Wilmington's Railroad Roots: Inside the Wilmington Railroad Museum

For more than a century, Wilmington was not merely a port city—it was a railroad town. The rhythm of locomotives and the scent of coal smoke were as much a part of daily life as the salty air off the Cape Fear River. That story, of a city built by rail and then nearly left behind by it, is preserved with remarkable care inside a modest brick warehouse at the north end of downtown: the Wilmington Railroad Museum.

A City Built by Rail

Wilmington's railroad story begins in 1840, when the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad was completed. At 161 miles, it was the longest continuous rail line in the world at the time, stretching from the coast almost entirely across North Carolina. For the next 120 years, railroading was Wilmington's chief industry, driving commercial and industrial growth and providing jobs and revenue for the local economy.

Near the turn of the twentieth century, the Wilmington & Weldon merged with several other eastern seaboard lines to form the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad (ACL). The new corporation made its headquarters in downtown Wilmington, cementing the city's identity as a rail hub for generations. By World War I, an estimated one in ten Wilmington residents worked for the railroad. The ACL's presence shaped everything from the city's architecture to its social fabric—train attendants in blue suits, handwritten tickets, and station floors of shiny red Italian marble.

Then, in 1960, it ended. The ACL moved its headquarters to Jacksonville, Florida, in what was then the largest single relocation of employees ever staged by a southeastern industry—over 1,000 workers, their families, and the company's files and equipment, moved more than 450 miles by rail. Wilmington lost its railroad identity almost overnight.

Three Women and a Table of Memories

The museum that exists today began not with a grand plan, but with a quiet act of preservation. In 1979, three women—Hazel K. Morse, Gerda Wooten, and Marguerite James—chartered the Wilmington Railroad Museum Foundation. The railroad had left town, and these women felt a pressing need to keep its history alive. They started with a single exhibit case in the Dudley Mansion on Front Street and a table at Riverfest.

From those humble beginnings, the collection grew. As soon as the founders had a place for artifacts, they filled it; as soon as they had a building, they opened the doors to the public. The museum moved into a three-story section of an ACL warehouse in 1983, and then, in 2007, across the parking lot into its current home—an original 1883 Atlantic read more Coast Line freight warehouse at 505 Nutt Street. The move was transformative: the new space offered about a third more room, all on one floor, making the entire collection accessible to disabled visitors for the first time.

Inside the Museum: History Hall and the Model Empire

A visit to the Wilmington Railroad Museum unfolds in two distinct movements. The first is the History Hall, a carefully curated series of exhibits that trace the arc of railroading in southeastern North Carolina. Here, glass cases hold an eclectic array of artifacts: an ACL conductor's navy blue uniform standing beside an early-1900s

suitcase filled with original workday manuals written in cursive; the last local ACL schedule board; a brass Atlantic Coast Line sign that once hung above a ticket counter; and fragments of the shiny red Italian marble floor from the 1913 ACL Union Station building. The exhibits are grouped thematically, exploring not just the machinery of railroading but the people behind it—women workers, unions, Pullman travel, railroad police, and the era of the caboose. A small cinema room offers a selection of well-pitched videos, including what one reviewer called "the clearest explanation I have ever encountered of how a steam engine actually works".

Then comes the second movement: the model trains. In the final room, an enormous and frankly thrilling model railway layout sprawls across the space, with dozens of buttons that let visitors—children and adults alike—control the action. More than 20 model trains run simultaneously in O, HO, G, and N scales, passing through meticulously detailed miniature towns and landscapes that evoke Wilmington as it looked sixty years ago. The museum's volunteer modelers have poured more than 75,000 hours into these layouts, and it shows in every tiny tree and hand-painted figure. For many visitors, this room is the highlight—a place where railroad history becomes something you can touch, control, and watch come alive.



Outside, the experience continues. A real 1910 ACL steam engine with tender greets visitors at the front door, coupled to a 50-foot boxcar and a red caboose that visitors can climb aboard and explore. The locomotive features sound effects, and the caboose sits behind crossing lights that flash—a small but evocative touch that transports you back to the days when these machines were not exhibits but the working heart of the city.

A Living Legacy

The Wilmington Railroad Museum is not a static time capsule. It is an active preservation project, with ongoing restoration work on its locomotive and caboose, and a mission that extends beyond its own walls—the museum has been part of efforts to save Atlantic Coast Line Railroad buildings throughout Wilmington. It also holds a Guinness World Record for the Longest Model Train, achieved in 2011, a testament to the ambition and dedication of its volunteer corps.

In 2024, the museum marked 45 years since three women decided that Wilmington's railroad story was too important to let fade. That story—of a city whose fortunes rose and fell with the rails, and of a community that refused to forget—is told here with clarity, warmth, and an obvious affection for the machines and the people who ran them. For anyone seeking to understand Wilmington beyond its riverfront and beaches, the Wilmington Railroad Museum is not a footnote. It is the foundation.

Plan Your Visit

Location: 505 Nutt Street, Wilmington, NC 28401

Hours: Labor Day to Memorial Day: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 AM–4:00 PM (closed Sundays). Memorial Day to Labor Day: Monday–Saturday, 10:00 AM–5:00 PM, Sunday 1:00–5:00 PM

Admission: Adults $12; Seniors and Military $10; Children (2–12) $8; Children under 2 free; Members free

Duration: The museum recommends approximately one hour for a visit, though model train enthusiasts may linger longer

Parking: Limited free parking is available in front of the museum; paid garages and metered parking are nearby. The free downtown trolley also stops directly in front of the museum