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# The Sentinel



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# Message from the President

## Fellow B&O Historians:

The Society has entered the winning bid and is in final negotiations to purchase a 9,600-square-foot building in Eldersburg, Maryland, to house the archives, conduct Society business and hold public functions. The building sits on 2.6 acres of land in a quiet neighborhood and has parking for more than 40 cars. We now control our destiny and have space that triples storage for archives material, a separate office, space for the company store, general storage space, and an auditorium for meetings. The purchase, moving, and modification to the building will cost us appropriately \$355,000. Currently there have been contributions to the building fund of more than \$150,000 and counting. With current cash reserves and the donations we have taken only a 15-year mortgage for \$100,000. The bank has approved our application and we are awaiting the appraisal and environmental reports.

We negotiated a purchase price of \$240,000 for the property, and at the time of this writing we are awaiting the final appraisal of the property's worth. The building is a masonry block structure built in the 1950s. Upgrades were done

over the years as the use and purpose changed over its lifetime. The low purchase price was due to the strict zoning on the community location requiring limited use by schools and non-profits. Some water damage to interior walls from a water line break in the basement reduced the value since the new owner will need to clean the mess. Since it was not occupied, the leak went for some time before discovery. The local government wanted to dispose of the property and transfer the burden of maintaining it. Estimates for the basement clean-up are in the \$10,000 to \$15,000 range.

So here is the general plan for the preparation, moving, and use within the next twelve months. First the basement water damage has to be corrected and unnecessary plumbing removed. We have begun getting quotes to move quickly in preparing the basement. A new climate control system may also be needed for the basement. The main hallway will be prepared as an exhibition hall to display B&O artifacts like china and other small items. Old carpet will need to be removed from the floor in some rooms, broken and missing tiles  
(Continued on page 39)

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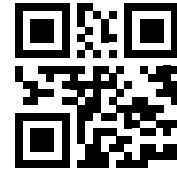
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## On the Covers

**Front Cover:** Dick Wallin captured this shot of B&O Alco FA-2 4028 ahead of two EMD F-7B units in Springfield, Illinois on the outbound Decatur/Indianapolis train on March 3, 1964. It is passing WR Tower just south of the GM&O's Ridgely Yard, used jointly by it and the B&O.

**Back Cover:** This photograph of B&O I-5 Caboose C-2122 was taken at Warther Museum at Dover, Ohio by John Teichmoeller during the 2015 Cleveland Convention. See page 37 in the Running Light section for additional details on this caboose.

# Bananas: Once the Railroads' Golden Cargo

by Frank Dewey

*Editor's note: This article originally appeared in the July 2013 issue of the RABO (Retired Administrators of the B&O Railroad, Its Affiliates and Successors) Club News & Notes. It is being reprinted in the Sentinel with the author's permission. A few minor changes and additions have been made to the original.*

**T**here are more bananas sold in the United States than any other fruit. You very well might have had a banana as part of your breakfast this morning. The average American will eat 28 pounds of bananas a year and 96 percent of American households will buy bananas at least once a month. Yet, none of those many bananas were grown in the United States. They all have to come into the country by ship and, at one time, were a prize cargo for the American railroads. Unfortunately, none of the bananas we eat in this country today move by rail. But the story of bananas and the railroads is an interesting tale and one that the Baltimore & Ohio had a long history of success and, as judged by some, failure.

Bananas require stable, warm temperatures and lots of water to grow. Therefore, they grow best in a wide band close to the equator. Our bananas come primarily from Central America.

They first came to the United States on sailing ships as deck cargo. The crews ate them as they ripened on the trip. Any bananas left when they arrived in port could be sold for very high prices, since there would not be many that had not ripened during the voyage. Thus, it was New Orleans and Mobile, Alabama, that first experienced bananas.

This all changed with the coming of the steamship. Because they were faster and did not depend as much on tides and winds, bananas started to flow into ports and areas along the coasts. While still dependent on the seasons for shipping into the northern United States ports



This 1903 photograph of a United Fruit ship being unloaded in New Orleans shows just how labor intensive the work was. The stalks of bananas (stems) were passed off the ship from one man to the next and then carried either into the refrigerator car or onto the dock for local shipment. There appear to be at least three banana ships tied up at the dock for unloading. New Orleans was one of the first banana ports in the United States to be mechanized. (Library of Congress, Shorpy photograph)

along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, bananas began to appear more and more in American homes and restaurants, but still only in coastal areas.

Henry Meiggs, an American who built railroads in much of South and Central America, and his nephew, Minor C. Keith, constructed a railroad in Costa Rica and acquired 800,000 acres of land along the railroad. The railroad was a financial failure for transporting passengers, but turned into a gold mine from the growing and transporting of bananas. After Meiggs' death, Keith merged his banana holdings with the rival Boston Fruit Company to form the United Fruit Company in 1899. By 1930, the company had absorbed numerous competing companies and was the largest employer

in Central America. At one time, it controlled more than 80% of the banana business in the United States.

United Fruit was truly a vertical company. It owned the plantations that grew the fruit; it owned the railroads that carried the bananas to port; it owned the ships that brought the fruit to the United States; and it owned the trading company that sold the fruit to grocery chains and distributors throughout the United States. The company was so powerful in some of the Central and South American countries where it operated that they were called "Banana Republics." While the company did much for the economies of the countries, it was not above getting involved in politics to get favorable government officials into office.



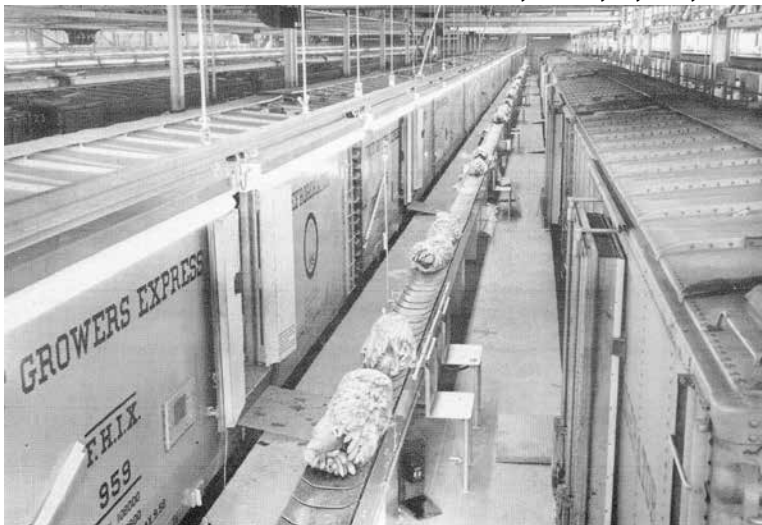


[left and below] These two photographs show the machinery used to unload ships. (Baltimore Museum of Industry, courtesy Ray Lichty)



[below and right] These two photographs show the conveyors used to move the bananas for loading into railcars.

(Baltimore Museum of Industry, courtesy Ray Lichty)



the B&O President, Maryland Governor Theodore McKeldin and Baltimore Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro watched as United Fruit Vice President J. Arthur Marquette threw a switch that started the conveyor system. There were 250 business and civic leaders of Baltimore and other eastern cities present for the ceremony. The railroad even highlighted the opening of the new facility with the addition of fried bananas and banana shortcake to its dining car menus.

Of note, at about this time, FGE built—most likely at its Alexandria facility—100 reefers for the B&O specifically to carry bananas. The all-steel, 42-foot-long cars were numbered 900-999, had a maximum capacity of 1,987 cubic feet, and a load limit of 109,000 pounds (except for three cars with a limit of 107,000 pounds). They were painted yellow with black lettering, and included a cluster of bananas inside a black circle on the right side of the car. The left side of each

car included the reporting mark F.H.I.X. and instructions that the cars were to be returned to the B&O agent at Locust Point, Maryland, for banana loading.

Although modern cars, they still carried ice for cooling during the summer and charcoal heaters during the winter. However, bananas could not be exposed to extremes of either cold or hot. That meant that Fruit Growers Express people were constantly conducting spot checks of the internal temperatures



B&O 6678, ex-C&O GP-9, on CI&M trackage north of North Grand Avenue and (CI&M) Shops Tower in Springfield. The train is returning to Ridgely Yard, July 17, 1970. The two tracks at the right connect with the Norfolk & Western (former Wabash).

(J. David Ingles photograph)



A "four-legged" resident enjoys the view as B&O GP-9 6563 leads the westbound Beardstown local across the GM&O (former C&A) "Jack Line" at Ashland, Illinois in April 1973. The depot was used jointly by the B&O and the C&A/GM&O. Originally, the depot included a two-story interlocking tower that controlled the crossing. Today, neither the depot nor any of the trackage remain, only a farmers co-op and grain silos. (Dick Wallin Collection)

Train 70, the westbound Beardstown local, is homeward bound with B&O GP-9 6534 on the front end. The train is on Madison Street in Springfield, Illinois, passing Union Station at the right. The date was April 4, 1970. The depot, built by the Illinois Central between 1897 and 1898, was used jointly by the IC and the B&O. Today the trackage is gone, and, in March 2007, the former depot reopened as the Illinois Visitor Center, located across from the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

(Dick Wallin Collection)





B&O 2-8-0 2817  
outbound on the  
Beardstown local  
passing Ridgely  
Tower in Springfield,  
Illinois, around  
1954. Ridgely Tower  
was the last true  
Armstrong tower in  
the country.  
*(Walt Peters photograph,  
Dick Wallin Collection)*



B&O GP-9  
6526 leads the  
southbound  
Flora local at  
19th & Carpenter  
Streets in  
Springfield,  
Illinois, in  
January 1964. It  
appears to be on  
C&IM trackage  
just north of  
Avenue Tower.  
*(Walter A. Peters  
photograph,  
J. David Ingles  
Collection)*

B&O 6673, ex-C&O  
GP-9, at Beardstown,  
Illinois, with one  
B&O hopper, across  
from the Burlington  
passenger station,  
March 13, 1970.  
*(J. David Ingles  
photograph)*

