

# Yesteryears: The little red caboose, Part 1: From Pennsylvania to Red Hill

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[Yesteryears: The little red caboose, Part 1: From Pennsylvania to Red Hill](#) David A. Maurer

*First of a three-part series.*

The creation process took a few weeks and involved sweaty men with grimy hands using heavy tools, welders and cutting torches.

It was July 1941, and before the month ended, the glistening new caboose rolled out of the Pennsylvania Railroad car shops in Altoona, Pa., ready to start its new life. Its name, No. 477768, was placed beneath the bold letters on the side of the car that spelled "Pennsylvania."

During the ensuing years as the caboose rolled through Pennsylvania and the eastern parts of the country, the railroaders who found comfort within its walls might have given it a nickname. If so, that name of affection has been lost to history.

The caboose itself likely would have been lost as well, if not for the efforts of many local people. Since 2005, the brick-red relic has stood on a railroad side track in southern Albemarle County while undergoing a complete restoration.

Now that the work is finished, the caboose soon will be moving back to Pennsylvania. Once back home, it will be maintained and operated on tourist trains belonging to the nonprofit Colebrookdale Railroad in Boyertown, Pa.

In the beginning, the caboose, also called a cabin car, was assigned to Pittsburgh Region Altoona-Enola Crew 225, which operated in the Harrisburg, Pa., area. It later was assigned to the railroad's Eastern Region, which included service in New Jersey.

In 1968, when PRR merged with Penn Central, the caboose was renamed No. 22966. It kept that designation when it became the property of ConRail in 1976.

By 1980, the modernization of trains and new technology had made the caboose nearly obsolete. The last one was built in 1981 by Pacific Car in Kenton, Ohio.

At some point during the 1980s, the long-serving caboose was sold to Knox and Kane Railroad. This was a short-line railroad in Pennsylvania that originally hauled coal before switching over to carrying tourists in the 1980s.

John Pfaltz, a retired University of Virginia professor, first laid eyes on No. 477768 at Knox and Kane Railroad's headquarters in Marienville, Pa. When the railroad went out of business several years ago, he bought the caboose and had it brought to its present location.

"I had just retired from the university and I knew I wanted to do something with my hands that would be a little different," Pfaltz said. "I was telling a friend at lunch today that getting the caboose was one of the stupidest things I've ever done, and the most rewarding.

"First off, where do you put a caboose? I hunted up and down the tracks trying to find a siding it could go on. I ended up putting it on the siding going up to the Red Hill Quarry, which they don't use anymore."

Martin Marietta Materials, which operates the quarry, was gracious enough to give Pfaltz permission to park the caboose on its property. In June 2006, Pfaltz and fellow members of the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society held a Caboose Appreciation Day to thank the people who were instrumental in getting the caboose to its new home.

During the event, a certificate of appreciation was given to Tommy Walker, the plant manager of the quarry.

"We are proud to be able to help," Walker said at the time. "That's part of how we do business."

Pfaltz had acquired the caboose so that he and his fellow railroad enthusiasts could tackle a restoration project. The first challenge that had to be met was getting the caboose here.

"When I asked the owners of the Knox and Kane if the caboose could get down here on its own wheels, they said they couldn't say," Pfaltz said. "Then I was told that the Buffalo and Pittsburgh Railroad was going to pick it up, and I'd have to talk to their freight manager.

"When I called him, he said he knew the caboose and asked me where I wanted it to go. I said I wanted it brought to Charlottesville, and I started to explain where that was.

"He said I didn't have to tell him where it was, because he had spent two years at the Darden School. Boy, it was amazing. All of a sudden it got a lot easier for the caboose to get here."

**Next:** The restoration.

# Yesteryears: Caboose, part 2: Lovingly restored caboose better than ever

Posted: Sunday, December 29, 2013 6:00 am

[Yesteryears: Caboose, part 2: Lovingly restored caboose better than ever](#) David A. Maurer

Second of a three-part series.

With a jolt and the metallic boom of separating railroad car couplers, a large piece of faded Tuscan-red history was left on a sidetrack in southern Albemarle County.

After more than 60 years of service, the 31-foot-long caboose showed its age — and the toll that decades of hard work had exacted. Since 1941, railroaders had sat in the cozy confines of No. 477768, as hail and rain drummed on its roof, snowflakes swirled by its windows and fog obscured the passing landscape.

The caboose's kerosene lamps had provided men with light to read and do paperwork. The coal-burning stove had warmed them and their coffee, and the bunk beds had given them a place to rest.

When John Pfaltz bought the old caboose in 2005 and had it delivered to an abandoned sidetrack at Red Hill, his plan was to restore it completely. In accomplishing the ambitious task, he would get a lot of help from many people, including more than 20 members of the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society.

"This has not been a one-man project by a long shot," said Pfaltz, who took on the restoration after retiring from the University of Virginia, where he taught computer science. "For example, the late Ed Birkhead of Birkhead Signs said he'd love to do the lettering on the caboose, and he'd do it for free.

"All the windows had to be replaced, because they were plastic and got cloudy with time. Charlottesville Glass and Mirror provided new Lexan windows at their cost.

"They just said, 'Oh, trains are important. Let us do this.' Reactions of this kind have been amazing."

The sides of the caboose are made of thick steel, but condensation on the floor seals had caused extensive rusting, so an entire side had to be cut off and new sheet metal welded in.

Then the complete exterior of the caboose had to be sandblasted and repainted. Central Virginia Rentals loaned the team a sandblaster at cost.

The stove was missing, but fortunately a genuine Pennsylvania Railroad caboose coal-burning stove was found and purchased on eBay. Much of the interior paneling had to be replaced, as well as the sink.

The caboose wasn't wired for electricity when it was built, but it is now.

Caboose, which first came into use in the 1850s, started out simply as small shanties bolted to flat cars. Depending on the railroad, they were given names like "crummy," "way car" or "cabin car."

The caboose served as a shelter and office and, until the 1980s, could be seen at the end of every freight train. Another important function was as a platform from which crew members could observe the train ahead for signs of shifting cargo or mechanical problems.

The Red Hill caboose is an example of the classic design known as the "cupola." It derives the name from the windowed projection on the roof that allowed crew members to see the cars ahead.

Most railroad historians credit T.B. Watson for coming up with the iconic feature. He was a freight conductor on the Chicago and North Western Railway.

In the summer of 1863, Watson's caboose was farmed out to another train, and he was given a boxcar as a replacement. He probably wasn't happy to see a large hole had been busted through the roof.

Perhaps with the idea to plug the hole with something, the conductor stacked up some boxes and clambered up. When he stuck his head and shoulders up through the hole, he realized he had an ideal perch from which to keep an eye on the cars ahead.

Watson mentioned his idea for the pilothouse to his boss, and it wasn't long before most cabooses had them.

The etymology for the word "caboose" is far more uncertain.

Theories have the word deriving from the Dutch word "kabhuis" or the German word "kabhuse," both of which refer to a cabin on the main deck of a ship. The French word "camboose" means the same thing, and there's evidence that the word was in use in America years before the first railroads started being built in the early 19th century.

Next to the smoke-belching steam locomotives of the past, the caboose is the favorite of many railroad enthusiasts. The completely restored example at Red Hill soon will be leaving for its new home in Boyertown, Pa., where it will become a part of a tourist train.

No. 477768 has left the sidetrack a few times before. In 2010 it went to Steamtown in Scranton, Pa., where it was placed on display. And last year it went to Harrisburg, Pa., where it was displayed at the Amtrak station.

But when it leaves Albemarle County in the next few weeks, it won't be coming back. This reality brings sadness, as well as a deep sense of pride, to the people who have readied her so beautifully for her new life.

**Next:** Back home in Pennsylvania.

Yesteryears: Caboose, part 3: Tourist railroad will be next stop for restored caboose

Posted: Sunday, January 5, 2014 6:00 am

David A. Maurer

Last of a three-part series.

In 1865, the ringing song of heavy hammers driving railroad spikes became a common sound in and south of Boyertown, Penn.

In 1869 the new railroad line between Boyertown and Pottstown, Penn., was complete. The Colebrookdale Railroad was up and running.

The railroad soon was leased to Reading Railroad, which operated it until 1976, when it became a part of Conrail. When Conrail announced its intention to abandon the line, the state of Pennsylvania acquired it.

In 2001, Berks County, where the tracks are located, purchased the line. A few years ago, the idea to start a tourist railroad was proposed, and the Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust was created to make it happen.

On a recent afternoon, one of the trust's board members, Richard Tobin, was admiring the first piece of what is hoped soon will become a part of an entire train. He couldn't have been more pleased with a red caboose that has become a landmark in southern Albemarle County.

"This is a thrill, because the caboose is our first piece of rolling stock," Tobin said recently during a farewell ceremony at the Red Hill sidetrack where the caboose has been undergoing an extensive restoration since arriving there in 2005.

"There hasn't been consistent rail traffic on the Colebrookdale Line since about 1927. Since then, it has been very sporadic.

"What we hope to accomplish is the creation of a tourist railroad that will make regular runs. It's a beautiful scenic route that's more than eight miles long, and this caboose is the beginning of a dream coming true."

The caboose will be returning to the state where it was built in July 1941. John Pfaltz, who purchased the car in 2005, said it's time for it to leave.

"The caboose doesn't belong in a field in Central Virginia," Pfaltz said. "One of the basic tenets set by the Rivanna Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society is that it's not going to end up in a park as a playhouse for children.

"It's going to be kept the way it was, and it's going to be kept operational. That's part of the agreement we have in donating it to the Colebrookdale Railroad.

"But I was just telling a friend that it's a little like giving away your daughter in marriage. You know it's the right thing to do, and you're really pleased, but I am a little sad."

The caboose has left a few times before to be put on display. During one of the brief absences, Pfaltz struck up a conversation with a conductor who works on a train that regularly passed the caboose on its way into Charlottesville.

"Whenever I was out working on the caboose and a train would come by, they would always toot the horn and wave," Pfaltz said. "I was talking with a conductor about the caboose, and he said he knew exactly where it was.

"Then he said, 'But it went away. What happened?' I told him and he said, 'But we count on that caboose to know when we're coming into Charlottesville.' So we're going to have to alert the railroaders as to where it's gone, and that it won't be back this time."

Travis Koshko is one of the many people who helped restore caboose No. 477768. As he looked around the interior of the beautifully restored caboose he worked on for five years, he said he was sad to see it go.

"Working on the caboose has been a labor of love and a learning experience," Koshko said. "Not only have we been rebuilding something from diagrams and historical knowledge, but we've learned about its quirks and character traits along the way.

"It's actually going to be close to my hometown, so I fully intend on visiting it there. And it's going to a good home, where it's going to be treated well by people who have as much appreciation for the railroad and its history as the people who have done this project."

Tobin's father worked for the Reading Railroad all his life, and their historic home stood right next to the tracks. As he admired the caboose from top to bottom, it was clear that he's also a railroad man at heart.

"Certainly, for historians, this is almost like the Holy Grail," Tobin said. "When something like this happens and a railroad comes to fruition in a community, it's a spark that can't be matched by anything else.

"It brings together the past and the potential for the future. People just light up when they see something like this, and children get all googly-eyed. Except for Christmas, seeing a real train from the past is probably the best thing that could happen to them."

Neither words or pictures can make the earth shiver beneath one's feet like a passing train will do. And few experiences could lock in a memory as deeply as the friendly wave from an engineer as he rode by beneath plumes of smoke and steam.

And without fail, it was the caboose that said goodbye as the freight train faded into the distance. Now the time has come for Pfaltz to say his goodbyes to the caboose that has come to mean so much to him.

"I've spent quite a bit of time by myself in the caboose," Pfaltz said. "It's a great feeling, because there's a peacefulness.

"I usually sit on one of the bunks and look out the window at this beautiful area. There's a feeling of this huge steel shell around you, and yet it's vulnerable. Surprisingly, if somebody climbs up the ladder, it will rock, because it's very balanced on its wheels.

"It's heavy, but it's on roller bearings so we can actually push it up and down the tracks. It feels like it's alive, and I wanted to make sure it stayed alive."