Building the NEW New Boston and Donnels Creek (So Far)


I love running trains outside. I love gardening. But when we moved in late 2016, I knew something would have to change if I wanted to keep running trains outside for very much longer.

Maintaining our old 70’x16’ retaining-wall-and-dirt railroad took too much work to keep up. Yes, it was lovely to look at, especially after I had just spent 30 hours or so weeding and clearing the right-of-way, much of it on my hands and knees.

But at least one reason for having a garden railroad is to run trains, and I spent far, far more time doing maintenance every summer than I ever did running trains. Not to mention that my back and knees aren’t what they used to be.

I also got tired of telling visitors who dropped by unexpectedly to come back in a week if they wanted to see the trains running.

So, for the new place, I planned an entirely raised railroad, with an attached shed so I could have trains ready to go at a moment’s notice.

I revised my plans many times. The current version of the plan is shown to the right in a side view.

There would be three platforms, each holding one of three concentric loops of track. The whole thing would be attached to a train shed just large enough to protect the power supplies and keep short trains on the tracks ready run.

All three right-of-ways would cross over little ponds and in front of waterfalls for maximum visual interest.

In 2017, I sunk a bunch of 5’ and 8’ posts and built the top two platforms. I also started adding the water feature, though I didn’t get the waterfall running until 2018

Early snows and bitterly cold weather kept me from working on the railroad past early November, though I did get trains on the tracks for Christmas.
By July of 2018, I had “dirtscaped” the top two layers and gotten the upper levels of the waterfall working.

I worked on the waterfall before I finished the shed in part because I got tired of telling visitors “this is where the waterfall will be.”

The photo to the right shows two of the Maccourt connecting pools I used. In this photo, they are emptying (temporarily) into a vinyl basin and utility tank.

The rest of the summer and most of the fall, I spent building the shed. The basic construction was like that of a pole barn – vertical posts sunk into the ground with plates and rafters on the top, and the siding eventually fastened to horizontal boards on the sides.

The photo below shows the frame from the end that the door would go on. I used ground-rated lumber for all of the framing and pressure-treated decking boards for the fascia and other trim.

I wanted it to resemble a Victorian country station.

To create a board-and-batten siding look, I purchased 5/8”x5.5”x8’ pressure-treated fencing boards from Lowes. I like the rough-cut look. I also know from experience that they should last as long or longer than most T1-11 and LP Smartside installations. The battens (the skinny boards) are just fencing boards sliced in half.

To get Victorian-looking windows, I purchased one arched window-frame from Hobby Lobby and two at a flea-market.

The door is a kitchen door we took off the old house when the windows got too fogged up to see through. Yes, I plan to paint it eventually.

To be honest, if I had known it would come out this nice, I would have made it bigger.

One reason I rushed to finish the shed by November, 2018 was that I wanted to be able to have a Christmas-themed open railroad like we used to have at the other house.

Once the shed was in the condition shown above right, I tried out Christmas trains, hooked up Christmas music and lights, and prepped the popcorn popper.
The first open railroad on the NEW New Boston and Donnels Creek was a resounding success, if the amount of visitors, delighted children, visitor questions, and popcorn consumed were any indication.

After two seasons of construction, I had also proven to myself that garden trains are a lot more fun when you can run them any time the weather permits just by walking down to the railroad and cranking up the controls.

The building season of 2019 almost got away from me when a “day job” contract kept me away from home seventy hours a week for all of the spring and most of the summer. When the contract ran out, I got very busy.

First, I finished the waterfall, installing a new, lower platform to hold one more Maccourt connecting pool, then digging a hole for a 2’-deep Maccourt “Grand Cayman” pond.

In the photo to the right, you can see that the sedums I planted in 2017 are filling out enough to give the top two platforms a more natural look. Eventually, the rock- and-dirt piles on the other levels should green up, too.

I then started on the third, lowest platform (the one shown in gray in the drawing on the first page). I knew I wouldn’t get the whole thing completed, but I started it with the hope of getting at least part of it framed out and decked by our next Christmas-themed open railroad.

I did manage to get a 6’x11” section ready (you can see it on the next page).
The new addition was big enough to hold two small, temporary loops of track. For 2019’s Christmas-themed open railroad, I placed a small track-powered unit on the inner loop. On the outer loop, I placed a battery-powered Hogwarts Express train that visiting children could run.

For fun, I added a castle and a “Platform 9 ¾” sign. They’re are not permanent fixtures, but they may come out again next fall.

When the rest of the lower platform is completed, it will be big enough to run longer equipment and longer trains, as well as having room for towns, industries, and operations.

The photo below shows the existing platforms as of December, 2019.

Once the infrastructure is complete, we will have time to work more on the “garden” aspect, adding more shrubs, groundcovers, and other scenic features. But being able to run trains whenever the weather permits, without performing hours or days of maintenance first will always be our priority.

You can follow our progress on the New Boston and Donnels Creek blog part of the Family Garden Trains web page. The actual construction of the railroad begins at the following URL: https://familygardentrains.com/newbost/17_07_digging/breaking_ground.htm

Feel free to use the contact link on any page of the FamilyGardenTrains.com web site to ask questions or share your experiences. In the meantime, enjoy your trains, and especially enjoy any time you can spend with your family in the coming days!

Paul Race, Family Garden Trains