



## Downeast Scenic: Forged by Collaboration

LOGAN TOURTILLOTTE/photos as noted

A SINGLE GLOWING ORANGE HEADLIGHT cuts through the morning fog and glints off shiny rails in Ellsworth, Maine, and an echoing horn wafts through the connected storefronts of Main Street. Briefly rolling alongside U.S. Route 1, the warbling prime mover of an Alco switcher greets the hundreds of tourists traveling along the Downeast Maine coast toward world-famous Acadia National Park. With shining red nose stripes trimmed with white, Downeast Scenic Railroad Alco S-4 1055 leads a four-car train of green and white passenger cars, each wearing the name of a location on this scenic route, catching the attention of tourists and enthusiasts alike while paying homage to Maine Central. Hidden beneath the quaint idyll of the ride, there is an intricacy to the birth and growth of this historic railroad, one that has forged through political and logistical challenges over the past 20 years with timely and opportune collaborations, making the success of the railroad possible.

### A Bit of History

The rails of Downeast Maine have had a turbulent and uncertain past. Once the route of Maine Central's *Bar Harbor Express*, this route carried major "rusticators" such as the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts, connecting major cities like New York and Philadelphia to the ferry at McNeil Point, and ultimately the stunning coastline island communities. It made Acadia National Park what it is today, connecting Mount Desert Island to western New England through the 19th and 20th centuries. However, in 1981, Guilford Rail System acquired the Maine Central system, and by 1985, the entirety of the 127-mile branch between Brewer and Calais was abandoned. The track was acquired by the state of Maine in 1987, slowly falling to the woes of time while the state searched for an operator. Through the 1990s, interest flitted as potential operators explored use of the line for freight and passenger, but nothing stuck due to the significant funds needed to get the washout-filled, eroding, rotted track back to operating status. As these discussions continually hit roadblocks, one began to gain traction — what if a



**ABOVE:** A regular Downeast Scenic Saturday excursion crosses the Union River in Ellsworth Falls, Maine, on July 23, 2023. This section of track was restored a few years ago. Alco S-4 1055 (former Portland Terminal) takes charge of the excursion through coastal Maine with four meticulously restored passenger cars. AERIAL PHOTO BY LOGAN TOURTILLOTTE

scenic passenger rail operator were to take on these rails with no upfront financial contributions, as a nonprofit, to preserve the historical significance and give a glimpse into the rich history of the line?

This idea eventually reached the ear of local businessman Tom Testa. Meeting and working with the state's line overseer, Charlie Freeman, and Rockland Branch railroader Ken Jackman, as well as other supporting parties such as the Maine Rail Group, Testa asked for the opportunity to launch this venture on the Calais Branch, to refurbish and return passenger trains to Ellsworth, with no upfront monetary support from the government. In 2006, the state signed a 25-year lease to the newly created Downeast Scenic Railroad, with the stipulation that the strictly nonprofit organization had to have trains running within five years. The organization would manage to do it in less than four years.

Immediately following the signing of the lease, the next hurdle that faced the group was garnering support from the local community. Public relations were understandably rocky as skeptics questioned the viability of the line, and the group held open houses through the local Chamber of Commerce to stay visible. Incredibly, interest in Downeast Maine railroading was immense, and locals volunteered to get this movement off the ground. With each volunteer who signed on, a new skill was brought to the fold, and over time, the railroad collected mechanics and machinists, carpenters and

electricians, heavy equipment operators and railroaders, teachers, pilots, and entrepreneurs. In the words of Testa, it was like "divine providence" that so many people, with so many different skillsets, became invested in the success of the railroad early on. Without this interest, Downeast Scenic would never have been able to succeed and begin operation in such a short window of time.

There were many moving parts in the first few years of operation. As the group forged on with trackwork, the acquisition of both maintenance-of-way equipment and passenger cars came to the forefront, much of which was accomplished through the gracious support of other area organizations. In 2008, Maine's Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad was in the midst of selling numerous pieces of equipment, which led Downeast Maine to purchasing its first locomotive, ex-Berlin Mills GE 70-Tonner 54. Also acquired from BML were two former Bangor & Aroostook bulkhead flatcars, one of which became open-air car 124 *Downeast Breeze*, as well as caboose 2608 and several pieces of on-track tamping and regulating equipment. At the same time, the railroad purchased its first coach, ex-Lackawanna steel heavyweight 123 *Union River*, which was personally electrified by Thomas Edison. However, the most notable collaborations were the donations that graced Downeast Scenic during the early years. Conway Scenic donated two coaches, Maine Central wooden coach 155 *McNeil Point* and





**ABOVE:** On the morning of the popular Pumpkin Train event in late October 2025, the passionate and devoted team of Downeast Scenic volunteers poses in front of 70-Tonner 54 before the commencement of a busy day on the rails. LOGAN TOURTILLOTTE PHOTO



**LEFT:** The track crew changes switch timbers in the Washington Junction yard in 2023. TOM TESTA PHOTO

Delaware & Hudson combine 102 *Green Lake*, both of which were meticulously restored in Ellsworth over the course of three years. Through this gracious support, Downeast Scenic had to cover only the cost of trucking, which had become a major expense due to the lack of an outside rail connection. Additionally, Davenport engine 53, an ex-Great Lakes ore switcher, as well as several other on-track MOW vehicles, were donated by private supporters who understood and believed in the vision of returning passenger rail to Ellsworth. Most recently, CSX donated Maine Central Russell plow 82, which is currently in the process of being cosmetically restored.

#### Ready to Roll

In 2010, 70-Tonner 54 pulled the first passenger train through Ellsworth in more than 60 years, made up of two passenger cars and the caboose, on tracks that would likely have become a trail if not for the far-reaching vision of the Downeast Maine community. As Downeast Scenic grew, it turned yet again to Conway Scenic, which had placed its 1000-hp ex-Portland Terminal Alco S-4 1055 up for sale, becoming a perfect purchase in 2010 for the growing railroad. In 2018, the Union River bridge

in Ellsworth Falls was rehabilitated and incorporated into the excursion, adding to the slow and steady movement westward toward Green Lake. As the state saw the success of the railroad grow over the years, it decided to invest in a "rail with trail" campaign on the corridor through Ellsworth, rather than removing the tracks, which has become a clear example of the possibility for coexistence between scenic rail operators and increasingly popular "rail to trail" movements across the state.

Through the success, Downeast Scenic was able to provide a home for another Maine nonprofit, the New England Steam Corporation. Founded in 2013, the mission of this organization is to restore Maine Central 4-6-2 470 to operating condition. The Pacific operated through the mid-20th century between Boston and Bangor on passenger trains such as the *Bar Harbor Express* and was the last operating steam locomotive on Maine Central when it was retired in 1954. Being displayed out in the elements adjacent to Pan Am Railways' Waterville Yard for the past 60 years, weather and time had taken a toll on the engine, and it was in need of major attention. Unable to perform the repairs, the city of Waterville put it up for bid; NESCo won, with the promise that it would be restored in Maine on its home rails. In 2016, the engine was trucked from its display location at Waterville to Downeast Scenic's

Washington Junction Yard, where it has undergone slow and steady restoration efforts by a team of volunteers, many of whom are also members of Downeast Scenic. Through donations and collaborations, the organization has been able to construct a shop complex and acquire various cranes and machining tools, forging ahead on the restoration. To date, the organization has had a new tender cistern and coal bunker fabricated in-state. The tender brake cylinder, tender trucks, and locomotive generator have been rebuilt and the lead truck is nearly complete. A boiler survey is in progress, and cab steelwork is nearly complete, as is the trailing truck. Still left on the list are the running gear, drivers, and spring assemblies, as well as the main cylinders, pistons and valves, crown brasses, locomotive drawbar, boiler studs and fitted bolts, and air compressor and lubricator components. Driving this group of experienced machinists is the reality that one day, the 470 will run under her own power through Ellsworth and beyond.

#### The Future

The future of Downeast Scenic means looking to the west. Over the past 15 years of operation, railroad volunteers as well as the state's own Department of Transportation have helped keep the nearly 20 miles of tracks between Ellsworth's Union River bridge and the terminus at Brewer passable, maintaining regular weed spraying, filling washouts, changing ties, and repairing heat kinks. Beginning in summer 2025, a section of track between Green Lake and West Ellsworth was leased to Revolution Rail, a nationwide railbike tour company. Through this collaboration, locals and visitors are able to visit sections of the railroad that are not yet ready for trains, exposing them to the scenery and history that would otherwise be hidden from view.

The history of the Downeast Scenic is not the story of one single person or idea, but a culmination of like-minded individuals who saw the vision and understood the history, a group that continued to grow through donations of equipment, volunteer hours, and the willingness of a government to give them all a chance. With new collaborations come new opportunities, and Downeast Scenic continues to forge ahead, raising the Calais Branch from the ashes and preserving a piece of Downeast Maine history that otherwise would be lost to time. ■

For more information about Downeast Scenic Railroad, visit their website [downeastscenicrail.org](http://downeastscenicrail.org).

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