

N&W Class J 611: The Spirit of Roanoke

The “Queen of Steam” gets new bearings. First, background from the [“Fireup611.org”](http://Fireup611.org) and Wikipedia websites...

No. 611 was one of fourteen Class ‘J’ passenger locomotives built for the Norfolk & Western Railway between 1941 and 1950 and the only one in existence today. The Norfolk and Western Railway's J class was a class of 4-8-4 streamlined steam locomotives built by the railway's own Roanoke Shops located in Roanoke, Virginia. The last units, 611-613, rolled out between May and July of 1950, marking them the last steam passenger locomotives built in the United States.

The J class locomotives were used daily to pull such passenger trains as the Powhatan Arrow, the Pocahontas, and the Cavalier between Cincinnati, OH and Norfolk, VA. The J's also pulled the Tennessean, the Pelican and the Birmingham Special between Monroe, Virginia, and Bristol, Tennessee.

In the late 1950s, N&W began purchasing first generation diesel locomotives which proved to be cheaper in maintenance and fuel cost. In 1958 and 1959, the railroad ran several *“Farewell To Steam”* excursions with 611 pulling the last one in October 1959. While many of the locomotives went to the scrap lines, 611 was donated to the Roanoke Transportation Museum where it sat dormant for two decades.

In 1981, Norfolk Southern president Robert Claytor sent 611 to the Norris Steam Shop in Birmingham for overhaul and 611 became the star of the Norfolk Southern steam program pulling excursions throughout the eastern United States. For twelve years she traversed the mainlines recreating the golden age of American railroading and inspiring a new generation of steam fans. The program ended in 1994, and 611 returned to her hometown of Roanoke, Virginia to once again serve as a static display.

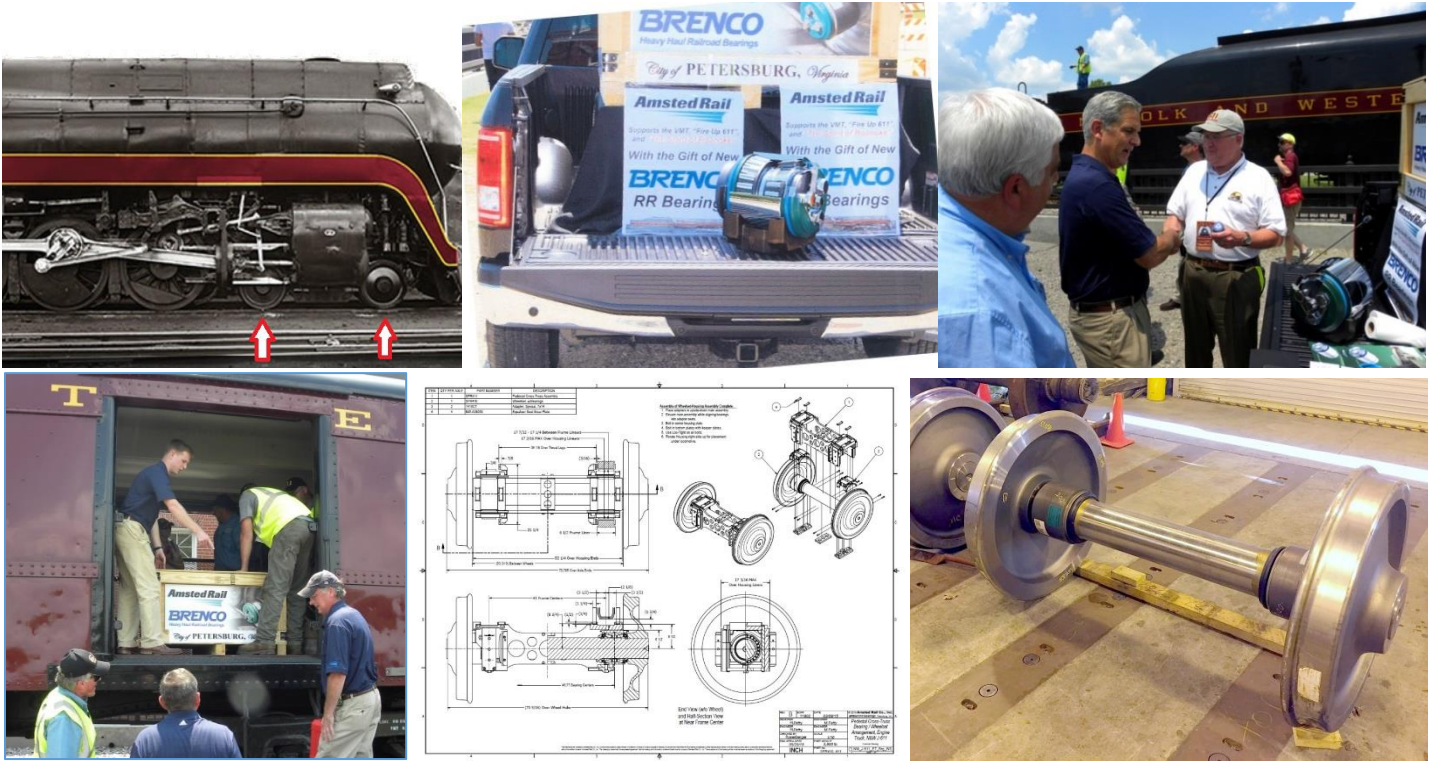
In 2011, the Norfolk Southern started a new *“21st Century Steam”* program. In 2013, the Virginia Museum of Transportation started the *“Fire Up 611!”* initiative to return No. 611 to excursion service. With over 3k donations from all fifty states and 19 countries, the “Queen of Steam” was restored. It is now serving a third career as a mobile ambassador for the Virginia Museum of Transportation meant to captivate, educate, and inspire everyone that sees her. She is a living testament to the ingenuity of American workers and the spirit of everyone who worked on the N&W.



Now for the Bearings...

Early in 2015, NS contacted Brenco Product Engineering. The 611 would soon need new wheels for the front engine truck. Without spare parts available, the Fire-Up 611 group wanted a “drop-in” wheelset/housing system with new, modern, AAR-style bearings. After developing a concept, Brenco donated four bearings which were presented during a visit by 611 to Petersburg on 6/13/2015. [Video with info is Here \(Rick\)](#). Once the system design was completed, the new housings were constructed.

The wheelsets were replaced in February of 2016 as an extension of the loco’s annual maintenance program. The new bearings carried the J on excursions between April and June of that year. The bearings are performing extremely well.



Before:



After:

