



East Broad Top Railroad
P.O. Box 158
Rockhill Furnace, Pa. 17249
814-447-3285 | info@eastbroadtop.com

News Release

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Nonprofit Buys East Broad Top Railroad, Plans to Renovate and Reopen

Pennsylvania's storied East Broad Top Railroad has a new owner, a nonprofit foundation organized by a small group of prominent rail-industry figures and longtime EBT fans. The new organization will offer several EBT events in 2020 — the 60th anniversary of the start of tourist service on the railroad — and hopes to resume regular operation in 2021.

The organization, called the EBT Foundation Inc., will own approximately 27 miles of the line, from the south end of the concrete-arch bridge over the Aughwick River below Mount Union to the road crossing in Wood Township. The foundation will also own the narrow-gauge railroad's shops, rolling stock, and equipment. The East Broad Top is a National Historic Landmark and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"This is the best possible outcome for the railroad, which has been in my family for two generations," says Joseph Kovalchick, whose father, Nick Kovalchick, purchased the East Broad Top Railroad & Coal Company after its coal mines closed in 1956. "It is with a combination of pride and relief that we pass the torch in its second reincarnation." The Kovalchicks will continue to own coal-company property that had been jointly owned with the railroad.



"When my father bought the company, it was never his intention to scrap the railroad. At the time he was the only one to stand for the EBT, and his role in the history books is assured. My generation has struggled to balance the need to preserve this national treasure with running it

as a business, and I take pride in our role in its survival. But it is clear that a for-profit business model is not sustainable. Our faith in the new model is reflected in both the sale and the Kovalchick family's ongoing role on the board of the new non-profit."

Financial details of the purchase will remain confidential.



Brad Esposito, a 20-year veteran of the Buffalo & Pittsburgh Railroad, a Genesee & Wyoming, Inc. company, led the effort to purchase the EBT, along with longtime EBT enthusiasts David Brightbill, Lawrence Biemiller, and Stephen Lane.

Backers of the new organization include three rail-industry and rail-preservation heavyweights: Wick Moorman, former chairman and CEO of Norfolk Southern and former CEO of Amtrak; Henry Posner III, a former Conrail manager who is chairman of the Iowa Interstate Railroad and the Railroad Development Corporation, of Pittsburgh; and Bennett Levin, a retired mechanical and electrical engineer who owns the Juniata Terminal Company, which operates two Pennsylvania Railroad E8 diesel locomotives and three private cars.

Esposito will become the general manager of the railroad. He says the EBT Foundation has a three-part mission. It's committed, first, to preserving and operating the East Broad Top as a steam railroad; second, to educating visitors about the role of railroads in local and national history; and, third, to promoting local and regional tourism and economic growth.

Esposito says the new organization will immediately begin work on several fronts. The EBT has been closed since late 2011, and before operations can resume, the railroad will need to overhaul track and equipment, including locomotives and passenger cars. A fire-suppression system will be installed in the historic machine shops and roundhouse, and several structural stabilization projects will be undertaken in the railroad's Rockhill Furnace complex.

"The East Broad Top is a unique national treasure unmatched anywhere in the United States," says Esposito. "It has been impressively preserved for over 60 years by the Kovalchick family. We are excited to pick up the torch and ensure that the railroad is preserved for future generations."

"Our close partners will be the volunteers of the Friends of the East Broad Top," he says. "They have contributed countless hours of work and significant amounts of money to help preserve the historic fabric of the EBT since 1983."

“Also, we look forward to working with the Rockhill Trolley Museum,” says Esposito. The all-volunteer trolley museum dates to 1960 and operates over the former Shade Gap Branch of the EBT. “This will be an exciting opportunity to promote and further develop tourism in the area.”

“The East Broad Top is a remarkable survivor from the age of steam railroading,” says Moorman. “I’m delighted to have the chance to be a part of its revival, both for the preservation of such an important part of our industrial heritage, and for the economic benefits that it will provide to an area of Pennsylvania that is so closely linked to the railroad industry.”

Levin notes that the EBT runs through a bucolic landscape almost unchanged since the early 1900s. “The railroad’s historic fabric is an important component of the region’s industrial archaeology, and the educational possibilities here are almost limitless.”

The new organization’s advisors include Linn Moedinger, former president of the Strasburg Rail Road — one of the most successful tourist railroads in the U.S. — and Rod Case, a partner at the consulting firm Oliver Wyman who leads their railway practice. Among the organizations providing support is the Allegheny Ridge Corporation, which manages the region’s state-designated Heritage Area. The corporation “is thrilled to participate in the rebirth of this great asset,” says Astride McLanahan, a longtime board member of the organization. “The EBT is a jewel in the Allegheny Ridge Heritage Area and its revitalization will bring economic opportunity to this rural community.”



Built from 1872 to 1874 to haul coal to a new iron furnace in the center of the state, the 33-mile-long East Broad Top survived the collapse of the local iron industry at the turn of the 20th century because the top-quality coal it carried had found other markets, thanks in part to close cooperation with the Pennsylvania Railroad. When the last of the coal mines closed in 1956, the East Broad Top was purchased by the Kovalchick Salvage Company of Indiana, Pa. Despite being in the scrap business, the company left the railroad intact and in 1960 reopened a portion of the line for steam-powered tourist trains that proved widely popular.

With rails just three feet apart — 4' 8 ½" is the industry standard — the EBT is the only original narrow-gauge railroad surviving east of the Rocky Mountains, and it is well known as one of the world’s finest preserved railways. The railroad’s shops complex, which dates to the 1880s and was greatly expanded from 1905 to 1907, is among the most complete early-20th-century industrial facilities anywhere in the U.S.

Still in the railroad's roundhouse in Rockhill Furnace are six narrow-gauge steam locomotives built for the EBT by Philadelphia's Baldwin Locomotive Works between 1911 and 1920. They share the building with the unique M-1 gas-electric, constructed at the railroad in 1927 with plans and parts from Philadelphia's J.G. Brill Company, a leading streetcar manufacturer, and Westinghouse Electric. Other EBT equipment includes several passenger cars believed to date to the 1890s and numerous steel freight cars built in the EBT shops. The East Broad Top was the only American narrow gauge to convert to an all-steel freight car fleet.

Remarkably, track remains in place over nearly the entire 33-mile main line, which connected the coal mines in Robertsdale to the Pennsylvania Railroad's Great Broad Way in Mount Union.-The former PRR main line is now Norfolk Southern's core east-west route between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh.

"The East Broad Top Railroad is a unique historic asset that is a national treasure representing our area's rich railroad heritage," says Sen. Judy Ward, who represents southern Huntingdon County in the Pennsylvania Senate. "The sale of this railroad to this group of longtime EBT enthusiasts who are committed to preserving and operating it as a steam railroad is very exciting news for the region because it preserves this irreplaceable treasure for future generations while opening up significant tourism and economic development opportunities."



Says Posner: "August 13, 2020, will be the 60th anniversary of the East Broad Top's first reopening, which took place during the bicentennial of the founding of what became the 'twin boroughs' of Orbisonia and Rockhill Furnace. This was an era of revised expectations in the face of the decline of the railroad industry nationwide. At that time Nick Kovalchick could not have imagined the possibility of reopening the entire line, but fortunately our industry's renaissance has helped create an environment in which this important and audacious project can succeed. We are honored to follow in the footsteps of two generations of the family that has made this all possible."

"This will be a monumental undertaking," says Esposito, "and I encourage anyone interested in helping us to join the Friends of the East Broad Top and come work on buildings, track and equipment."

The railroad's new website can be found at eastbroadtop.com.

Editors: For interview opportunities, photos, and more information, contact Lawrence Biemiller (lbiemiller@eastbroadtop.com; cell 202 494 7670).

About the EBT Foundation

The EBT Foundation, Inc., was incorporated in January 2020 to acquire, preserve, and operate the East Broad Top Railroad. It aims to restore the railroad for tourist operation and to educate visitors and fans about the history of the railroad and the region. It also aims to expand opportunities for tourism and economic development in and around southern Huntingdon County. The foundation has filed an application for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status from the Internal Revenue Service.

Founding board members are:

Henry Posner III, chairman of the Iowa Interstate Railroad and the Railroad Development Corporation, of Pittsburgh. Initially, Mr. Posner will chair the foundation's board.

Wick Moorman, former chairman and CEO of Norfolk Southern and former CEO of Amtrak. Mr. Moorman will be the foundation's first president.

Bennett Levin, owner of the Juniata Terminal Company.

Brad Esposito, former assistant general manager of the Buffalo & Pittsburgh Railroad, a Genesee & Wyoming, Inc., company, and a longtime member of the Friends of the East Broad Top. Mr. Esposito will be the railroad's general manager

David Brightbill, office manager of the East Broad Top Railroad and a longtime volunteer at the Rockhill Trolley Museum. Mr. Brightbill will be the foundation's treasurer and will continue as the railroad's office manager.

Lawrence Biemiller, a former senior writer at *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and a member of the Friends of the East Broad Top board. Mr. Biemiller will be the foundation's secretary.

Questions we're pretty sure will be frequently asked:

— Are you going to go all the way to Robertsdale? To Mount Union?

Right now our focus is on reopening the railroad as far as Colgate Grove and on reconditioning locomotives and cars. In the future we look forward with enthusiasm to discussing possibilities for expanding our operations, which would be tremendously exciting. But before that we have a lot of work to do on the portion of the EBT that's operated since 1960.

— What about the Friends of the EBT and the trolley museum?

We are excited to have both the Friends and the Rockhill Trolley Museum as partners, and we look forward to working very closely with both to make Rockhill Furnace a great destination for railfans and casual visitors alike. As you know, the trolley museum got its start very soon after the East Broad Top reopened in 1960, and its volunteers have built a tremendous operation that was able to survive and grow during the railroad's recent shutdown. We look forward to planning and cross-promoting events that will benefit both the railroad and the trolley museum.

And the Friends have been invaluable. Much less of the East Broad Top would survive today for us to acquire without their tireless work to stabilize buildings and equipment. And their efforts to record the history of the line have been just as important. It's hard to imagine that any other 33-mile railroad has ever had the benefit of so much well-researched interest.

— Are you connected to the East Broad Top Railroad Preservation Association?

We are not associated with the East Broad Top Railroad Preservation Association.

— Are you going to preserve all of the surviving hoppers?

Our goal is to preserve as much of the East Broad Top as we can responsibly maintain and to present visitors with a full picture of the railroad as it appeared in common-carrier days. But at this point many of the remaining hoppers have been sitting out in the weather for more than 60 years, and they're in rough shape. It may not be possible to preserve them all.

— Will you own No. 3 in Mount Union?

Mr. Kovalchick sold No. 3 before we began negotiations with him, although we believe it is still in the Mount Union enginehouse.

— How soon can we ride to the picnic grove? What will the fare be?

As soon as we're certain we can safely carry passengers, we'll make an announcement. Our tentative plan is to use the M-1 at first, and possibly a coach or caboose, while we continue overhauls on other equipment. We have not yet discussed fares. But we emphasize that all our plans are tentative at this stage.

— Will you bring back the Polar Express?

We will certainly offer some kind of Christmas train, but probably not in 2020.

— What locomotive will you restore first?

We're currently evaluating several locomotives, with advice and help from people who have lots of experience with steam locomotives. While we understand and appreciate that many people have their own favorite EBT engines that they would like us to return to operation, we'll have to make our decisions based on the engines' condition and our operating needs. Our hope is that we will eventually be able to use all six locomotives, along with the M-1, the M-3, our speeder cars, and diesels M-4, M-6, and M-7, but that will take some time.

East Broad Top Railroad timeline

1856: The East Broad Top Railroad receives a charter from the Pennsylvania legislature.

1872: After numerous delays, construction of the railroad begins in Mount Union. Shortly beforehand, the directors decide to save money by building a three-foot-gauge line. This allows them to use sharper curves, lighter bridges, and smaller rail than would be the case with a standard-gauge line, but means the EBT cannot interchange cars with other railroads.

1873: Construction reaches Rockhill Furnace and passenger service begins.

1874: The rails reach what becomes the coal-mining company town of Robertsdale on Broad Top Mountain. The mountain's folded seams of semi-bituminous coal will eventually be riddled with tunnels stretching far from the initial mine entrance behind the Robertsdale station.

1876: Production begins in the new Rockhill iron furnace. Unlike earlier furnaces in the area, which produced around 800 tons a year, the new furnace is capable of 28,800 tons a year.

1900: The first fire-brick plant opens in Mount Union. Transporting coal and ganister rock to Mount Union's fire-brick plants becomes a key part of the EBT's business after the Rockhill iron furnace finds itself unable to compete with more modern operations and better iron ores in the upper Midwest.

1903: Robert Siebert becomes the EBT's president and begins a major modernization campaign that will eventually encompass track, bridges, locomotives, rolling stock, and repair facilities. The EBT as we know it today is largely the product of Siebert's policies and plans.

1906: The current EBT station is built in Rockhill Furnace. To avoid confusion with another destination called "Rockhill," the station is eventually named "Orbisonia," after the larger town on the other side of Blacklog Creek. The station receives its current platform canopy in 1909.

1911: The EBT receives No. 12, first of what would be six engines with the 2-8-2, or "Mikado," wheel arrangement. The newest, No. 18, is delivered in 1920.

1913: The EBT orders its first 10 steel hopper cars from a Cincinnati manufacturer. The railroad later builds well over 200 hopper cars from scratch in the Rockhill shops complex.

1924: The railroad builds a crane in Mount Union for transferring timber from its own cars to standard-gauge cars. The Timber Transfer becomes famous in the 1930s when the EBT starts using it to lift standard-gauge cars off their wheels and set them on narrow-gauge wheelsets to be pulled in EBT trains.

1925: A new coal-cleaning plant opens in Mount Union. The plant is served by a dual-gauge yard with three rails for every track, accommodating both narrow-gauge and standard-gauge cars. This allowed the EBT to load coal easily for customers elsewhere.

1927: The EBT builds the M-1 using plans and parts from the J.G. Brill Co., a trolley manufacturer, and Westinghouse Electric. The M-1's 250-h.p. gasoline engine powers a generator that feeds electricity to motors on all four axles. A 12-seat passenger compartment accommodates riders, while a freight compartment carries packages and the U.S. mail. It is the only such gas-electric unit ever built for an American narrow-gauge railroad.

1936: The EBT operates its first trip for railfans.

1942: The EBT builds its last new branch, a steep spur track up to a North American Refractories Company ganister quarry on Jack's Mountain.

1953: Regular passenger service ends after the Post Office begins moving mail by truck. Commuter runs for coal miners survive until the following year.

1955: The coal business having dwindled to almost nothing, the railroad files for abandonment in November.

1956: The last mainline runs, pulled by No. 17, operate on April 6. The last switching moves in Mount Union, by No. 3, follow on April 13. Shortly thereafter, the Kovalchick Salvage Company buys the assets of the railroad and the Rockhill Iron and Coal Company. But almost nothing is scrapped.

1960: As Orbisonia and Rockhill Furnace approach their bicentennial celebration, representatives of the planning committee ask Nick Kovalchick if he will put an EBT locomotive on display for the event. He offers to run trains instead. On August 13, 1960, the railroad reopens with trains pulled in one direction by No. 12, nicknamed "Millie" after Nick's daughter, and in the other by No. 15. The line is an immediate hit.

1961: The EBT builds a wye to turn trains, as well as picnic facilities, at the site of a former spur track serving a clay pit.

1963: The Rockhill Trolley Museum opens and begins laying standard-gauge track on the EBT's former Shade Gap Branch.

1971: Abandonment is formally rescinded.

1982: Friends of the EBT is organized, initially for model railroaders.

1986: FEBT leases the Robertsdale station and buys the neighboring Old Post Office.

2002: FEBT volunteers begin the first of many restoration projects in Rockhill, the section shed at the south end of the yard.

2011: At the end of a busy season featuring both Thomas the Tank Engine and the Polar Express, the EBT's final train of the year operates on December 23. The railroad then closes, although FEBT volunteers continue stabilization and restoration projects and occasional public tours are offered.

2020: The EBT Foundation purchases the railroad from the Kovalchicks.

For a more detailed history of the EBT, see Lee Rainey and Frank Kyper's excellent 1982 book "East Broad Top."