Berks & Beyond

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LOCOMOTIVE RESTORATION ON TRACK TO FINISH SOON

Nearly decadelong project to restore Locomotive No. 2100 is expected to wrap up in 2026

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Reading Railroad Locomotive No. 2100 will debut for excursions as American Freedom Train 250. COURTESY OF FORREST NACE

An original Reading Railroad locomotive may soon be back on the tracks.

After more than a decade of work, a project to restore Locomotive No. 2100 is wrapping up, according to representatives of American Stream Railroad, the nonprofit behind the effort.

The train was built in 1923 but modified in Reading shops in 1945, the first of 30 engines made to assist with the World War II traffic boost at Reading Railroad.

Only four of the 2100 series survive, including No. 2102 owned by the Reading & Northern Railroad in Port Clinton.

No. 2101 is in Baltimore, and 2124 is at Steamtown in Scranton.

The restored No. 2100 is slated to debut as American Freedom Train 250 in 2026, said Forrest Nace, treasurer of American Steam Railroad, Mount Vernon, Ohio.

No. 2100 is undergoing work at the Midwest Railway Preservation Society in Cleveland.

The plan is to lease the locomotive for excursions in eastern Pennsylvania and throughout the Northeast.

Restoration of No. 2100 has been ongoing since American Steam Railroad leased the privately owned locomotive in 2014.

The restoration is funded by donations and carried out by volunteers.

So far, over $1.8 million in cash and volunteer labor has been invested in the project, Nace said.

Nace, a computer programmer, said he makes a 240-mile round trip to Ohio from his home in Butler County to work on the train almost every week.

Lack of funding, an increase in the price of steel post-COVID-19 and changes to the plans to allow for more cost-effective operating opportunities have prolonged the restoration, Nace said.

The train had its coal-burning components swapped for a fuel system that uses recycled oil.

"These projects move at the speed of money," Rob Gardner, president of American Steam Railroad, said in a YouTube video. "Definitely the firebox work is the thing that turned this into a much larger project than any of us expected 10 years ago."

The train had its first "fire-up" and tests of its steam system in March.

"Once it was fired, everybody could breathe a sign of relief just to sit back and absorb it and enjoy it," Nace said the video. "One of the biggest projects that has to be done in any steam locomotive restoration has now been accomplished and people can have confidence that this locomotive will run."

Nace noted the project still needs $138,00 to finish.

The remaining work includes repairs and modifications to the running gear, tender, backhead and boiler, as well as a complete paint job.

If the remaining funding is raised in 2025, Nace said the train would likely be ready to run by Memorial Day 2026.

"There are things about a steam locomotive that make it a living, breathing thing," Gardner said in the video. "It's really a thrill for the senses, and we can't wait to the thing start hauling trains."

Originally built by the Baldwin Co. in Philadelphia, No. 2100 was converted to a T-1 class locomotive in the Reading shops. It went into service Sept. 11, 1945.

The T-1 class has a 4-8-4 wheel configuration — the front four wheels guide it through curves, the middle eight wheels power the 404.5-ton behemoth and the rear four wheels support the firebox.

No. 2100 was used in the Reading Rambles excursions between 1959 and 1964. It served as a parts locomotive for the American Freedom Train during the nation's bicentennial celebration in 1975-76.

It was once owned by Richard P. Kughn, former CEO of Lionel Trains Inc. From 2005 to 2008, it ran on a tourist railroad in Tacoma, Wash. It had been out of service from 2008 to 2014, when American Steam Railroad leased it.

To donate to the restoration of Locomotive No. 2100, visit americansteamrailroad.org.