

Railroad Rehabilitation

Berkeley Springs' Historic Train Depot Is Brought Back to Life

Written by Tricia Lynn Strader

The historic Baltimore and Ohio Railroad depot in Berkeley Springs has undergone a years-long rehab and is ready for its next phase of life. A group of dedicated volunteers and its mayor began planning how it could be saved from ruin about 16 years ago.

"I have always wanted the unrealized potential of the Depot and surrounding property to become an asset to the community, and we are on our way," says former Mayor and current Town Recorder Susan J. Webster.

Plans are underway for it to become a shining, iconic part of the community's character once again.

The B&O built the Berkeley Springs Train Depot from 1914-15 in the Mission style, with a low-pitched terra cotta tile roof and wide overhanging eaves. The current building replaced a wood frame structure that had served the town since the railroad's arrival in 1888. The town was established as Bath in 1776, plotted on land belonging to Thomas Lord Fairfax by a 16-year-old surveyor George Washington in 1748; the municipal name remains Bath.

Local sand, lumber, vegetable, and fruit merchants opened new establishments or expanded old ones after the



After 16 years of hope and planning, the now-restored 1914 railroad depot in Berkeley Springs is a trip to the past.

railroad reached the area. At its height of productivity in the 1920s and '30s, the railroad was used for shipping produce and pulpwood. Passenger traffic ended in 1935.

Webster had pursued ways to restore the building since 1994. The Town of Bath owns the building and the adjoining 2.1 acres acquired from CSX. Up until the 1990s, the town's administrative office, municipal court, and police department were in the Depot. Afterward, it was used as a music shop and art gallery in the early 2000s, and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2001. The Preservation Alliance of West Virginia

placed the depot on the 2010 endangered properties list.

After it became vacant again, Webster knew it was time to act.

"I told Council that it was God's way of telling us it was time to get serious about the rehab of the depot," she says. "We started meeting with the public to get their thoughts and from those meetings the Berkeley Depot Rehabilitation Committee was formed."

The core group included architect Victor Greco, U.S. Park Service historic preservationist Jim Bailey, architect Michael Gotwald, John McCracken, Webster, Ryan Rebant, Foxglove Garden Club, Morgan

PHOTOS BY TRICIA LYNN STRADER, BLUEPRINT PROVIDED BY BERKELEY DEPOT REHABILITATION COMMITTEE.

HISTORY

County Genealogical and Historical Society, and others.

“Susan was the driving force getting a group together,” says Jim Bailey. “I read a news article about a meeting and went to the first one, which had several people who were interested in the town or its history. From the early stages, everybody wanted to fix it up. There was talk of it being a museum or visitor center in the future, or renting it out.”

With Bailey’s knowledge of Department of the Interior guidelines, they looked at possibilities like strict historic preservation, restoration, or rehabilitation. With preservation, it would have had to remain exactly as it was then. With restoration, a time period of greatest significance could be picked and restoration would take place back to that time. Rehabilitation offered the most flexibility, meaning it could be updated somewhat for adaptive future use.

“In ‘preservation’ you can’t do a whole lot to it,” says Bailey. “In rehabilitation, you basically preserve what you have but can upgrade certain things like plumbing or bathrooms [to ADA standards].”

Rehab gave them a purpose of taking it back to its original time period with flexibility for future use, whatever that would be. There are still limits to the changes allowed.

Luckily, the group found a guideline. Bailey happened to be at a train show and spoke to someone with the B&O’s historical society. The two men found the original blueprints. It was decided to rehabilitate the Depot to the era when it was built, since it was so important to the community, and people could still remember the past generation of World War I soldiers leaving town on the train and returning home.

Project Coordinator John McCracken was a civil engineer with 34 years experience in managing multi-disciplinary projects for both local and federal governments. He has since passed away, but the members of the Depot Committee credit him with the knowledge and time he devoted to restoring the building.



Susan Webster, Town of Bath Recorder and former Mayor, is also a founding member of Berkeley Depot Rehabilitation Committee.

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KEVIN GOODE

LANTZ CONSTRUCTION

The Town of Bath received the first grant to stabilize the structure. In 2009 and 2010, the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office and Governor’s Office of Economic Development provided a grant for initial work to repair the roof. KLA Roofing and Construction, LLC, of Everett, Pa., won the bid to secure the roof and work on the exterior shell. The WV Eastern Panhandle Regional Planning and Development Council awarded the town a \$32,000 West Virginia Energy Efficiency & Conservation Grant to pay some of the cost of installation and replacement of the HVAC system and insulation. Extensive carpentry repair of the roof sheathing was performed that year. In 2012, the town was awarded a

Transportation Enhancement Grant to rehabilitate the depot. The matching funds are provided by donation of land from CSX to the Town of Bath, which McCracken said was championed by then-Gov. Joseph Manchin. Donations were also accepted.

In the summer of 2010, two-thirds of the historic roof tiles were removed and stored for incorporating into a roof rehabilitation. Outside overhang work was done by National Park Service Historic Preservation Training Center.

“We identified the company that manufactured the roofing tiles, and it was still in business,” Bailey says. “We found out they had some pieces in stock and could still make them.”

As much of the original wall tiles, flooring, wood, and windows were saved as possible. In fact, most is original. Lantz Construction had the job of working with the Committee and The Mills Group architects to make the Depot shine again.

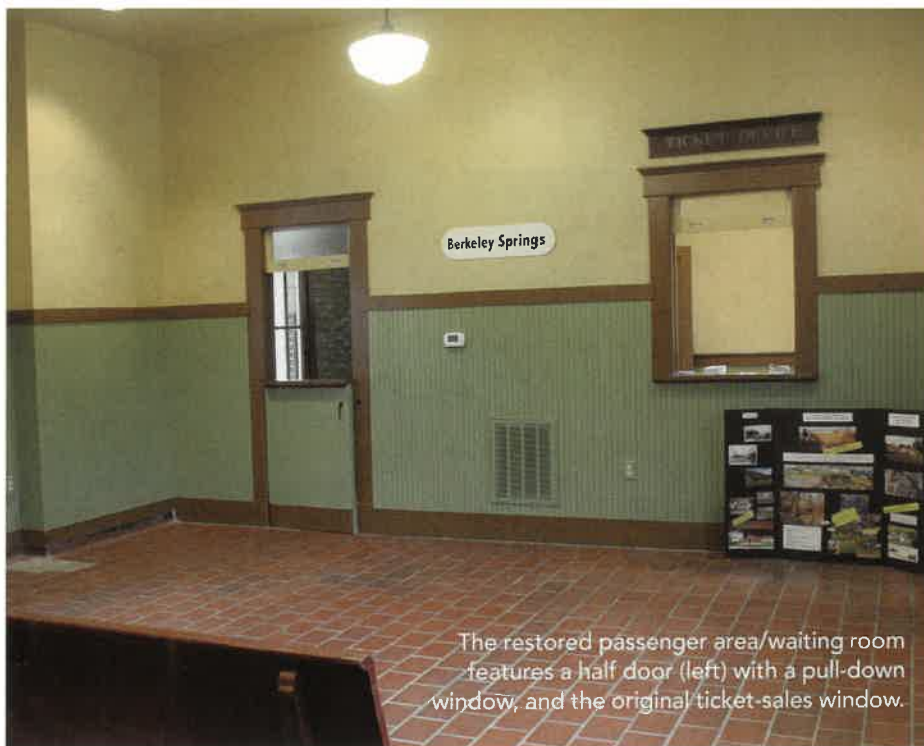
There was water damage from leaks, formerly water in the basement, wood molding needing repair, windows needing repair, walls needing new paneling, and more.

Kevin Goode was the point man for Lantz and spent many hours rolling up his sleeves inside. “It was very, very challenging, but it made the days go quickly,” says Goode.

“I spent a year and a half there myself. I took pride in it. I like working on modern buildings, but to be honest, I miss it and think about it a lot.”

Using the 1914 blueprints, Goode did a lot of the drywall repair, fixing or installing new matching wood trim, preserving ceramic wall tiles to reinstall in the bathrooms after other upgrades were made, and fixing the old doors and window trim or panes. He believes only one window had to be replaced in the whole structure. Sometimes the blueprints did not reveal what was actually staring back them. So, they improvised.

The baggage area had been an office with an attic and framing was all



The restored passenger area/waiting room features a half door (left) with a pull-down window, and the original ticket-sales window.

removed. Goode says they wanted to keep the tongue-and-groove ceiling.

According to the blueprints, the women's waiting area just outside the actual restroom was supposed to have tongue-and-groove flooring, but it was plywood over concrete, badly in need of repair. Goode found Hicksville Planing Mill in Clear Spring, an Amish company, that helped create the wood floor and trim.

An old partition in the men's room was reused in the women's restroom as a utility closet. Some of the tile from the women's restroom was reused in the men's room.

"It had the old 1914 subway tile in the men's bathroom we had to take off two walls and try to match it," Goode says. "Normally it is hard to get off of the wall. We must have removed and cleaned 500 pieces, regrouted, and replaced them," Goode says.

The ticket and baggage windows proved to be a tricky job. "The ticket window area was the 'centerpiece' of the whole project," Goode says. "There were countless meetings throughout the project with the historical team, Susan Webster, and myself on how to go about reviving that area."

The old windows have window weights and heavy glass. Some places were missing weights. He managed



The steam locomotive bell donated to the Depot by Larry Bowers awaits its eventual installation.

to make some weights to get windows functioning again. The public waiting room was cut off from the ticket office and baggage area/loading dock except for the ticket and baggage windows. To get into the office, one had to enter from outside. For modern purposes, a half door was built inside where the baggage window had been, keeping the pull down window, as had been done at the ticket window.

He sanded and painted, got windows functioning again, cleaned the tile floor in the waiting room, and so much more. Goode says Western Heating and Plumbing and Advanced Electric helped with the plumbing and HVAC.

Even modern things like the HVAC have been hidden by built-ins. Ryan Rebant was instrumental in helping

with the HVAC system.

When the public walks in, it is hard not to feel transported back in time. Webster found the old Berkeley Springs and ticket window signs in storage and returned them to their former spots. Even the font used on the women's and men's room doors is historic. A train bell was donated by Larry Bowers for later installation. He said it came into his family from the family of a steam locomotive engineer in Pennsylvania. The engineer retired, and the locomotive was retired; the bell was given to the engineer.

"The overall result was great," says Bailey. "Susan found lights that look to fit the period. The construction company did a phenomenal job on matching everything."

The grand re-opening was Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2023. Donations are still accepted by Town of Bath for the Depot's upkeep.

The future of the Depot will probably include a new tenant, Travel Berkeley Springs visitor center, but it will still keep the charm of 110 years ago when it was built. The waiting room area may be used for rotating historical exhibits.

"We are currently working on getting a lease agreement implemented," says Travel Berkeley Springs President Stephanie Rebant. "The Town of Bath and Travel Berkeley Springs Board feel it is a terrific opportunity and location to showcase and promote the excellent hospitality, services and attractions our local tourism industry has to offer."

The Foxglove Garden Club maintains a small flower garden at the Depot, and there is work being done at the back of the lot with a rain garden and tree plantings by North Berkeley Rail Trail folks. After many years similar to the task the Depot Committee had, the North Berkeley Rail Trail is picking up steam again and could in the future be even more connected to the Depot and its lot. Rail Trail hopefuls envision a pavilion or similar building for events, and a separate public restroom building. Stay tuned.