

New L&N home won't be old, but it will be reliable



The Louisville & Nashville Railroad Historical Society's collection, soon to move to a building at the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum in Chattanooga, is rich with great classic-era images, such as this 1956 view of 'Big Emma' 2-8-4 No. 1953 on a coal train. *R. R. Malinoski photo, L&NRHS collection*

The familiar story is not merely apocryphal: Countless times over recent decades, railroad-specific historical societies were the only alternative to the literal or figurative dumpster, often swooping in to save a railroad company's paper heritage in the nick of time. Some railroads were callous about their heritage, but thank goodness their fans weren't.

One of our most accomplished groups is the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Historical Society, which has been preaching the gospel of the "Old Reliable" for nearly 40 years. Now its valuable collection of L&N material has found a new permanent home with the Society's announcement it plans to move its headquarters to a permanent facility at the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum (TVRM) in Chattanooga.

There, the L&N group will share space with the Southern Railway Historical Association, which made the same move a couple of years ago. The L&N

society will occupy about 2,500 square feet of a former commercial building TVRM acquired in 2018. I like its street address: Turntable Drive.

The L&N crew should have no trouble filling its part of the building with the cabinets and shelves necessary to protect all the mechanical drawings of M-1 2-8-4s, or correspondence on John E. Tilford's letterhead, or maps of the Corbin Division, or the organization's huge photo collection, some of which is displayed here.



Rakish E6 No. 773 speeds through Ocean Springs, Miss., with the *Humming Bird* in 1955. J. Parker Lamb photo, L&NRHS collection

Chattanooga is a logical location for this unusual shared space, given the city's postwar reputation as both a Southern and L&N town, the latter via L&N's absorption of Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis in 1957. Once upon a time, Chattanooga was a place to catch Southern's *Pelican* to New Orleans at SR's Terminal Station, or L&N's *Georgian* to Florida at Union Station — friendly rivals, for the most part. Also a plus: TVRM has a number of significant L&N items in its equipment collection, including GP7 710, built in 1950 for NC&StL and later renumbered as L&N 478; heavyweight dining car *Cross Keys Tavern*; and 60-seat lightweight coach 3101.

The TVRM facility will be a big step up for L&NRHS. For years the organization has been storing its archives in the basement at the Historic RailPark & Train Museum in the former L&N depot at Bowling Green, Ky. Although a safe space, the basement at Bowling Green was crowded and not easily accessible, says

David Orr, who chairs the L&NHS archive committee. Moreover, the museum needed expansion space of its own.

“At Bowling Green, we have not been able to have volunteer workdays because of the narrow stairway through a commercial office space and hence, the collection of drawings, photographs and correspondence is behind in organization,” Orr told me. “We do not have adequate secured space for physical archives such as L&N marked items, and consequently, we’ve had to turn down valuable items offered to us. Our new space will encourage potential donors to consider the new home.”

While design details are being worked out, Orr says the new space will have drawing cabinets, library-style shelving, study tables, bright lighting, security, and environmental controls. “The goal is to do the job right, yielding a professional archive space for many years,” he says.



All shined up for its run to Atlanta and points north, L&N's *Piedmont Limited* stands ready to depart New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal in May 1957. *L&NRHS collection*

The move to Chattanooga has been contemplated since 2018, Orr says, shortly after SRHA moved from its former location in Kennesaw, Ga., to TVRM. “SRHA and TVRM envisioned the concept of ‘The Center for Southeastern Railroad Research’ to be housed in TVRM's acquisition of a commercial building and property adjacent to their campus,” explains Orr. “Then our membership saw first-hand the professionalism of the work done by SRHA to

set up their space.”

It’s great to see like-minded organizations find ways to work together for the greater good. Meanwhile, the L&N and Southern organizations join several others that have found permanent, secure solutions to the archive problem.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Historical & Technical Society, for instance, has for several years stored and curated its collection in Lewistown, Pa., in the former PRR depot, built in 1849 and now the oldest surviving Pennsy depot.

Researchers who make an appointment have access to a vast collection of Mechanical Department drawings, official PRR photographs (including more than 5,000 glass-plate negatives), company correspondence, and ICC valuation maps.

Not to be outdone, the New York Central System Historical Society recently set up shop in a corporate office park in Middleburg Heights, Ohio, near such NYC sacred places as Berea and Cleveland Union Terminal. There, the organization preserves its materials in a 3,000-square-foot, climate-controlled space equipped for scanning, filing, and sorting. As a result, NYCSHS already has been able to make more than 60,000 images available on its website.

Like TVRM, other railroad museums offer good homes to historical societies. In St. Paul, Minn., both the Great Northern Railway Historical Society and the Northern Pacific Railway Historical Association cooperate on a jointly held archive housed at the Minnesota Transportation Museum’s Jackson Street Roundhouse facility.

At Union, Ill., the Illinois Railway Museum for several years has been the site of the Milwaukee Road Historical Association’s archives, which soon will be moving from a separate location in the village of Union to a new building on the IRM campus along Central Avenue. A similar facility at IRM is in the works for the Chicago & North Western Historical Society, which has already raised more than \$600,000 toward a new building.

Every last railroad — big or small — deserves some version of what the L&N Historical Society is doing. The fact they are partnering with their Southern friends makes it that much more meaningful. Even now, in 2021, the Old Reliable is pointing the way.