip of the floor came up on that side of the wall.

The summer of 1994 was the summer of heavy structural work, with southern yellow pine sills and the replacement of nearly all the posts on the bad side. No doubt the ***Carbuilder's Dictionary*** has proper terms for the pieces replaced, but we "railroad magnates" seldom have time for such trivia - wood is wood. You make a piece that duplicates the old one, and install it. As an occasional break, I began to strip paint from the ends of the car, which were in good condition due to the protection of the roof overhang. A messy chemical product was tried first, but soon changed for an electric heat gun, with better results. By the end of 1994, I had a good start repairing the rotted side and paint removal on the ends, but knew the floor, other side, interior and windows lay ahead. In reality, I had only made a few saw marks in a big log that had to be cut, despite two years of hard work.

As purchased, I did not know much about the car's history, assuming that it had always been a combine. The dismantling, and later delving into the B&M Historical Society's archives in Lowell, Massachusetts, disclosed that the car had been built in 1907 by the Pullman Company as a coach, No. 1246. Originally all wood, the steel underframe had been added in 1926, and the combine doors added in 1950, when the car was transferred to work train service. As I wanted to restore it authentically to its best condition, I decided on returning it to a coach rather than the dilapidated work train combine it had become in later years.

Nineteen ninety five saw the completion of the bad side, including replacement of the siding with new poplar. After nailing on the siding, however, I noticed a slight wavy

look as I sighted along the side. This meant I hadn't spent enough time planing down the new inner structural members to create a straight edge. By now it was too cold to worry about it until spring. About the same time, I noticed my new canvas roof was splitting. Depressed, I said a prayer that it wouldn't leak and waited for warm weather. Luckily, it didn't leak much, and there was no interior to damage by now anyway.

The next season was spent re-roofing - again. Stripping off the canvas wasn't too hard except pulling the nails in the tackstrip, to allow its reuse. When I remembered tediously drilling each hole to drive the nails, it didn't make my spirits soar very high. Rubber roofing, which I had now decided on, needs to be stuck in place with contact cement, over a plywood under layment. Quarter-inch Baltic birch plywood was used on the lower roof because of its ability to be curved without cracking. I screwed it down along the outer edge, then forced it into place along the clerestory with a small hydraulic jack. Amazingly, it held and still holds. The monitor roof, being flatter, was covered with quarter-inch Luan plywood. The compound curves of the bullnose ends presented a severe challenge. Narrow curved pieces were cut by guesswork, with hopes they would lay flat. Any boat builder would probably have these skills, but not being the nautical type, they have escaped me. The result was reasonably successful, however.

Once the plywood is down, the cement is applied by roller to the plywood and the precut rubber. Two persons are needed, and, like laying a Formica countertop, there is one chance to get it right. With the help of my wife and a neighbor, we successfully covered all but the bullnosed ends. To cover the ends smoothly, the rubber must be stretched over the plywood, but at the same time you are working over the cement, and can't stretch it. With cutting, patching, sweat and cursing, a weather tight seal was created, but the ends will probably be redone eventually for better appearance, with advice from someone skilled in the art.

In 1997, after spending a year on the roof, my attention turned to the inside. I did some paint stripping with the heat gun during the winter months, and began to see the extent of the inlaid mahogany, both solid and veneered. It was obvious I would be spending some time and money making and installing moldings for which no commercial product had existed for decades. It's likely some special cutters will need to be made. As mahogany is not plantation grown to my knowledge, I would also help deplete the Central American rain forests of mature trees, but having been told that they once used mahogany logs for railroad ties there, perhaps my purpose was worthy enough. As mahogany is also expensive, I briefly considered substituting native cherry or a similar species, but later concluded that was not in keeping with the original Pullman craftsmanship.

Once spring arrived, I stripped off the siding from the better side and found a few bad spots, but nothing like the other side. A few posts were replaced, and the side door area was rebuilt to its proper coach configuration. Even the sill area under the door, where I expected rot, was ok. Siding was milled from native, rather than yellow poplar for the second side, a choice I'll discuss later.

Replacement of the subfloor came next. It appeared mostly solid except for the missing 18 inches next to the bad side, but I decided on a complete replacement with modern materials. It was a long job of ripping up the old floor and subfloor and removing the nails, which remained firmly embedded when the boards were raised. A layer of what appeared to be horsehair had been used as a form of insulation and sound-deadener. Underneath, two one-inch spaced layers of tongue and grooved wood were nailed to the cross members to keep dirt out. The whole flooring experience was still quite gritty, however, with decades of accumulated cinders, soot and dirt present.

Once stripped, a few spots in the cross members were repaired by cutting out the bad spots and filling them with new wood, so the subfloor could be nailed to them. With the steel frame, these were less important structurally than when the car was of all-wood construction. To save a bit of expense and remember the old carbuilders, I put back the old horsehair and reused most of the tongue and grooved boards underneath the car.

The subfloor inside the car was replaced with 3/4-inch CDX plywood, rather than the original six-inch poplar boards. The Strasburg Rail Road, which purchased the rest of the B&M wooden cars from Steamtown in 1972, regularly rebuilds its cars with plywood in hidden areas for safety and durability, so I wasn't being too far out of line. Bolt heads protruding from the cross members complicated the matter somewhat, requiring the cutting of numerous 1 1/2-inch holes in the plywood so it would lie flat on them. Pullman workers did the same thing, an easier task when laying down six-inch boards, however. It was a great day when I could finally walk from end to end and even clean up the smooth floor with a shop vacuum.

Nineteen ninety eight became another year lost in re-doing work I'd already completed. The bad side still looked too wavy, and had to be straightened out. This meant removing the siding again and planing down the inner structural members for a flatter surface to nail the siding onto. I considered buying a power plane, but started with a sharp hand plane and found that it worked pretty well. By now, I'd replaced my original wooden staging with secondhand pipe staging, which was more solid.

Shortly after I bought the car, I had purchased native poplar, which I had sawed at a local sawmill. This was stored and stickered in my barn for two years before I had it milled into car siding (by the P.J. Currier Lumber Co. of Amherst, NH) and installed it. The result wasn't bad, though native New England poplar has more knots than commercial yellow poplar, which results in more waste to get clear siding boards. Neither species is very stable, nor resistant to rot, but when painted and allowed to dry out after being wet, it is satisfactory. Poplar was the common siding material in the wooden car era. In that era, however, railroads employed hundreds of car department workers just to maintain their passenger car fleets. A wooden coach like mine would have received lots of attention from this army of men, and wasn't expected to last for 90 years either. I was one person alone, trying to restore and preserve it for all time, without the benefit of training under masters in a four-year carman's apprenticeship.

The second re-siding of the bad side was done with purchased yellow poplar, milled locally to the proper shape. The bad side is the wetter side, with less sun, and I soon had a swelling problem, which buckled some boards, despite my efforts to provide proper spacing between them. This had not occurred with the previous native poplar. Because each stick is blind-nailed through the groove, it is no easy matter to adjust troublesome boards. I was able to cobble up a repair using screws concealed by plugs, which is not very noticeable and has so far held. Time will tell if this was really effective. The good side of the car, which receives more sun, is still ok with its native poplar siding.

As of February 1999, I'm back inside the car, stripping paint and milling replacement wainscotting. From here on, most of the work is inside, though replacement of windows will be an inside-outside project. Replacing the missing mahogany pieces is one thing, finishing them is another. The original wood was sanded, filled and varnished to a deep rich red, with quite a bit of inlay. New pieces should match, and this will take some consultation with woodworking experts, perhaps antique furniture restorers, to determine the best process.

Windows are a special challenge. The present windows are a mish-mash of style, mostly the incorrect ones for the car. Steamtown had apparently used the car for a while

without windows, so riders could enjoy the unsullied New Hampshire (where their first operations took place) and Vermont air, mixed with coal smoke and cinders from the engines. This exposure didn't do the window frames any good, and some replacement is necessary. The odd sashes are mostly unusable, with lots of rot, but some of the glass is ok. As I am far from done, and thus far from any idea of operation, I plan to forgo the installation of safety glass, which is better, but expensive.

The original window sashes were mahogany, a good choice because of its rot-resistance and stability. Forty new ones must be made for the upper windows, plus forty lower sashes and twenty additional clerestory windows. While I don't expect the work to go fast, I'm hoping some sort of production line will speed the work.

Each window has its own set of brass hardware and each clerestory sash has a pull-ring, some of which are missing. While I have sent out some feelers for original replacements, I may end up casting some new ones if they can't be purchased reasonably. The signal cord carriers running down each side of the car are missing also, as are luggage racks. The original Pintsch gas lighting fixtures are long, long gone, and probably not available except by reproduction. The gas lights require vents be cut in the roof, an invitation to leaks. The B&M converted these cars to electric lighting in roughly the 1920s, with conduit on the roof and new fixtures inside. Power was supplied from an extra large turbo-generator on the locomotive; the cars and locomotive were connected by jumper cables, much like today's Amtrak Head End Power system. The hopper-type toilets are gone also, but a similar car at Lowell still has parts of them and the B&MRRHS has Pullman drawings for same, so eventual reproduction is a possibility. A proper drinking water tank and spigot would be welcome also.

One end door is an original, the other from another car, the latter not fitting well. The original door has lumber-core veneered panels, which are delaminating. The process for correcting this is yet to be determined. The other door will be replicated, using the original as a pattern,

The running gear of the car is complete, except for the end buffers and air signal equipment, which were removed when the car was converted to maintenance-of-way service. If these can't be located, they will be fabricated.

photos by David Woodbury

Left: Necessary repairs included removing and replacing one whole side of the car to repair rotted structural members. The combine doors were removed and the car rebuilt as a coach. **Right:** Still under restoration, a complete new set of windows are required, as well as much replacement and refinishing of interior woodwork, but slowly it is returning to its once-proud status.

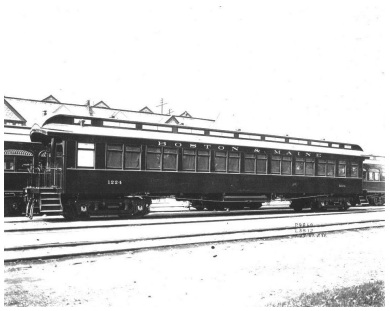
Finish flooring and seats will be the last things replaced. The finish floor that I took up was fir, painted maroon, but the builder's photos shows it varnished. Fir flooring of that type is still available, and I'll likely varnish it. The seats that came in the car included a couple from a newer heavyweight car and others salvaged from the Long Island Ping Pongs. I donated these to the Railroad Museum of Long Island, the group most likely to have a need for them. The original seats were a simple walkover type, and I'd welcome leads to finding some of the proper type.

Car No. 1246 was the 23rd car of Pullman lot 3512, outshopped in July 1907. I'm not sure if it came from the recently-damaged Chicago plant, but would imagine it did (perhaps a reader can tell from the builder's photo). It served in the B&M's regular passenger fleet, being rebuilt with a steel underframe in 1926. In 1931, the car was renumbered No. 246 to free up the higher number for a steel coach. That number was used until it was withdrawn from branchline and commuter service in January 1950.

On January 17, 1950, the car was renumbered again to W-3238, by the Concord, New Hampshire shops which had just converted it to a combine for work train service. On June 25,1959, the tired tool car was sold to F. Nelson Blount, and shipped to his Pleasure Island Amusement Park at Wakefield, Massachusetts. When the Blount collection moved to North Walpole, New Hampshire, the car was painted yellow and black and named ***Mount Sunapee***, a mountain near the Claremont & Concord line on which the first Steamtown operations were conducted. The number was changed to No. 243. Within about three years, the wooden car fleet was retired by Steamtown in favor of steel cars, with the better wooden ones sold to Strasburg by 1972.

The frugal (and often broke) B&M retained these cars long after they would have normally been retired because of its extensive network of branchlines and commuter routes out of Boston's North Station. It is said that their condition caused many complaints by state and federal regulators, and that the B&M worked out a deal with the Interstate Commerce Commission to replace them with newer cars if the ICC would allow discontinuance of some of the least profitable rail operations. Most of the fleet was withdrawn by 1953, and many were burned at the main B&M shops at Billerica, Massachusetts. A great many photos of the cars were taken in their later years by Philip Hastings and others. They, and the elderly 2-6-0s which often pulled them through the quaint covered bridges of New England, were considered antiquities even in the late-1940s.

I'm yet undecided as to which era to restore the car to. The steel underframe would indicate post-1926, and the electric lighting system would be easier to put together than the ancient gas system. The original heating was provided by a Gold steam heating system, which I welcome information about. No traces of a heating system remain on the car today.



Pullman photos from the Smithsonian collection

Boston & Maine coach No. 1246 looked like

sister No.1224, shown here, when new in 1907. The plain walkover seats were not designed for luxury travel, but certainly provided more comfort than the primitive automobiles and buckboard wagons of the time. The cars received steel underframes in 1926, which allowed some to operate in regular service into the 1950s. Afterward, work train service and ultimately tourist trains kept them intact for continued existence today.

Colors are another matter, and there are a wide variety to choose from on the car today, ranging from the original (somewhat unattractive) green, to later B&M maroon (post WW2?), to the gaudy circus yellow of Steamtown. For now, the outside is maroon, which I like. Inside are several more colors, ranging from the original varnished mahogany, to tan, white, light blue and green, the latter three probably Steamtown applications. It is unclear if the tan paint came with the maroon paint on the outside, but my favorite is the original, beautiful wood, which seems criminal to paint over.

Some have asked how much I've spent on this exercise, and I can't say exactly. My $1000 initial investment, however, grew to $6500 after the move, and the total may be somewhere around $25,000 today, with a ways to go yet.

Others ask what I'm going to do with it when finished. I don't know exactly yet, but I want it to end up someplace where it will be appreciated, and hopefully ridden in, as a passenger car. I'm also involved with the group restoring former B&M 4-4-0 No. 494 at White River Junction, Vermont, and No. 1246 would look good behind it. At present, the 494 group only plans a cosmetic restoration, however, and wooden cars really don't fare too well on open display. The Conway Scenic Railroad operates some ex-B&M trackage, and the dormant Wolfeboro branch is still intact (used by motorcars occasionally). The old B&M line between Concord and Lincoln, New Hampshire now sees two different tourist operations. No doubt No. 1246 ran over all this trackage once. Hopefully, the car will end up where it will get the best care. Shelter would be nice. My town of New Boston once had a B&M branch also, but it was removed in 1935 and is today a nature trail. The quaint stone New Boston depot still stands, however.

In the meantime, there's plenty still to do. Interested parties are welcome (especially those with woodworking and refinishing skills), and if you'll be in the area drop me an e-mail at WRJ494@aol.com. I'll be happy to show you around.

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