

# The flag that fell, only to rise again

Norfolk Southern was merged away in 1974—then the name reappeared 8 years later • **By Robert C. Reisweber**



Led by 1605, a trio of Baldwin road-switchers in the classic NS color scheme pulls out of Raleigh for Charlotte with train 64 in November 1961.

Wiley M. Bryan photo; J. David Ingles collection

Until 2012, one might have wondered why “Norfolk Southern” was a “fallen flag.” But when Norfolk Southern Corp. included in its “Heritage” fleet GE ES44AC 8114 dolled up in the red and black of the old Norfolk Southern Railway, public awareness of the “first NS” jumped exponentially.

The name “Norfolk Southern Railroad” first appeared on February 1, 1883, when the Elizabeth City & Norfolk Railroad adopted it. EC&N had been chartered in North Carolina on January 20, 1870, to connect its namesake North Carolina town with Norfolk, 46 miles north. Construction didn’t start until 1880, owing to difficulty in attracting enough capital. This was a problem that would haunt NS throughout its lifetime.

The railroad did get built, and regular service began June 1, 1881. An extension to Edenton opened on December 19, 1881, but the owners were already thinking of extending the line south, which led to the name change.

NS went into receivership in 1889, and was reorganized as the Norfolk & Southern Railroad in 1891. Included was the former Albemarle & Pantego, a logging pike from Mackey’s Ferry, N.C., on Albemarle Sound, 30 miles south to Belhaven, on Pamlico Sound. A&P ran a carfloat from Mackey’s Ferry to Edenton, creating a through route from Norfolk to Belhaven. The carfloat operation was time-consuming, and passenger timeta-

bles show roughly 10½ hours for the 113-mile trip, including 1 hour 20 minutes for the ferry. N&S bought the ferry *John W. Garrett* from the Baltimore & Ohio in 1899, but ferrying was still slow.

In January 1900, N&S expanded again, this time east, acquiring the Norfolk, Virginia Beach & Southern, which ran from downtown Norfolk to the Virginia Beach oceanfront and had a branch south to Munden on Currituck Sound. In 1902, Chesapeake Transit Co. built a competing line from Norfolk to the oceanfront via Cape Henry. CT was an electric line, which many travelers preferred to N&S’s smoky steam trains, and a brief “railroad war” ensued, with N&S electrifying its line and extending it north parallel to the CT. The fight ended in April 1904 when the lines merged.

Also in 1904, N&S expanded south again by buying the Washington & Plymouth, a narrow-gauge logger connecting those two North Carolina towns. N&S standard-gauged it and built north to a connection at Mackey’s Ferry, giving it a continuous 135-mile line from Norfolk to Washington, N.C.—but still with the 9-mile ferry across Albemarle Sound.

The biggest expansion occurred in November 1906, when N&S merged with the Virginia & Carolina Coast; Raleigh & Pamlico Sound; Pamlico, Oriental & Western; and Beaufort & Western. Also included: the Atlantic & North Carolina Co., a private firm that leased and ran

the state-owned Atlantic & North Carolina from Goldsboro through New Bern to Morehead City. The new merged firm was the Norfolk & Southern Railway Co.

## Connecting the new N&S system

N&S Railway immediately undertook construction to link all its new components into a unified system. When this was done in late 1907, N&S had through routes from Norfolk to Raleigh and New Bern, and from Morehead City through New Bern to Goldsboro, with branches to Oriental, Columbia, Goldsboro, and Beaufort, N.C., and to Suffolk, Va. N&S next began its largest-ever construction project, a 5-mile wood pile trestle across Albemarle Sound to replace the ferry. A moveable span let water traffic pass.

Buoyed by the soon-to-be-done trestle, the company considerably expanded the passenger service, initiating overnight Norfolk–Raleigh and Norfolk–New Bern Pullman service to complement established daylight train Nos. 1 and 2 between Norfolk and Belhaven, which were extended to New Bern (later to Raleigh instead). The Raleigh day train got a Pullman parlor car, later changed to Norfolk–New Bern.

Alas, the firm’s financial structure could not support these investments, and it entered receivership July 1, 1908. Reorganized on May 4, 1910, it again became the Norfolk Southern Railroad Co. Fortunately, the judge overseeing the re-

ceivership allowed construction of Albemarle Sound trestle to continue, and the first train crossed it on January 1, 1910.

In 1911 NS was ready to expand again, buying a charter granted to the Raleigh, Charlotte & Southern to build from the capital to Charlotte. As a start, NS bought four more short lines: Raleigh & Southport; Durham & Charlotte; Sanford & Troy; and Aberdeen & Asheboro. By using parts of these lines and building connections, NS attained the objective of the charter, and the first Raleigh-Charlotte trains operated on November 13, 1915. NS also gained branches to Fayetteville, Aberdeen, Carthage, Jackson Springs, Ellerbe, and Asheboro.

More expansion came in 1920 with the lease of the Durham & South Carolina, from Durham to a connection with NS at Duncan. This was NS's last major addition for 40 years, bringing its mileage to an all-time high of 942.

By this time, NS realized passenger traffic would never produce much income; NS passed through sparsely settled rural areas, and most of the towns had other travel alternatives. Most branch-line passenger trains were downgraded during the 1920s to mixed trains, and after 1924, even the Raleigh-Charlotte main had only one mixed train each way. By 1938, only Norfolk-Raleigh daylight trains 1 and 2, plus the Virginia Beach trains, were left. The beach trains last ran on November 7, 1947, and the Norfolk-Raleigh trains expired January 31, 1948, making NS an early freight-only Class 1.

Freight traffic through the 1920s kept the road viable, but the Depression ended that. NS again entered receivership in July 1932, and the Pullman service ended that year. Management tried ACF-Brill railbuses to save money, putting them on the Virginia Beach lines; this allowed the outmoded electrification to be eliminated. NS also stopped making payments on the Atlantic & North Carolina lease, voiding it; A&NC would be leased to the



**"This is NS passenger service," wrote photographer H. Reid in 1951. "Country folk with their paper-bag suitcases and poke [sack] lunches, in scrub pine country and a beautiful little Ten-Wheeler in front of antiquated wooden cars. The year: 1942. The place: Marsden, N.C."**

Atlantic & East Carolina, which in 1958 was taken over by Southern Railway.

As World War II approached, freight business rose, and management realized new motive power was needed. Almost all freights were powered by 34 2-8-0s, the newest of which dated from 1927, so NS ordered its most modern steam locomotives: five 2-8-4s from Baldwin, delivered in 1940 as Nos. 600-604. They were notable as the lightest U.S. Berkshires, necessitated by NS's light rail and many light wood trestles, although they sported most of the technological features of their contemporaries. They did allow NS to speed up schedules for the Norfolk-Charlotte through freights.

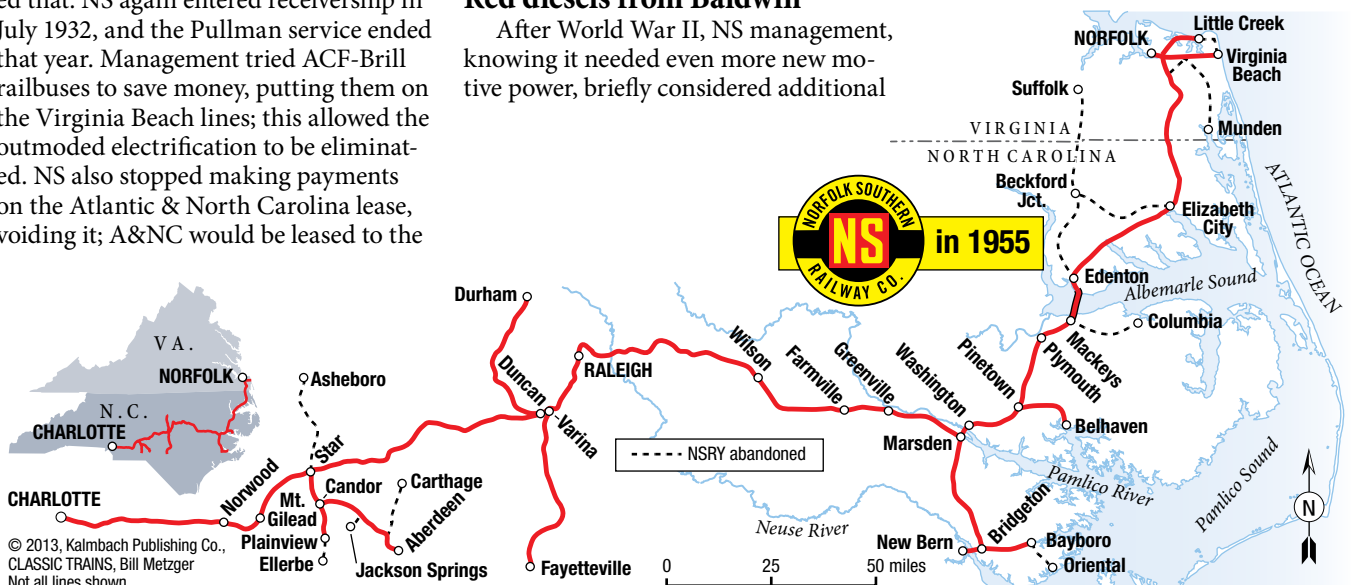
With more business, NS's financial situation improved, and it emerged from receivership on January 21, 1942, as the Norfolk Southern Railway Co.

### Red diesels from Baldwin

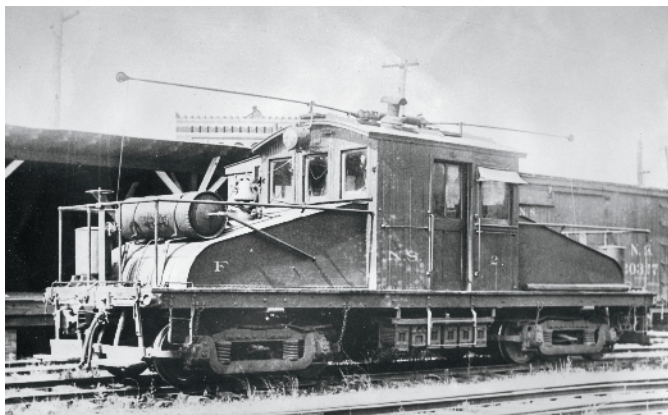
After World War II, NS management, knowing it needed even more new motive power, briefly considered additional

2-8-4s, but instead in 1947 acquired from Baldwin 5 diesel switchers and 10 road-switchers. They wore the bright red, with a yellow stripe all around and three black stripes on both ends. Like the 2-8-4s, the road-switchers were notable for their light axle-loading. They were Baldwin model DRS-6-4-1500, with A1A trucks, followed in later years by 17 of Baldwin's 1,600 h.p. successor AS416's, whose arrival permitted NS to retire its last six steam locomotives in 1954.

When dieselization began, Norfolk-Raleigh passenger trains 1 and 2 were still running, and NS wanted diesels for them. In an unusual move, NS, desiring a lightweight model, chose three GE 70-ton units! But by the time they were delivered in 1948, the varnish was gone, although the GE's did haul NS's mail and express-only trains until 1951. After that, the 70-tonners handled light freight



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Not all lines shown



NS variety, clockwise from above: GE 70-tonner and a GP18 at Carolina Junction (Norfolk) in 1974; freight motor No. 2 at Park Avenue Station, Norfolk; railbus 105 at Norfolk's Union Depot on August 2, 1947; and Baldwin DS-4-4-660 No. 663 in the Raleigh yard on September 31, 1961.

Clockwise from bottom left: Kurt R. Reisweber; H. Reid collection, courtesy H.T. Crittenden; H. Reid; Wiley M. Bryan

work, mostly on the Bayboro branch, which still had some 50-lb. rail.

In 1947, a major change in NS management occurred as Patrick McGinnis took control. McGinnis' controversial tenure as head of the New Haven and Boston & Maine made headlines in the '50s, so let's just say he developed many of his management practices, good and bad, on NS before taking them north. The Interstate Commerce Commission launched an investigation of these practices, but that became largely moot when McGinnis left NS in early 1953.

McGinnis did reorganize NS's financ-

es, turning it from a perennial loser into a profitable property. He also encouraged dieselization and the elimination of passenger trains, and he accelerated the abandonment of unprofitable branches, which by the time he left included those to Suffolk, Munden, Columbia, Oriental, Asheboro, and Ellerbe. The cutbacks reduced NS's mileage to just over 600.

Unfortunately, McGinnis did not pay as much attention to maintenance of way, and the worst result of this took place on July 5, 1957, when part of the Albemarle Sound trestle collapsed under a freight. Two crewmen died, but three others were saved after a harrowing ordeal clinging to remnants of the trestle.

### New business, more diesels

In the late '50s, NS management was happy to learn that plans were under way to mine phosphates near Aurora, 30 miles or so from the important NS junction at Chocowinity (called Marsden on NS). NS started to plan a branch to the area but ran into heavy opposition from Atlantic Coast Line, which once had operated a subsidiary, Washington & Vandemere, into the same area. ACL argued

this should give it precedence to build, even though it had abandoned the W&V a few years earlier. The dispute went to federal court, which ruled for NS, but not until 1965. NS built the line, and it opened in 1966.

With this new business in the offing, NS ordered more diesels. Baldwin had quit the market, so NS turned to EMD, buying 17 GP18's, Nos. 1-17. Delivered in 1963, they were largely the same as other GP18's, except they had low short hoods and noticeably small fuel tanks, again to keep weight down. Even so, they were excluded from several of the lighter branches. The '18's introduced a new color scheme of light gray with red safety stripes on the ends, and eventually all the Baldwins and GE's that were still on the roster got this scheme. In 1966-67, the GP18 fleet was augmented by seven GP38's, Nos. 2001-2007, again with small fuel tanks. They would become Southern 2880-2886 (later NS the same), and were not dispersed until 1996. The GP18's became Southern 180-196.

In the late 1960s, realizing the ongoing lack of capital was a serious limitation, NS management sought a merger



GP18 No. 187J wears a Southern number, check-letter, and high nose in company with gray GP18's 3 and 1 at Raleigh in August '74.

Wiley M. Bryan

partner. Southern was interested, as it could use the NS Norfolk–Raleigh main line to replace trackage rights over an ACL branch that gave it access to the Hampton Roads ports of Norfolk and Portsmouth. The merger went through with few problems, effective January 1, 1974, as NS was merged into Southern subsidiary Carolina & Northwestern, which assumed the NS name. Southern immediately began to upgrade NS track, installing 132-lb. welded rail on the Norfolk–Raleigh line and strengthening trestles. Southern rebuilt NS's Geeps to its standards with high short hoods and controls to run long-hood-forward.

In 1982, Southern merged with Norfolk & Western, and what better for a new corporate name than “Norfolk Southern”? To accomplish this, the Carolina & Northwestern name was brought back in 1981 to free the old subsidiary name. So the little fallen flag rose again and became one of the biggest rail banners flying over the U.S. today. One result was the demise of the Norfolk–Raleigh line as a through route, as all Norfolk traffic used the double-track former N&W. This relegated all remaining old NS trackage to branchline status. The famous Albemarle Sound trestle saw decreased use and was removed in January 1987.

Today, more than half the trackage of the original Norfolk Southern remains in service, much of it owned by the company that resurrected the historic name. Not bad for a fallen flag, is it? ■

## NS fact file



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1973)

**Route-miles:** 933; 622

**Locomotives:** 105 steam, 5 elec.; 37 diesel

**Passenger cars:** 108 (plus 42 electric); 0

**Freight cars:** 3,282; 2,245

**Headquarters cities:** Norfolk, Va.; after 1961, Raleigh N.C.

**Special interest group:** Norfolk Southern Railway Company Historical Society, 2222 W. Club Blvd., Durham, NC 27705; [www.norfolksouthernhs.org](http://www.norfolksouthernhs.org)

**Recommended reading:** *Norfolk Southern*, by Richard E. Prince (Prince, 1972); *The Original Norfolk Southern Railway, 1883-1974*, by Robert C. Reisweber and Dalton P. McDonald (Garrigues House, 2007).

**Source:** *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 2000)