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B&O Railroad Museum Executive Director Makes Commitment to Delve Further into Stories of Railroading and Civil Rights

Baltimore, MD (June 10, 2020) –Executive Director of the B&O Railroad Museum, Kris Hoellen, issues statement of commitment to tell fuller, more in-depth stories surrounding the history of American railroading and its relationship to slavery and civil rights.

Dear B&O Family and Community Members,

The events of the last several weeks, which have transfixed the world and horrified everyone, have also been weeks of self-reflection for us at the Museum.

We are the birthplace of American railroading, an industry that transformed the United States economically, technologically, and culturally. We tell the story of the laying of the first stone of the railroad and showcase the words of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the last signer of the Declaration of Independence, and a founder of the B&O Railroad. We do not mention that Charles Carroll was a slave owner.

We have nine locomotives from the Civil War on display at the Museum. We note the role the B&O played in supporting the Union, and how freed slaves helped sabotage southern railroads. We did not proactively share, until recently, that most railroads prior to the Civil War were constructed using slave labor, making railroads some of the largest lease holders of enslaved people.

Visitors to the Museum can view the inside of the Dreamland, a Pullman sleeper, perfectly preserved. The Pullman Company was the largest employer of African Americans in the country during its time of operation. We effectively share the story of the Pullman Porters and the formation by A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, the first recognized African American labor union in the world. We do not share that in 1949, a Truman-appointed fact-finding body officially approved of the retention of a 50-hour work week for African American waiters on railroads, despite the fact that white railroaders were only required to work a 40-hour work week.

We display an authentic Jim Crow era segregation car and descriptively tell the story of African Americans being forcibly removed from the trains. While we share that railroad segregation laws were eventually overturned, we do not mention that one of the oldest and most respected community churches in Baltimore, Union Baptist, played a significant role in ending that era in Maryland when in 1906 their pastor, Dr. Harvey Johnson, successfully sued the B&O for being ejected from a train on August 15, 1906. We were honored this past January 2020 over the MLK holiday weekend, when the Union Baptist Church choir performed standing in the center of our 1884 Baldwin Roundhouse.

The history of the railroad is intertwined with the civil rights and equality journey in the United States. Historically, railroads served as tickets to freedom, sometimes literally. Railroads, as with all modern transportation modes, can serve to unite or divide communities, can provide access to jobs and wealth creation or serve as barriers for people living in transportation deserts, i.e., those communities without public transportation choices.

We recognize as a world-class museum that we have a responsibility to be more intentional in the stories we choose to tell, the facts we include, the sources we cite, and the community partners we engage. We ask each visitor to hold us accountable.

*Kris A. Hoellen
Executive Director
B&O Railroad Museum*

About the B&O Railroad Museum

The B&O Railroad Museum™, a full affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of American railroading and its impact on American society, culture and economy. The Museum is home to the oldest, most comprehensive collection of railroad artifacts in the Western Hemisphere including an unparalleled roster of 19th and 20th century railroad equipment. The 40-acre historic site is regarded as the birthplace of American Railroading and includes the 1851 Mt. Clare Station, the 1884 Baldwin Roundhouse and first mile of commercial railroad track in America. In 2019, the Museum welcomed guests from all 50 states and 40 countries. For further information on the B&O Railroad Museum, please call 410-752-2490 or visit www.BORail.org.

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