

The B&M: a century and a half of influence

Northern New England's largest railroad made a lasting impact



George Krambles; Krambles-Peterson Archive

For 150 years the Boston & Maine Railroad was an integral part of northern New England, beginning with the charter on March 15, 1833, for the Andover & Wilmington Railroad to build between those two adjacent towns northwest of Boston. The name arose with the creation of the Boston & Maine Railroad of New Hampshire on June 27, 1835.

The B&M was nearly 120 years old when I first encountered it in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. As a pre-schooler in the early 1950's in Shelburne Falls, I would visit the depot and small yard with Dad on many a Saturday afternoon. The Ashfield Street crossing guard was friendly and his shanty fascinating (although intimidating). When "a job was on the bell," it was my dilemma whether to wave to the crew or cover my ears! The passing trains introduced me to not only maroon-and-gold E and F units, but also to freight cars bearing place names near and far. Occasionally we'd see the westbound stainless-steel *Minute Man*, behind E7 diesels, and often the local freight would be working the yard. Eventually the crew took me for a ride, boosting my B&M interest.

The B&M had become a regional

B&M's 7.9-mile, 11,000-volt Hoosac Tunnel 1911 electrification, patterned after the New Haven's, employed seven Baldwin-Westinghouse motors. On August 1, 1940, box-cabs 5002/5003 tow 2-8-4 4010 and train west.

force in the 1870's, gaining the upper hand in the consolidation battles that followed New England's "railroad fever" expansion in the 1840's-1860's. B&M in 1885 leased the Eastern Railroad, which included a controlling block of Maine Central stock, and gained control of the Boston & Lowell in 1887. The Concord & Montreal capitulated in 1895, and the Fitchburg Railroad came into the fold in 1900. The Fitchburg brought with it the landmark, 4.75-mile Hoosac Tunnel through the Berkshires, longest railroad bore in the land when it opened in 1875 after a 24-year construction. Ultimately, more than 173 companies were melded into the B&M system.

Boston & Maine's apogee of power, territory, and influence occurred during 1907-1916, when more than 25,000

The lineup at Boston's North Station on July 1, 1955, illustrates the evolution of B&M passenger-train power. At left, a 4-6-2 starts up; in the middle is a GP7 in the "Minute Man" scheme; at right are newer Budd RDC's.

employees kept the 2,364-mile system fluid and profitable. In all of New England, only the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad exceeded the B&M in power and influence.

B&M's early 20th-century locomotive roster was heavy on 0-6-0's (192), Moguls (137), Consolidations (245), and 4-4-0's (91), but it had nary a Mikado. It did have oddities. In 1910, B&M received four oil-fired 2-6-6-2 Mallets for use through Hoosac. They were replaced in 1911 by electrics and sold to Maine Central, which used them as pushers up



John P. Ahrens



Boston & Maine's system, by divisions and with connections, is shown as it existed in 1951.

Crawford Notch in New Hampshire. Also built 90 Pacifics for B&M varnish in the 1910's, although the trains—the likes of the *Minute Man*, *Alouette*, *Red Wing*, and *Flying Yankee*—weren't given those names until 1925-26. In 1913, B&M opened a central locomotive shop in North Billerica, Mass., five miles south of Lowell.

As with most railroads in the century's early decades, there were ups and downs. B&M entered bankruptcy in August 1916, and the subsequent 1919 reorganization eliminated most of its numerous leases. The last half of the 1920's was difficult. A major flood in 1927 washed away or damaged hundreds of miles of track and disrupted service for days, but it allowed B&M to begin its first major abandonment of branch lines, already made unprofitable

by Ford's flivver and paved roads.

Capital investment in the main line and physical plant in the late 1920's included strengthened bridges, rock ballast, heavier rail, and CTC signaling installations. B&M built hump yards at Mechanicville, N.Y., and East Deerfield and Somerville, Mass. (suburban Boston). In central Boston, a new complex was built that included North Station/Boston Garden, the Hotel Manger, the Industrial Building (B&M's headquarters), an engine terminal, and the Charles River drawbridges.

A new administration, led by President Edward S. French, took over in 1930 and soon put the B&M on the path to dieselization ["Steam to Diesel on the Boston & Maine," pages 92-101, DIESEL VICTORY 2006]. The earliest splash was the three-car streamliner *Flying Yankee*,



Dan Foley

Mogul 1493 drifts onto the Nashua River bridge at Clinton, Mass., in January 1956 with train 3107, one of three commuter schedules from Boston on the 37-mile “Mass. Central” line.

delivered by Budd on February 9, 1935. A clone of Burlington’s first *Zephyr*, the “first Streamliner east of the Mississippi” served on several B&M routes over the years and carried several train names before retirement in 1957 and eventual preservation (today, work progresses in Lincoln, N.H.).

A decade before, B&M had tiptoed past steam in passenger service with 13 EMC/Winton gas-electric cars. Coincident with the Budd streamliner in 1935, B&M acquired diesel switchers from Ingersoll-Rand/Westinghouse and Alco-GE, plus two diesel-powered baggage-RPO locomotives from St. Louis Car. More EMC and Alco switchers followed during 1936-39.

In 1943-44 the Office of Defense Management allotted the B&M 12 four-unit EMD FT freight diesels, and in October 1945, two E7A passenger units introduced the new maroon-and-gold “Minute Man” color scheme. The balance of 14 E7’s, three F2A-B passenger duos, and 15 F2A’s (to make A-B-A consists with an FT A-B) allowed B&M to de-energize the Hoosac Tunnel electric zone in 1946, the first steam-road electrification to shut down. B&M in 1947 said it was 70 percent dieselized.

Meantime, in 1932 French’s administration had conceived an economy plan to combine senior executive positions with the Maine Central. The roads were “jointly managed” but not merged. The closest coordination during those years came near the end of World War II, when one purchase order to EMD

covered 20 E7A’s, the only combined order B&M-MEC ever placed.

French retired in 1952, and a proxy fight at the 1955 Annual Meeting deposed his administration—which had not declared a dividend since 1932—and created a new 19-member Board of Directors. All were allied with Patrick B. McGinnis, a Wall Street promoter. The new board cancelled the last B&M-MEC corporate relationship in 1955, and on January 20, 1956, McGinnis became B&M president, about 6 hours after resigning as New Haven’s president!

He came to a railroad about to finish its motive-power transformation. Following a trial with Alco’s new RS2 road-switcher, B&M bought 36 RS2’s and RS3’s during 1948-55. Four BL2’s from EMD in 1948 were followed by 23 GP7’s during 1950-53.

A big change was also on tap for B&M passenger service, kicked off by an order in 1951 for three Budd Rail Diesel Cars. B&M called the self-propelled cars Highliners, and by 1957 had purchased 109, the world’s largest RDC fleet. B&M steam expired in commuter service on July 23, 1956, and the last gas-electrics also departed that year.

By 1958, RDC’s were covering nearly all passenger service. On January 20, service on the Fitchburg Division west of Williamstown, the last stop in Massachusetts, was terminated. On Saturday, October 25, when the afternoon westbound RDC stopped in Shelburne Falls, my parents and I boarded for the 47.6-mile round trip to North Adams

via Hoosac Tunnel. On the return, the conductor took me to the rear platform, put on the headlight, and showed a fascinated 10-year-old the brickwork, the remains of the electric catenary structure, the central shaft’s half-mile deep “Hoosac Hotel,” and hand-drill holes from a century past. Back at Shelburne Falls, as the Budd’s red markers faded eastward down Shelburne hill that evening, my life was forever changed. Since that afternoon I have been interested—some say obsessed—in the saga of the B&M in general and the Hoosac Tunnel in particular. My folks’ timing was impeccable—passenger service west of Greenfield ended five weeks later, on November 30, 1958.

Meantime, B&M changed colors, trading-in to EMD in 1956-57 its 48 FT’s on 50 GP9’s, which arrived in President McGinnis’ new blue, black, and white livery and were soon called “Bluebirds.” Six GP18’s that followed in 1961 were B&M’s last pre-1970-bankruptcy power.

By 1960, New England freight business had slumped as heavy industry was departing the region. B&M abandoned lines, reduced double-track main lines to CTC-controlled (but ill-maintained and worn out) single track, and sold buildings and land in epidemic proportions. Still, losses mounted, and employment plummeted. McGinnis and his successor, Daniel A. Benson, were convicted and jailed in 1966 for financial improprieties.

My youthful conviction to work for the railroad wavered, but in January 1968 I joined the B&M as a signal draftsman on the 10th floor in headquarters at 150 Causeway Street in Boston. The surroundings were aged and rundown, morale was understandably poor, and the future was bleak. I departed that August to enter college and forsook a rail career.

B&M filed for bankruptcy again on March 12, 1970. Late that year the trustees hired the “doctor of sick railroads,” John W. Barriger III, as president effective January 1, 1971. “JWB” promptly began to assemble a new operating and management team of young, bright professionals. Not so coincidentally, that September the Boston & Maine Railroad Historical Society, one of the first such railroad special-interest groups,



Ralph L. Phillips; J. David Ingles collection

“Bluebird” GP9 1729, in Boston on August 23, 1958, displays a road-dirty version of the McGinnis blue, white, and black that were B&M’s final colors; behind it is passenger GP7 1575.

was incorporated.

Barriger mingled with the local railfan community. He rode the annual February 1971 Railroad Enthusiasts’ “Snow Train” from Boston to North Conway, N.H., from which an autographed Polaroid snapshot I took remains a treasured memento. He also encouraged my effort to write the history of Hoosac Tunnel (*A Pinprick of Light*, published in 1974), and authorized a cab ride through it as part of my research.

Dr. Paul W. Cherington, a Harvard Business School professor, took B&M’s helm in January 1973, and that year F. C. “Buck” Dumaine, head of Amoskeag Corp., purchased sufficient of B&M’s in-default first mortgage bonds to make him B&M’s *de facto* owner—subject only to the Bankruptcy Court trustees and judge. Dumaine sent his Executive Assistant, Alan G. “Dusty” Dustin, to the B&M to assist Dr. Cherington.

Dustin became B&M president and CEO in August 1974, and he and his young managers turned the railroad around in the face of declining revenue and carloads. They kept it from liquidation and out of Conrail in 1976, sold enough assets at high enough prices to keep creditors at bay, and managed to rebuild the road’s motive power, rolling stock, trackage, and signal system.

In 1981, Timothy Mellon, scion of the Pittsburgh banking family, purchased the Maine Central, and on June 30, 1983, his privately held Guilford Transportation Industries (named for the

Connecticut city where the offices were) added the B&M, for \$24.25 million. B&M’s independence was over, but “Boston and Maine” still remains on locomotives and freight cars of what in 2006 Guilford “re-branded” as Pan Am Railways.

Dusty Dustin subsequently commented that he and his team had accomplished the longest income-based reorganization in post-Depression railroad history . . . and worked themselves out of a job in the process. The B&M and its predecessors brought economic growth, increased mobility, and employment to seven generations of northern New Englanders. It will be eons before that effect is erased from the region’s economy and history, and that is as it should be. ■

B&M FACT FILE

(Comparative figures are for 1929 and 1982)

Route-miles: 2,077; 1,508

Locomotives: 787; 151

Passenger cars: 1,275; 0

Freight Cars: 11,062; 3,112

Headquarters city: Boston, Mass. (later North Billerica, Mass.)

Notable postwar passenger trains: *Flying Yankee, Minute Man, Red Wing*

Special interest group: Boston & Maine Railroad Historical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 469, Derry, NH 03038; www.trainweb.org/bmrrhs

Source: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads* (Kalmbach, 1999)