



A first generation layout by THE NEXT GENERATION

A millennial's layout depicting a fictional New York railroad in 1838

By Frank DeStefano • Photos by the author

You're young with limited income and even more limited space. You move around from apartment to apartment in the New York City area and devote most of your time to employment and a social life. Despite having a lifelong interest in model railroading, you have no hands-on experience. How can you make a layout interesting, or for that matter, good?

These were all questions I asked myself when I first started thinking of modeling ideas in my early 20s. I was lucky that the time period I had in mind, the first-generation railroads of the 1830s, would be very accommodating to these limitations. Little trains on barely graded track and bare-bones operations would allow me to create something

simple in a small space but with ample room for my imagination to run wild. I was ready to build my first layout.

The backstory

The year is 1838, and the Flushing & Brooklyn RR has just opened for service between its namesake towns. It was intended to connect Flushing with New York City by way of Brooklyn ferry connections. The railroad is well financed and built to a high standard for the time, with all 11 miles of track constructed within a single year. This is using "heavy" rail and wooden ties, but with the contemporary practice of filling the track gauge with soil to provide a walkable path for horses should backup motive power be needed.

The railroad has three locomotives: two Norris-built "six wheelers" (4-2-0), and a Stephenson "four wheeler" (0-4-0) leased from a neighboring road. The passenger fleet consists of two-axle passenger coaches with stagecoach-style seating compartments and a single eight-wheel coach with traditional bench seating and center aisle. A boxcar, a flatcar, and a hopper handle freight such as coal imports, lumber, and locally grown produce for New York City markets. I had a great deal of fun creating the backstory for my fictional railroad.

To keep my first layout manageable, the Flushing & Brooklyn was planned as an exercise in creativity and technique rather than operating possibilities. The track plan, an oval with a few turnouts, is about as basic as it gets, but it allowed

1 The Flushing enginehouse is a beehive of activity on Frank DeStefano's HO scale Flushing & Brooklyn RR. The layout is set in 1838.

me to focus more on creative elements and honing my skills.

Early railroads featured simple timetables with a single train running from point A to point B and back. Complex practices like switching, train meets, and interchange wouldn't develop until railroads expanded later in the century. To generate some extra operational interest, I created a dock siding at Flushing Bay and a team track in the rail yard, a combination which allows a freight pick up/drop off scenario. Such simple operations let me focus more on improving my detailing and scenery skills.

A small, portable layout

Being a young man living the renter's life, I knew the layout had to be easily portable. The 3 x 6-foot table is made of 1" plywood on top of a 4" high L-girder frame. Rather than build legs, I simply laid the layout on a folding table. With this simple arrangement and lightweight design, two people can pick up the layout and carry it away with relative ease.



2 The Pegasus, a Bachmann Classic Collector Series 4-2-0 steam locomotive hauls a train of two-axle stagecoach type passenger cars past the Flushing enginehouse.



3 Though the layout is just a loop of track and early railroad operations were quite simple, Frank chose to model a wharf and dock for the railroad to serve to increase operating interest.

For the terrain I glued a 1"-thick piece of extruded-foam insulation board to the top of the table, then carved out a section to create the bay scene. That section of exposed wood was painted a deep marine blue and topped with Liquitex gloss medium to create Flushing Bay.

The backdrop is a 1/8" sheet of plywood painted sky blue with large white clouds. For maximum portability, the

backdrop isn't screwed to the table, but clamped to the girder frame.

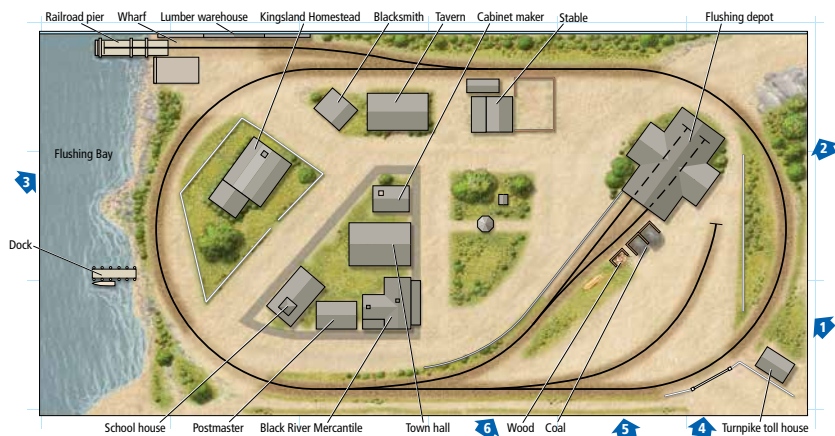
Where the backdrop meets the layout, I created a distant treeline using a technique described by Lance Mindheim. I cut out an undulating line on cardboard, painted it black to mute any visual detail, then glued clump foliage to the surface. This sits at the back edge of the layout to gracefully transition from level topography to backdrop.

The track plan uses sectional Atlas code 83 flextrack with Peco Electrofrog turnouts. Powered frogs were an absolute must on my layout, as the light, short-wheelbase engines would stall on insulated frogs. The tracks were glued directly to the insulation foam without any roadbed, as I wanted to recreate the crude trackwork of the 1830s.

To make a horse path in the track gauge, I simply poured fine brown ballast between the rails, covering the ties completely, then left it alone! Rather than tamp the ballast between the ties, all I did was run a train car over the tracks to be sure the flanges would clear the



4 As with early versions of every machine, reliability is questionable. Fortunately the Flushing & Brooklyn RR has access to horses who can haul its stagecoaches down the track via a horse path in the gauge of the rails.



The layout at a glance

Name: The Flushing & Brooklyn RR
Scale: HO (1:87.1)
Size: 3 x 6 feet
Prototype: freelance
Locale: Flushing Village, N.Y.
Era: 1838
Style: portable tabletop
Mainline run: 12 feet
Minimum radius: 15"

Minimum turnout: No. 5
Maximum grade: none
Benchwork: open grid
Height: 34"
Roadbed: none
Track: Atlas sectional, Peco turnouts
Scenery: Woodland Scenics ground foam
Backdrop: painted plywood
Control: direct current

Flushing & Brooklyn RR

HO scale (1:87.1)
 Plan size: 6 by 3 feet
 Scale of plan: 1" = 1'-0", 12" grid
 Numbered arrows indicate photo locations
 Illustration by Kellie Jaeger
 Find more plans online in the
[Trains.com Track Plan Database.](https://www.trains.com/Track-Plan-Database)

so I was glad to be done with it fairly early on in the construction process.

Practical scenery

A few of the techniques I used to either create or apply general scenery on the layout are modeling tricks described in early issues of *Model Railroader*. Because the town scene is dominated by country roads, I knew I wanted these roads to have a high degree of realism.

ballast, then I left it to soak in scenic cement. Once settled, the brown ballast covering the track gauge creates the impression of packed soil.

The layout is direct-current powered with a main bus running from a

standard power pack supplying the layout's power. Atlas switch controls help adjust polarity for sidings, as the rails beyond each turnout are isolated to accommodate the points. Wiring is by far my least favorite aspect of the hobby,



5 An assortment of early first-generation locomotives and rolling stock can be seen outside the Flushing, N.Y., enginehouse. Most rolling stock at the time only had two axles, as seen at right. The passenger car on the left is an early example of bench and aisle seating arrangements.



6 The horse path continues throughout the entire railroad, even through turnouts. Frank utilized a technique called zip texturing to create the desired look. The brown is a stark contrast from the colorful locomotives and rolling stock.

I researched many products and techniques, but nothing looked quite right to me. Despite its popularity, I personally had zero interest in using real dirt on my layout. So a friend sent me an article outlining the old yet highly practical art of zip texturing. [This technique was introduced in the April 1965 issue of *Model Railroader*. - Ed.] This involves mixing dry plaster of Paris with dry paint pigments to create an earth tone.

When ready to apply, the layout surface is sprayed with wet water, the mixture is sifted onto the damp surface, then a few more mists of water are sprayed on top of that.

While it was still damp, I'd take an old car and roll it lightly over the surface to create wagon-wheel ruts. Eventually this would harden enough to keep the visible appearance of soil, but would not blow away in transit. Zip texturing was an extremely simple yet highly effective technique that made my village pop.

Another trick I discovered was a zero dollar resource. I knew I wanted to add a few small rock formations around the layout, but nothing large enough to justify purchasing rock molds. So I created my own using sheets of tin foil glued together, folded up, and crinkled to make the right surface texture.

The trains

I was incredibly lucky that Bachmann created the Classic Collectors Series, which gave me just enough variety to model the era. The collection includes a few variations of the Norris 4-2-0 locomotive (*Lafayette*, *Prussia*, and *Pegasus*),

the *John Bull*, and the *DeWitt Clinton*, all of which I purchased for different reasons. The two Norris engines were upgraded with custom paint, while the third engine on my roster, Bachmann's *John Bull*, is modified greatly in physical design. The famous engine that resides in the Smithsonian Institution was a widely produced British design exported to America in large numbers. Bachmann re-created the locomotive as it appeared in service on the Camden & Amboy RR, featuring upgrades unique to that company only.

To make my engine look generic, I removed the pilot truck, headlight, bell, and other features that are associated



Meet Frank DeStefano

Frank DeStefano is a 31-year-old video producer living in Queens, N.Y. While not at work, he enjoys full-size railroading, history, exploring old taverns, and time spent with friends and family. He is a volunteer at the Black River & Western in Flemington, N.J., and serves as the railroad's social media manager.

with the *John Bull*. Then I swapped the enclosed tender that came with the model for the that of the *DeWitt Clinton*, but traded the canopy car body for the tender frame of an old OO scale *Rocket*.

For rolling stock, I chose the two-axle compartment coaches that accompanied the *Prussia*. I thought these were unique and reflect a transition in American railroads from early stagecoach designs to the modern aisle coach passenger car.

For horses, carriages, and figures, I leaned heavily on Preiser models, but also hand painted a few metal Victorian figures I picked up from eBay.

The Flushing & Brooklyn has been a wonderful learning experience for me, and hopefully a stepping stone to larger and more challenging projects in our hobby. I'm already dreaming up a new layout, one set in the modern day. I know exactly what I'll do differently next time around, a characteristic I believe all first-time modelers share.

This has also been a great way to indulge in a time frame I find very fascinating, when railroads were brand new and comparable to space travel today. With my little Flushing & Brooklyn, I sincerely hope to inspire other modelers to give the 1800s a try! It's a challenging time period to model, but I think the results are well worth the effort.

I also hope fellow young modelers will be encouraged to leap into the hobby despite the challenges. Our time, space, and funds may be limited, but that doesn't mean we can't produce something as creative and highly detailed as the largest basement empire of a seasoned modeler. [UR](https://www.instagram.com/frankdestefano)