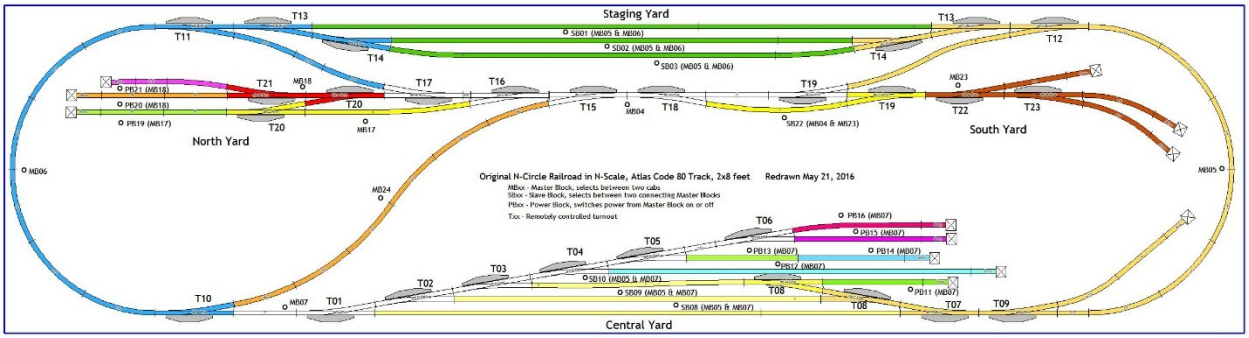
N-Circle Railroad Updates – Overview

Background History

My first model railroad was a temporary N-scale Atlas snap-track layout on a piece of plywood and a Bachmann Santa Fe freight starter set in the summer of 1985. I was a lot younger here!

N-Circle_Beginnings_1985_Cropped

In 1990 I progressed to a permanent 2x8 foot layout with 1/2-inch Homasote sheets over a plywood base on a frame of wood 1x4s. This Atlas snap-track layout is seen here, with a reversing track bisecting an oval with yards on both sides.



This layout was first operational in 1990, with the electrical control panel added in 1992. I used it until 2018 when I gave it to a model railroader friend and started sizing Kato UniTrack layouts on T-Trak modules. By December 2018 I had a temporary UniTrack oval layout operational on a 2x8 foot set of T-Trak module bases.

In January 2020 I added double-crossover modules in the middle of the two endcaps and built an 8.5 x 3.5 foot rack to support the modules. A 1x6 foot panel was added to fill the resulting hole in the center of the T-Trak modules. This defined the 'final" track plan in use today, and at this point, serious creation of scenery for the N-Circle Railroad began.

Current Operations

The N-Circle Update Reports describe the development of the current 3.5 x 8.5 foot configuration of the "N-Circle Railroad" layout, composed of modules built to the T-Trak standard, with scenery developed to model four scenarios:

- 1950s Vermont
- 1980s Vermont
- 1950s Louisiana
- 1980s Louisiana

The layout uses changeable scenery panels, structures and vehicles, in addition to, of course, the trains. These reports describe developing scenery, structures and vehicles for the layout. While they contain many details about building specific kits in N-scale, many of the modeling techniques discussed can be applied in other scales also.

The techniques used to build and detail these kits are not necessarily new and innovative. Living in a condominium I do not have a good means to vent an airbrush booth or a work sink for cleaning up oil-based paints. Therefore, almost all my work is with water-based acrylic paints, applied with a brush. While these techniques may not be of interest to those building a full-basement layout with an airbrush booth and large workspace to create a magazine-quality layout, hopefully my reports will be informative to those getting started and will inspire others to give it a try for their home layout. And some of these reports end up providing insight on "how not to do it…"!

I do not discuss building or detailing locomotives or rolling stock in these reports, my trains are pretty much "out of the box".

I am from Vermont, and my wife is from Louisiana, hence the two regions to be modeled. In N-Circle Updates 7 & 9 I introduced the names "Maple Corners" for the Vermont city and "Lake View" for the Louisiana city depicted on the layout, derived from our hometowns.

I started collecting N-scale trains long before I had a clear vision for a layout, so I own rolling stock from the 1940s through the 2000s. I narrowed the vision down to the 1950s and 1980s to focus on specific equipment and eliminate some from the collection that would not fit these time periods. The 1950s was of course the classic "Diesel Transition" era that many model. The 1980s was when I did the most railfanning on the prototypes, when boxcars were still colorful and before all the consolidation of railroads that has occurred since then.

To further narrow down the rolling stock acquisitions for the layout, I defined the Central Vermont as the "home railroad" for the Vermont scenarios of the N-Circle, and the Texas and New Orleans for the Louisiana scenarios. The CV of course interchanged with most of the railroads in the northeast, and the T&NO on the Mississippi River was a connecting point for eastern, western and northern railroads in New Orleans for the south. The T&NO was acquired by the Southern Pacific, so the SP becomes the home railroad for Louisiana in the 1980s. But all these connecting railroads justify keeping most of my extensive collection of rolling stock!

My similarly large collection of locomotives will allow interchange activities in the main yard between:

Vermont Division:
Central Vermont and Canadian National
Central Vermont and Canadian Pacific
Central Vermont and Maine Central
Central Vermont and Boston & Maine
Central Vermont and Vermont Northern/Lamoille Valley
Central Vermont and Montpelier & Barre
Central Vermont and Rutland
Central Vermont and Vermont Railway
Vermont Railway and Clarendon & Pittsford
Vermont Railway and Green Mountain
Vermont Railway and Delaware & Hudson
Amtrak Northeast

There is also "loaner power" from the Grand Trunk and Duluth, Winnipeg and Pacific to run in Central Vermont consists, and a pair of Bangor and Aroostook locos, just because...

Louisiana Division:
Texas & New Orleans/Southern Pacific and Union Pacific
Texas & New Orleans/Southern Pacific and Santa Fe
Texas & New Orleans/Southern Pacific and Texas & Pacific
Amtrak Superliner

All locomotives are four-axle diesels, except for a couple of Central Vermont steamers, as six-axle units are too large for the running lengths on this layout. The majority are Atlas units, as they run well, and are easy to maintain, though I have a few other brands where they made units for Vermont railroads. And most are EMD, as I never cared that much for the look of Alco and later GE locomotives, except for RS-3s and RS-11s. (Sorry, Alco lovers!). Rolling stock is mostly limited to 50-feet or less, except for passenger cars and some single-trailer TOFCs.

Electrical operation is DC block control - most of my locomotives were built before "DCC Ready" was a concept, and this isn't really a multi-operator layout to justify upgrading them all for DCC. I plan to eventually build a control panel to allow two DC throttles, so two operators could work sections independently.

Please see the “Layout Diagram” document to see the latest track diagram and scenery plan for the layout.

The T-Trak modular standard is a double-track mainline along the outside edge of the modules, intended for public displays, allowing two trains to loop on the two independent mains. As can be seen in the layout’s track plan, the N-Circle's outer loop has a passing siding on both the North and South sides, and a double crossover to the inner main on both the East and West ends. Thus, the outer loop can be used for a circulating train but will mostly be used for staging yards. For example, when doing interchanging switching activities in the North Yard, trains can be staged on the two South outer sidings, then crossover to the inner track to approach the town. The two inner tracks also can serve as staging tracks, so effectively the South side can provide up to four staging tracks when operating on the North side, or vice-versa. Having not built the electrical control panel yet, the entire layout operates as one electrical block. However, the power routing Kato turnouts allow parking of staged trains, though without block control, one of every group of two or three parallel tracks will be "hot."

The modular approach to scenery that you will find in these articles is driven by my limited physical reach, not just my inability to decide on one region and period for the layout. The T-Trak modular standard places all the mainline tracks on the front edge of the layout, where they are easily reached for operating the trains. The scenery is then on panels which fit between the tracks and the back of the modules. These panels can be built up on the workbench requiring less than a foot of reach, then placed on the layout, rather than having to manipulate delicate N-scale scenery at a distance.

At this point I am applying years of corporate experience making Power Point presentations to create temporary scenery for the layout! I developed templates for paved and dirt roads, sidewalks, etc. in N-scale to then incorporate into the scenery panels for each section of the layout. It is very easy to then add sharp, clean and even striping for roadways, parking spaces and crosswalks, I have even overlaid occasional manhole covers, pavement patches and crack fills in the streets! The sheets are attached with double-sided tape to foam-core panels. Eventually I will use particle board to achieve smoother surfaces and clean joints, but for now the foam-core board provides an inexpensive base for sizing scenes for the layout.

The fixed N-Circle track layout essentially defines a “stage” for displaying ever-changing “scenes.” The scenery panels approach allows flexibility for sizing, visualizing and changing the placement of structures relative to each other and roadways as I build more structures kits. And it provides a place to display my growing collection of vehicles in urban, suburban and rural settings, without having to commit to the permanency of glued ground foam and road fills.

And you ask: Why the “N-Circle Railroad”?

1. For years, there was N-O railroad, just a lot of pencil drawings and dreams, like many model railroaders.
2. The layout is a simple 3.5 x 8.5-foot oval with yards on the long sides, so trains pretty much run in a Circle.
3. The T-Trak modular standard places the double-track mainlines on the outer edge of the modules. Therefore, the railroad “encircles” all the scenery and switching yards.
4. There is N-O N-Circle Railroad as a real prototype, and there is no rolling stock with this name on this model railroad
5. And of course, it’s “N-Scale”!

In conclusion, a recent photo of the owner/operator in front of the layout, looking a bit older than in 1985!

N-Circle_Owner_26-01-27

I welcome any questions or thoughts, please send them to:

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Thank you for reading and Happy Modelling!