

Mike Confalone's **ALLAGASH** STORY



**Volume 1:
Conceiving,
designing
and building
the layout**

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**Model Railroad
Hobbyist magazine™**

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**VOLUME 1: Conceiving, designing, and
building the layout**

By Mike Confalone

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1: Mike Confalone's railfanning roots lead him to conceive of a freelanced railroad that felt like a real railroad. When looking at photos like this one of Mike's HO Allagash Railway, it's hard to imagine the Allagash *isn't* a real full-sized railroad! In this series, Mike shows you in-depth how he did it.

Chapter 1: CONCEPT

The Allagash Railway is a proto-freelanced HO scale model railroad based in Maine in the early spring of 1980. The original concept for the railroad began to materialize in August 2009.

Nearly five years later, the railroad is fully functional, and hosts regular operating sessions. Scenery is approximately 50% complete, and continues to progress at a steady pace.

The following is the story of my life-long passion. This is the story of the Allagash.

History

I've been a model railroader for as long as I can remember. My initial interest in trains probably began at age four or five. My grandmother used to bring me down to the end of her driveway to watch the trains of the Long Island Rail Road in the distance. The seed was firmly planted.

My first experience with model trains was at my friend's house across the street. He had an HO train set that we used to play with. I remember green Pennsy F7s and the smoking Chattanooga Choo-Choo racing around a loop of track. I received my own train set for Christmas in 1978. I was only 11. The rest, as they say, is history.

As my interest in model trains grew, my mom checked out issues of *Model Railroader* magazine from the local library. I remember at a very young age getting one of my



first issues of MR which featured Bruce Chubb's Sunset Valley. I was fascinated by this fantasy railroad, and how it seemed so real. Little did I know it at the time, but I was officially bitten by the freelance bug!

My earliest attempts at building model railroads usually centered on a fictitious railroad that occupied real space on a map, but was completely made up. Names like Genesee & Susquehanna, Bangor & Livermore Falls and St. Johnsbury & Wells River helped fuel my creative passion.

I painted locomotives and freight cars in my own paint scheme, came up with far-fetched operating scenarios and had a lot of fun in the process. None of these early attempts made much sense from a practical standpoint, and only one, the St. Johnsbury & Wells River was ever built to any extent.

But looking back, they each represent a small imprint on the map of my life, and are in essence fallen flags that I still, to this day regard as sacred.

As a young teen in the early 1980s I joined the local model railroad club in my home town of Smithtown, New York, on Long Island. It was the first time I witnessed a basement-sized layout in action, and boy what an impression it made! Interestingly, the club had their own proto-freelanced railroad, the Smithtown, Setauket & Midland.

Beginning with my college years in the mid-1980s, I started to get interested in some of the proto-freelanced model railroads that graced the pages of the various model railroading magazines. Three in particular made a big im-

pression on me at the time, and today I consider them to be the top three proto-freelanced railroads ever created.

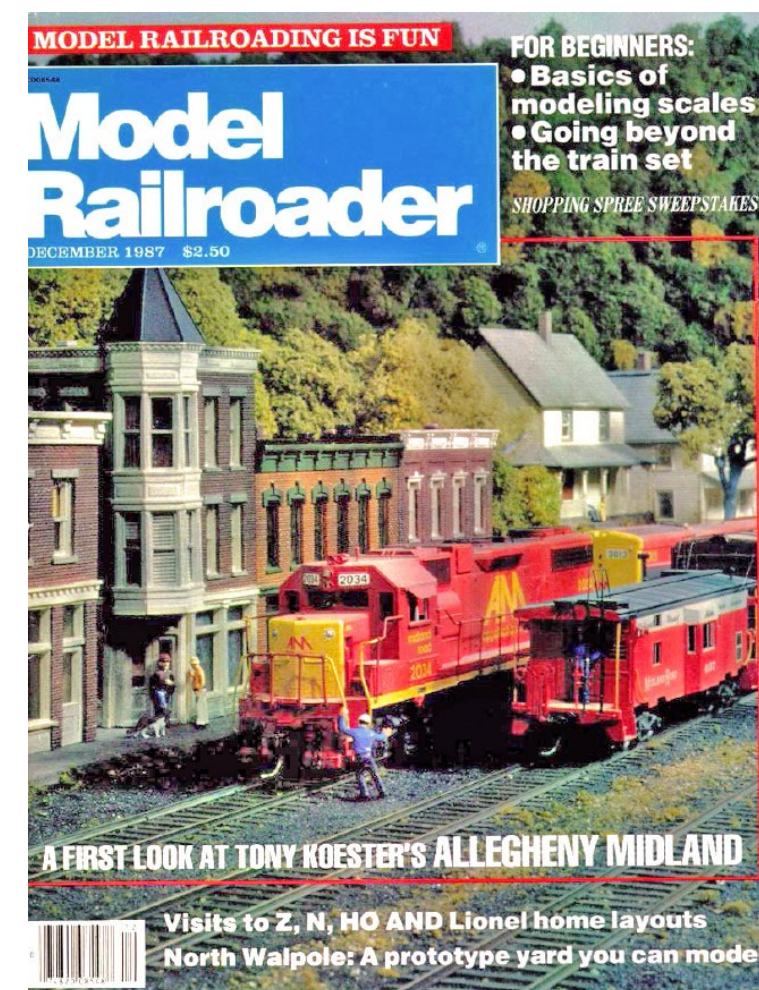
Inspiration - The big three

Despite the fact that I was primarily interested in New England railroads, Tony Koester's Appalachia-based **Allegheny Midland** was the first proto-freelanced model railroad that really caught my eye.

I recall it was the December 1987 edition of *Model Railroader* that featured Tony's railroad on the cover. The cover shot featured a pair of AM's brightly-attired red and yellow diesels in a yard set against an Appalachian town scene. It struck a chord.

After seeing this issue, I started to pay closer attention to this colorful proto-freelanced railroad. Many more articles over the years cemented my interest in the AM, and to this day it remains a favorite of mine and countless other model railroaders.

Next was Jack Ozanich's **Atlantic Great Eastern**. The AGE was a steam-to-diesel, transition-era railroad set in



New England, Maine specifically. It was also hyper-focused on prototypical operations. But what really set Jack's layout apart from the rest of the bunch was the season he modeled.

Jack stepped outside the model railroading scenery box and modeled the dead season - early spring. His scenery featured brown-grass landscapes, bare trees and gray skies, a challenge to model effectively vs. the standard puffball green lichen trees it seemed everybody else was doing at the time.



The AGE's red diesels set against this neutral backdrop made for a striking study in contrast. It made an immediate impression on me, one that would come back to serve me when the Allagash was born.

Although I learned about it much later, the railroad that has most impressed me over the years is Allen McClelland's **Virginian & Ohio**. It wasn't until I purchased a copy of Carstens Publications' landmark book *The V&O Story* that I truly understood and appreciated the impact and importance of the V&O.

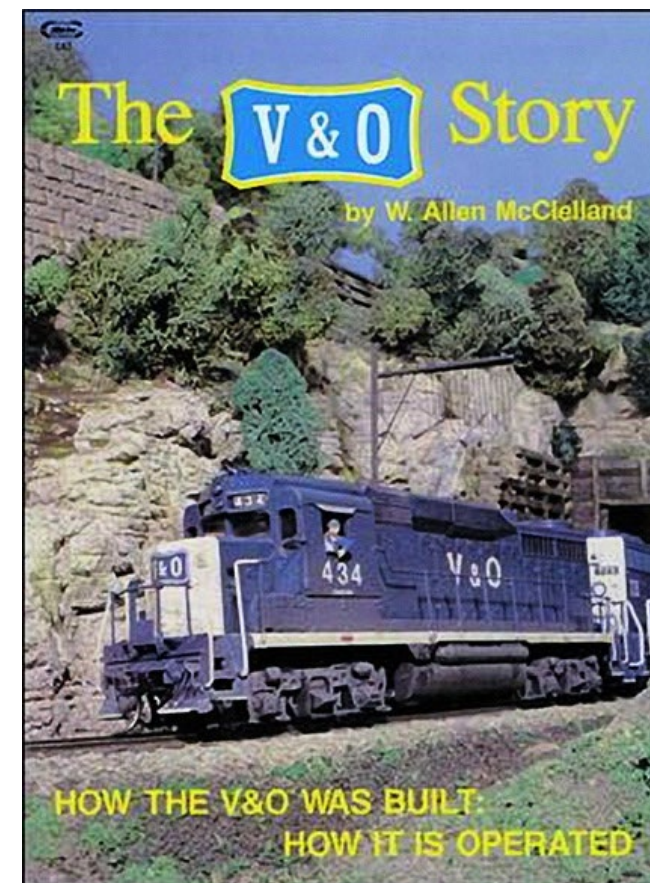
To me, McClelland's V&O stands alone at the top of the list of great model railroads for one reason. First and fore-

most, and before anyone else thought to do it, Allen treated the V&O as if it were a real railroad, not a model railroad. I felt this gave the V&O instant credibility.

All of the design and planning considerations that went into the building of the V&O were rooted in the question "how would a real railroad do it?" This design and planning platform drove Allen's decision-making process on a myriad of considerations - everything from customers to connecting railroads to locomotive color schemes to freight car fleets and operating plans.

In short, Allen's V&O railroad looked real, felt real and operated just like the real thing. His "beyond the basement" and "good enough" philosophies are major takeaways that ring true today more than ever.

I think it is important to note that in order for me to create a successful proto-freelanced model railroad; I really needed to develop a mindset similar to Allen McClelland's with regard to treating the railroad as if it were, in fact, real.



I adopted this point of view early on in the process of creating the Allagash. Friend Joe Posik cemented it during our Allagash scouting trip back in April 2010.

As we were driving through the Maine countryside in the region of the state that the Allagash would run through I remember saying “boy it’s beautiful up here, can you imagine if there was a railroad that ran through here?”

Joe replied matter-of-factly, “There is one.”

That was all I needed to hear!

Setting a course

Prior to the birth of the Allagash in 2009, I was deep into the process of building a model railroad that featured a proto-freelanced, New Hampshire and Vermont-based shortline railroad called the Woodsville Terminal (Kalmbach-Model Railroad Planning 2007), plus the prototype Lamoille Valley Railroad, a Vermont-based shortline.

The Woodsville Terminal and Lamoille Valley were interesting railroads with lots of character, but at the end of the day were not sufficient to satisfy my desire to model big-time railroading. Traffic was light, and operations were limited to one train per day, poking along at slow speeds over decrepit track.

Interesting? Sure.

Exciting? Not really.



2: My first attempt at doing a freelanced layout in my current space was this proto-freelanced New Hampshire and Vermont-based shortline railroad called the Woodsville Terminal. As time went on, I found this concept had many unanticipated shortcomings, so rethinking my layout goals resulted in the Allagash Railway.

The Woodsville Terminal was limiting from many perspectives, and over time a frustration began to build. By the time the summer of 2009 rolled around, it was time to look in the mirror and ask the tough questions.

Clearly, a change needed to be made, but what was it?

I decided to go back and revisit the three great model railroads that had inspired me in my formative years in the hobby. Construction on the old railroad ceased immediately, and a period of serious contemplation ensued.



After assessing my situation, in August 2009 the decision was made to pull the plug on the Woodsville Terminal and start anew on a completely different proto-freelance concept. My list of givens was long.

I wanted a railroad that had many of the attributes of the V&O, AGE and AM. I knew I wanted to model the New England region, but I wasn't sure exactly where.

After careful consideration, I chose the State of Maine. The railroads of Maine had always been of interest to me. The Maine Central, Bangor & Aroostook, Canadian Pacific, Grand Trunk and others were fascinating.

As a kid, I had come up with the Maine-based Bangor & Livermore Falls proto-freelance concept for my first 4x8-sheet-of-plywood layout. It was ill-conceived and didn't get far – a couple of diesels were painted and that's about it. But nonetheless it planted a seed that would one day grow.

Historically, Maine always enjoyed robust freight rail traffic. Up until the early 1980s, the State of Maine was the top paper-producing state in the country. The Maine Central and Bangor & Aroostook railroads moved much of that paper traffic, along with all of the raw materials that went into producing it.

The Maine Central alone serviced twenty or more paper mills at one time. I wanted my new model railroad to have robust rail traffic, and for these reasons, Maine seemed like a great place to put my stake in the ground.

While on vacation on the Outer Banks of North Carolina in August 2009, I spent downtime combing over maps of Maine and discussing an action plan with Joe Posik. By the end of the trip, the basic route and scope of the new railroad were clearly defined.

Locating the railroad in space and time

After careful consideration, I decided to locate the railroad in the northwestern side of the state, away from the primary territory of the Maine Central and Bangor & Aroostook. A name was chosen – Allagash Railway (AGR), or more to the point, “the Allagash.”

Allagash is a town in extreme northern Maine and a territory as well. The Allagash Wilderness Waterway in Maine, a 92-mile long section of Aroostook County, was created in the 1960s to protect this remote region of Maine.

Historically, the logging industry was big here, but there wasn't much else. The great thing about proto-freelancing is that you can re-write history. Allagash would now have a railroad running through it.

Establishing the size and scope of the railroad was important. After considering my previous degree of discontent with the pokey shortline scenario, the new railroad needed to have some muscle.

The Allagash was no shortline, and it wasn't a newcomer either. It was to be a major player in New England railroading – a bit smaller than the Maine Central, a bit more





3: Here's the hypothetical route of the Allagash through the state of Maine. I model the more industrial south end.

robust than the Bangor & Aroostook, and with a storied history, just like its brethren.

The railroad stakes a large swatch stretching from extreme northern Maine along the St. John River at its namesake town, down through remote territory. Similar to the V&O, AM and AGE, the Allagash connects with real railroads on the map.

On the Northern Division, a branch to St. Francis makes a connection to the Bangor & Aroostook, while connections are made with the Canadian Pacific's (CPR) maritime mainline at Jackman, and also with Jack Ozanich's AGE at Clayton Lake.

South of Allagash, the Northern Main Line drops down into the Division Point town of Madrid. From here, the railroad splits into two important Subdivisions. The Androscoggin Sub. heads south to a CN connection at Bethel, while the Kennebec Sub. meets up with the Maine Central just outside Waterville. Branches to Andover, New Portland and Lincolnville round out the map.

Now that I had the route figured out, I needed to set the time.

The choice of era was an easy one for me. I wanted to be able to include first-and-second-generation diesels from at least two of the major locomotive builders, and I wanted to include modern paper boxcars from the brief but colorful per-diem era, mixed with older, heavily-weathered cars.

This put me into the late 1970s at the earliest, and after some back and forth, I settled initially on April 1977 and then finally on April 1980.

The stage was set. It was time to design the railroad. ●



5: Mt. Blue Garage, Weld, ME.



4: The Weld General Store, Weld, ME.



6: The Sandy River at Philips, ME.