

A uniquely positioned flag

Bred of transcontinental dreams, the Wabash served but also avoided Chicago and St. Louis

BY J. DAVID INGLES



Engine 706, last of seven 4-6-4s rebuilt at Decatur from 2-8-2s, leaves St. Louis Union Station in October 1948, with the *Banner Blue* for Chicago.

J. David Ingles collection

The term “Fallen Flag” first appeared in **TRAINS** in 1974, as the title for a series of thumbnail histories of merged-away railroads. The series began with the Wabash, and employed the road’s flag emblem outline to illustrate the series’ opening pages. Editor David P. Morgan and I each wrote half the thumbnails. One of mine was the Wabash, which served my home territory, as in one of its slogans, “Serving the Heart of America.”

I came to know the Wabash well for much of its last decade, before Norfolk & Western absorbed it in October 1964. Other than pacing a 2-8-2 south of Taylorville, Ill., circa 1950, I had only one Wabash experience before our family moved from suburban Chicago to suburban Detroit in 1956. And that was indirect — my 5th-grade class viewed the railroad’s 16mm p.r. movie *Once Upon the Wabash*, produced to tout its new Budd domeliner, the *Blue Bird*.

With more than 100 Class Is in the postwar era, it wasn’t as easy then to connect key points in your life by one railroad as it would be in today’s world of

seven mega-systems. Wabash, though, did so for me, and in some ways I adhered to its emblem’s “Follow the Flag” slogan. My first Wabash ride was a 1957 Detroit–Decatur (Ill.) *Wabash Cannon Ball* round trip to visit relatives. By 1959 Wabash’s diesel terminal at Oakwood Yard near home had become a regular stop on Detroit-area engine-photography “rounds,” and as a Michigan Railroad Club member, I rode a diesel excursion that year covering much of the obscure 4th District, from Montpelier, Ohio, to Pine, Ind., plus subsidiary New Jersey, Indiana & Illinois up to South Bend.

During 1962–65 I attended MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Ill., on Wabash’s Detroit–Kansas City route. Until my junior year, I didn’t have a car at “Mac,” so when I’d go home to Michigan, I’d ride the *Cannon Ball* or the overnight *Limiteds* between Decatur and the Motor City. I left my car in Decatur a time or two, and returned via Chicago, taking the *Blue Bird*. After 1964, of course, reality was the Norfolk & Western but the Wabash spirit endured as N&W kept the

train names. My miles on the *City of St. Louis* and *City of Kansas City* were either on Colorado family vacations or visits with K.C.-area friends. I returned to central Illinois and worked for newspapers during 1966–71 before moving to Wisconsin to join **TRAINS**’ staff.

Stitching the flag together

In today’s terms Wabash was a decent-size regional — 2,423 route-miles in 1960. Wabash’s hot “Red Ball” freights burnished busy high iron as the road took full advantage of its unique position spanning the Mississippi River with a main line that bypassed congested St. Louis and Chicago.

Wabash had three freight hubs — Montpelier, Decatur, and Moberly, Mo. — which anchored a network connecting Detroit, Toledo, Chicago, St. Louis, and K.C., with secondary lines to Des Moines and Council Bluffs-Omaha. It also ran, on Canadian National trackage rights, between Detroit and Buffalo, N.Y., starting in 1898. It employed Detroit River ferries to Windsor, Ont. This effectively made Wabash a link between Lackawanna and

other roads to the big Eastern cities and Union Pacific, Rock Island, Missouri Pacific, and others across the Great Plains.

As with many mid-size Class Is, Wabash's history is one of mergers, consolidations, and leases.

What became the Wabash had early beginnings that included the first railroad in Illinois. The Northern Cross, first of several east-west lines sponsored by the state to aid development, was chartered in 1837 to run from Quincy on the Mississippi River to the Indiana state line. In 1838, it laid 8 miles of wobbly track from Meredosia, on the Illinois River, east toward Jacksonville and the state capital of Springfield; its first train ran on November 8, 1838. Through service to Springfield began in May 1842; Decatur was reached in 1854, and Indiana in 1856. Remarkably, Norfolk Southern still operates essentially all of this route.

Downriver, the North Missouri was set up in 1851 to build from St. Louis to the Iowa border, opening in 1858. In the 1860s NM acquired a branch to Brunswick and established Moberly, named for a railroader, at the junction. The Brunswick line reached K.C. in 1868; to the north, the original route attained Ottumwa, Iowa, in 1870, the year the line from Brunswick to Omaha was begun. It got to Council Bluffs in 1879. NM had stumbled financially and was succeeded in 1872 by the St. Louis, Kansas City & Northern.

To the east, two roads were organized in 1853: the Toledo & Illinois to build from Toledo, Ohio, to the Indiana border, and the Lake Erie, Wabash & St. Louis to continue to Attica, Ind., following the Wabash & Erie Canal. They merged in 1856 as the Toledo, Wabash & Western, the first time the word "Wabash" entered the picture.

TW&W was succeeded by the Toledo & Wabash in 1858, having absorbed the



Three F7s roll west through fresh snow in February 1961 in Taylor Township (now the City of Taylor), Mich., 4 miles out of Oakwood Yard, with a freight to Montpelier, Ohio, and Decatur, Ill.

J. David Ingles

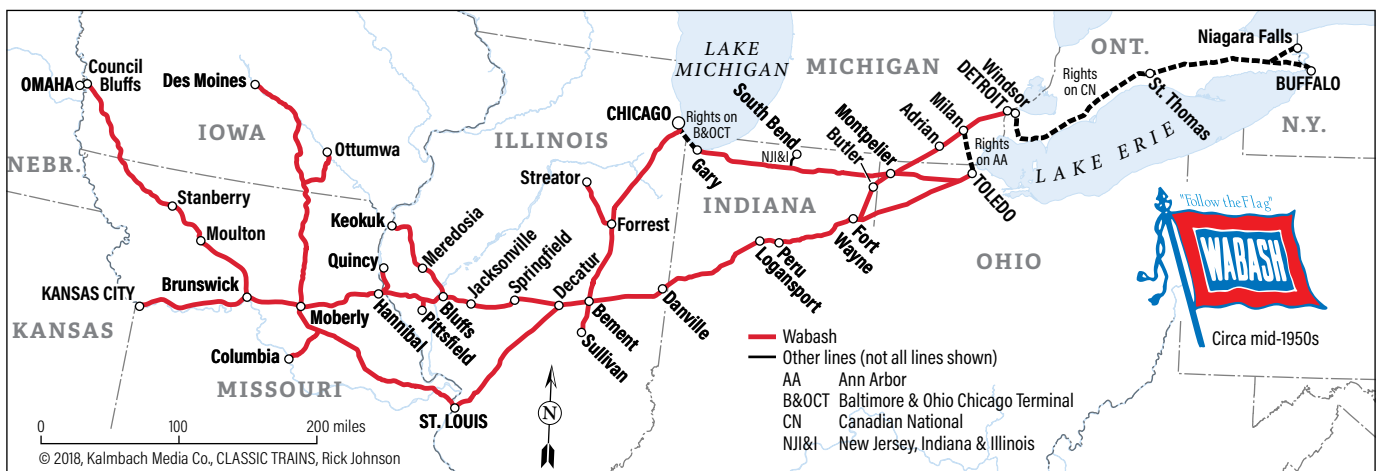
Great Western of Illinois (a Northern Cross successor); T&W spanned from Toledo to Quincy and Keokuk, Iowa, both on the Mississippi. In 1879 Jay Gould merged T&W and StLKC&N to form the Wabash, St. Louis & Pacific. To it he added the Chicago & Paducah, from Streator to Effingham, Ill., which crossed the WStL&P at Bement. Another Gould road built from Forrest, Ill., on the C&P, into Chicago in 1880, and he also built a line from Butler, Ind., to Detroit. A cutoff from Butler to New Haven, Ind., near Fort Wayne, opened in 1902, enabling Detroit–St. Louis trains to go via Fort Wayne, Huntington, and Wabash, Ind., versus the older, shorter-but-slower Logansport–Butler line, which was sold to the Pennsylvania.

Wabash's 4th District across northern Indiana, unnoticed by many as it had no modern-day passenger trains, was pushed to completion for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Built in a straight line from Montpelier to Gary, it passed through no big cities and couldn't compete with New York Central for passengers. Instead, Wa-

bash used latter-day parent Pennsy on a joint Detroit–Fort Wayne–Chicago route. Although sometimes called the "Punkin' Vine," the 4th District had heavy rail and became part of a competitive Buffalo–Chicago freight route. It was Wabash's first dieselized line (1950) and hosted Indiana's last mixed train (1962).

As Jay Gould added lines, Wabash in 1884 reached its zenith of 3,549 miles, from Detroit to Omaha and from Fonda in northwest Iowa to Cairo at the foot of Illinois. But he had overextended, and his rate wars forced Wabash into receivership that May. The leased lines — including Cairo & Vincennes and Des Moines North Western — were returned to their owners, and Wabash retrenched to the network familiar to us. Reorganized as several roads, they were reunited in 1889 in a consolidation guided by John Whitfield Bunn, an industrialist and railroad developer from Springfield, Ill.

Jay's son George Gould also dreamed of including Wabash in a transcontinental system, and in 1904 got it into Pitts-



burgh from Toledo over the Wheeling & Lake Erie and his Wabash Pittsburgh Terminal. Wabash in Pittsburgh didn't last long, as WPT entered receivership in 1911. A 1915 reorganization took the name Wabash Railway, and WPT became the Pittsburgh & West Virginia in 1917.

20th century growth

By the 1920s the auto industry was growing, and the increasing traffic saw Wabash taking advantage of its direct Detroit–Kansas City route. The 67-mile portion between Hannibal, Mo., and Moberly had been built by the Katy in the 1850s, but Wabash began joint operation in 1894, with costs proportionate to use. With Katy going to St. Louis on its own, Wabash's share of the Hannibal branch rose to 90 percent by 1923, so it leased the line.

Wabash in 1925 acquired control of the Ann Arbor Railroad, which cut north-west across Michigan's lower peninsula from Toledo to a Lake Michigan port, from where AA ran carferries to Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. Eventually Wabash owned virtually all "Annie" stock. Meantime PRR, through its new holding entity Pennsylvania Co., gained control of Wabash in 1928, largely to protect itself after Wabash and Delaware & Hudson bought control of the Lehigh Valley.

Fast-forward four decades. In 1963 Pennsylvania Co. owned 87 percent of Wabash's stock, and when PRR and New York Central were planning their merger, it was clear PRR would not be allowed to include Wabash, which found a niche in the Norfolk & Western-Nickel Plate merger. N&W had no interest in the Ann Arbor, so it was kept in the PRR family by being sold in 1963, to PRR-controlled

Detroit, Toledo & Ironton.

Wabash was leased to the expanded N&W on October 16, 1964, although it looked like a merger, with Wabash continuing to exist only "on paper." N&W acquired control from Pennsylvania Co. by 1970 and by 1981 had almost complete Wabash ownership. When N&W and Southern merged in 1982, N&W continued to exist on paper, and successor Norfolk Southern finally merged the Wabash name away in '91 by folding it into N&W.

Power and varnish

After depending on more than 150 2-8-2s for freights that succeeded typical smaller types, Wabash in 1930 received 50 handsome 4-8-2s and 4-8-4s (25 each) from Baldwin. Perhaps more remembered were seven 4-6-4 Hudsons, rebuilt at Decatur from unsuccessful three-cylinder Mikados in the 1940s, which had smoke deflectors adorned with the flag emblem. Until then, Wabash relied on Pacifics for varnish, four of the J-1 class from the 1910s being adorned, also in the '40s, in dark blue to match the road's passenger cars.

Wabash's first diesels were switchers, always solid black with minimal silver or white lettering. From 1939 through World War II, it received 19 units: 2 Alco "high-hoods" and 5 S1s; 7 EMD SW1s; 4 Baldwins; and a lone GE 45-tonner for St. Thomas, Ont. After the war, it added more Alcos and EMDs (including 4 Canadian SW8s), plus 7 Fairbanks-Morse and 12 Lima-Hamilton goats. Reflecting its presence in four big cities, Wabash totaled more than 100 bought-new switchers, the last being SW1200 379 in 1957.

In contrast to the dour switchers, road units wore blue, gray, and off-white (orig-

inally aluminum). Wabash's first road freight units, in 1949–50, were 9 A-B-A EMD F7 sets and 5 similar Alco-GE FA1-FB1 trios. It settled on cabs (no more Bs) and EMD, adding 117 F7As including 22 from GMD in London, Ont. Wabash was essentially dieselized by 1954, although three 2-6-0s worked its Bluffs, Ill.–Keokuk, Iowa, branch into early '55 and became known among enthusiasts. One, 573, survives in St. Louis' Museum of Transportation and there is a subsidiary's ex-Wabash 0-6-0 in Fort Wayne.

During 1950–56, Wabash bought 46 GP7s and GP9s, 17 with steam boilers and the last 3 with dual controls for its lone Chicago commuter train, and while it never owned an early Alco road-switcher, it bit on FM's Train Master, acquiring 8 in 1956. When GE announced its U25B, Wabash in 1962 took 15. Just before the merger, it turned ecumenical again, adding 8 GP35s and 7 Alco C424s. Wabash had Alco re-engine its Train Masters, and 8 C425s were at Schenectady on merger day, some already painted for Wabash; those were redone in black as N&W 1000–1007 before they left the plant. Likewise, more GP35s on order came out of La Grange as N&W 1302–1308, following 1300–1301, which had been ordered by P&WV. N&W added a "3" to the road number of Wabash units it acquired except for the 12 E8s (2 had been scrapped), 5 of which became N&W 3800s.

Cab-unit diesels replaced steam on Wabash's modest fleet of varnish after World War II. The first was E7 1000 in 1946 for the new St. Louis-based *City of Kansas City*; the E7 briefly bore the K.C. train name in its forward blue side panels, the only Wabash unit known to do so.



With flat-roof Wabic Tower and the passenger station at left, E8s 1000 and 1003 leave Decatur with the Chicago-bound *Blue Bird* in July 1962.

J. David Ingles



Wabash's first GE U25B rolls west with freight ADK-1 on its initial revenue run, May 26, 1962, as seen from JA Tower at Jacksonville, Ill. Wabash traded in its nine Alco FAs and FBs on the 15 GEs.

J. David Ingles

Next came E7As 1001 and 1001A in 1947 for Wabash's share of Union Pacific's *City of St. Louis*; the duo initially ran through to Denver but not beyond because they lacked dynamic brakes. Wabash would buy another E7, 1002; two pairs of Alco-GE PAs, 1020–1021A, initially for the St. Louis–Detroit overnight trains; and ultimately 14 E8As. Wabash 1003 was EMD's first E8, and 1009 was designated by the builder as its 10,000th locomotive.

When the E8A ordered for the 1951 St. Louis–Chicago Budd domeliner *Blue Bird* was to be No. 1000, E7 1000 became 1002A. In 1961 Wabash dropped the "A" suffix from all units, renumbering the F7s to 600–726 and the FAs/FBs to 800–814; "A"-suffixed E7s and Train Masters were renumbered above their siblings. Two F7As, E8 1009, the GE 45-tonner, and a third-hand Wabash NW2 built for Wheeling & Lake Erie reside in museums.

Today the old Wabash lines to Omaha and central Iowa are history, as are the Illinois branch lines, the middle of the Chicago–Decatur route (in favor of CN-IC trackage rights), and most of the old 4th District, which N&W quickly replaced in favor of the parallel ex-Nickel Plate Chicago main. That about 1,000 miles of the 1964 Wabash still are not only operated today by Norfolk Southern but are key NS routes (NS slowly bowed out of Canada), testifies to Wabash's place in history. 📌

J. DAVID INGLES is contributing editor of CLASSIC TRAINS. This is the 76th and final installment in our "Fallen Flags Remembered" series about departed small and mid-size Class I railroads and major interurbans.



In a view from a college-apartment window, open-platform parlor-obs *City of Wabash* is on the rear of the northbound *Banner Blue* as it nears Decatur's Millikin University in 1960.

R. R. Wallin, J. David Ingles collection

WABASH FACT FILE



(comparative figures are for 1929 and 1963)

Route-miles: 2,524, 2,423

Locomotives: 660; 307

Passenger cars: 412; 101

Freight cars: 26,633; 15,028

Headquarters city: St. Louis, Mo.

Special interest group: Wabash Railroad Historical Society, www.wabashrhs.org

Recommended reading: *Follow the Flag*, by H. Roger Grant (Northern Illinois University Press, 2004); *Wabash in Color, Volume 2*, by Michael C. Kelly (Morning Sun, 2007); *Railroading on the Wabash Fourth District*, by Victor A. Baird (Erstwhile Publications, 2014); *Wabash Railroad Color Pictorial*, by J. David Ingles (Four Ways West, 2017)

Source: *Historical Guide to North American Railroads*, Third Edition (Kalmbach, 2014)