

RailCamp 2024

Wesley Maxfield, DCNRHS Scholarship Recipient
[Photos courtesy of Tony White]

From June 23rd to 29th of the year 2024, I attended the National Railroad Historical Society Railcamp. This is a write-up on my experience, where I will break down the activities, day by day. The experience of a lifetime, that I don't think you can get anywhere else in the world.

Day one was when all the campers arrived in Wilmington, Some got rides from their parents, some flew in from destinations across the country, and others arrived by train. I had taken the train to Wilmington from my hometown of Fredericksburg. I was excited for both the camp and the ride to camp. Once everyone had arrived, we socialized and got a general overlook for the rest of the days activities. After having dinner, we would have two presentations. The first was from the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania, giving us the presentation they normally give to guests about the history of railroads in Pennsylvania. The next presentation came from two Amtrak employees who had both attended Railcamp in prior years. Both of them explained their journey from Railcamp to employment at Amtrak, with each one having unique stories to tell. With those two presentations concluding, that would be the end of activities for the first night, The next day would bring experiences nobody was prepared for.

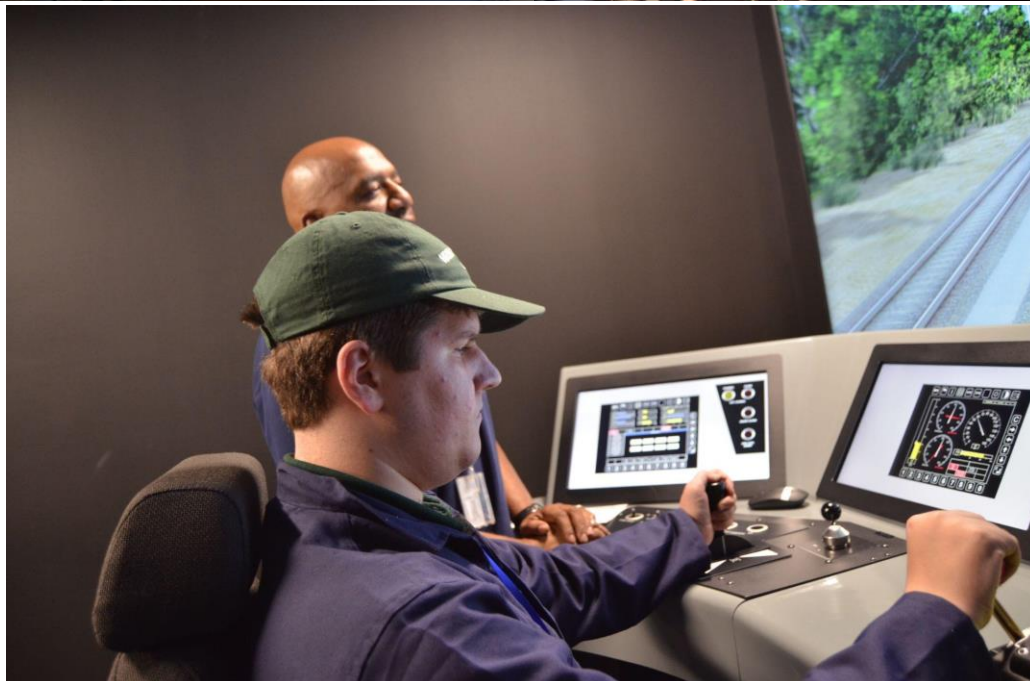


Day two would see campers getting up bright and early for the trip over to Wilmington from Newark. There we would meet some of the top executives from Amtrak. Campers were given time for railfanning at Wilmington Station while waiting for the train to New York. For many of us, it was our first time railfanning the northeast corridor. When our train arrived, Groups 1 and 2 would get in the American View, while groups 3 and 4 would get in Corridor Clipper. I was part

of group one, So I was in American View. As our train departed Wilmington, We passed by the Wilmington shops and saw all the old power sitting outside. Then we got towards the Philadelphia area, Where we saw future Acela Trains sitting in the yard. Once we arrived at Trenton New Jersey, the groups switched out, and It was now time for us to ride in Corridor Clipper, a special car that Amtrak uses to measure track geometry. We were shown how the car works and then enjoyed the ride. Stations flew by until we entered the tunnels and began the descent into New York Penn Station. After arriving at Penn Station, each of the groups had activities that they took turns doing. My group started off with a demonstration from Amtrak police, showing how they keep things safe. Then we moved onto a tour of the train hall, one of the two buildings that make up the Penn Station Complex. After that, We looked into some of the inner workings of the station, mainly how they prepare the meals for the Acela Express. And then we would end the tour by watching the dispatchers at work. Dispatching is the backbone of the railroad, and they mentioned that the dispatchers' control at least 1800 trains through New York Penn Station every day. We got back on the two cars which had now been put on a southbound train, with the groups going inverse of how they came to New York. We watched everything behind us as we rose out of the tunnels and back onto the northeast corridor. After having dinner when we got back to the University of Delaware, Some of the campers did some railfanning at the local station in Newark. The rush of seeing the Northeast Corridor in action was too hard to put into words. We would return to the main building, and that would end the activities.



Day three would see the crew getting up bright and early for a drive to Amtrak's Wilmington shops. The Wilmington shops are the main maintenance facilities for the entire Northeast Corridor, And it offered insight into what goes into maintaining Amtrak's busiest line. From the testing of new locomotives to the repair of coaches. From truing wheels to taking apart and reassembling the rolling stock, it's an interesting process. The next Half of the day was spent at the Wilmington training center. First, we took turns on the engineer simulators, The very same ones that Amtrak Engineers use. They have simulators for every train that Amtrak uses, from the P-42 to the Avelia Liberty. Then we got to check out the dispatch simulator, getting a true Taste of how it is to manage trains across the Northeast Corridor. Then came the part everyone was waiting for, we got to go in actual Amtrak equipment, specifically an ALC 42 Charger and a GP38-3. We got to see how they worked and even got to blow the horn. And then that evening we went out to Newark Delaware's train station again with a mission. We had been informed by Amtrak employees that one of the new Acela train sets was being moved down to Washington DC, and we went out to catch it. We were so excited getting to see the next generation of Amtrak as it came by, and we went back triumphantly.



(Here I am, having the best time of my life. The operator even said “I ought to hire you right here” . I wish I could’ve said yes, but unfortunately I had to go back home eventually.)

Day four would see us going all the way out to the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania. We would get an exclusive tour of the museum, getting to go in places that not many can. Specifically, we went in locomotives number 460, and GG1 number 4935. We also had some time to look around and explore on our own, which was perfect as the Reading Railroad Historical Society actually had a layout set up. We also got to get an exclusive look at the restoration shop, along with the museum archives. While we were at the museum, we got our projects, each group having to do a research project on a particular locomotive in the museum. My group got the *Reading Rocket*, which was a challenge because there wasn't a lot of information available anywhere regarding the rocket. One thing that was also cool that we would get to experience the next day was the Strasburg Railroad, which is quite literally across the street from the museum. For me, this was something I had wanted to do for a long time, as the Strasburg Railroad had always been on my list of places to visit. After we finished our day at the museum, we went out to a buffet for dinner and headed back to our dorms. I began trying to do research on my project, as did everyone else.



Day five was the day I had been waiting for the most, a behind the scenes look at the Strasburg Railroad. We headed out and split into our groups for the activities. Up first for our group was running the miniature steam engine known as the Cagney. Despite looking like a model train that you'd see at a zoo, the Cagney still operates the same way that a real steam engine does, which meant it was very hot. Up next was practicing shunting in the yard. Shunting is the process of moving cars around, also sometimes referred to as switching. While the Strasburg railroad is mostly known for its steam operations, the railroad does have a diesel that they use for pulling freight trains to help the local farming communities, and we got to practice with some of the cars that were in the yard. My part was coupling up freight cars, which was a little challenging for me when it came to specifically the air brake hoses. However as we finished up, we then headed over to the platform, as we would be having lunch aboard one of the days trains. I was so excited that we got to do this, as I had always wanted to ride the Strasburg railroad. While the ride wasn't the longest, because Strasburg is only a four mile line, it still offered plenty of scenery. After the ride, we would get to do some track work demonstration using manual tools instead of machines like our modern-day railroads would use. Everybody would help in some form or another, and it was genuinely a great experience. After the track work, we got back to the rest of our days activities. Our next part would be getting to take a tour of the steam shops, and seeing the unique part about their shops compared to other tourist lines. The shops at Strasburg contain a lot of Machinery that can't be found anywhere else, so a lot of their work is actually contracts from other railroads. Our guide even told us that they worked on the wheels for Union Pacific 4014 which is the largest operating steam locomotive in the world. After the main shop, we went to the sheds where the operable engines are stored, right as locomotive number 89 was pulling in after finishing up the last train of the day. After we did that, our final activity was getting a ride on the 8618 while it did the shunting exercise for another group.



Day six would be our final full day, with several activities planned. We started off at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania to give our presentations on our respectively assigned equipment. After that we would move on to lunch aboard the train again. After that, we went over to the famous Choo Choo Barn, a famous model train store in the area. Then, we watched as 89 pulled back into the station and then we got to take cab rides and even blow the whistle. For me, this was a lifelong dream come true. After the last of the cab rides, we left Strasburg and ate dinner at the Red Caboose Motel. Even though we knew that tomorrow would have us all going back home, not knowing if we'd ever see each other again, we didn't let it get us down, instead we just talked about whatever we could think of. We figured out as many possible ways that we could keep in touch with each other, and I began thinking of how I would write this report.



As we woke up on **day seven**, everyone said their final goodbyes and made sure we had contact information so that we would remember each other(In fact, I have met up with 2 of them since the writing of this report). All of us had different ways we were getting back. Some of us would be taking flights home, others would be taking the train, and some would be picked up by parents. As I sat in the car on the way home, I kept thinking about everything that had happened that week, many of these things were firsts for me and many others. And then I remembered who I had to thank for it. If it hadn't been for the DC NRHS, I don't think I would have been able to do Railcamp. So I wrote this report as a way of thanking them, for letting me be able to experience something that had been a dream for so long. After going to Railcamp I had finally decided that I was dead set on being an engineer, and it helped me to articulate the reason why. As of when I'm writing this, I'm currently taking a college course that will help me go on to achieve that dream. I can't overstate the gratitude I have for the DC NRHS, and I hope other candidates can get sponsored in the future

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