Spectators watch as the Union Pacific funeral train carrying the casket of former President George H.W. Bush passes through Navasota, Texas, U.S. December 6, 2018. REUTERS/Nick Oxford
George H.W. Bush, the 41st president of the United States, died peacefully in his Houston home on the evening of Nov. 30, 2018, at the age of 94.

The Bush State Funeral Plan, “Epilogue,” began with a flight from Houston to the nation’s capital aboard Air Force One, designated, “Special Air Mission 41.” Following a formal reception at Joint Base Andrews, there was a period of lying in state in the Capitol Rotunda and a service at Washington National Cathedral, after which the casket was returned to Houston for a public repose, a funeral service and a journey to interment at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library on the grounds of Texas A&M University in College Station.

President Bush, who loved trains, specifically requested one for his final journey. As a child, he recalled riding and sleeping on trains when traveling with his parents. Other memorable trips included the day in 1942 when, at age 18, he boarded a train at New York’s Penn Station to join the Navy.

President Bush’s connection with Union Pacific began with the use of the dining car “Overland” and UP Chairman Drew Lewis’ private car, “Selma,” as part of the whistle stop tour during the 1992 presidential campaign. After he served as president, UP trains took guests from Houston to the Library in College Station for special events, including one notable birthday celebration dubbed “‘41 at 80.”

At the time of President Bush’s passing, there had only been seven presidential funeral trains in American history, from Abraham Lincoln’s in 1865 through Dwight Eisenhower’s in 1969.

“It’s more personal with a funeral train,” presidential historian Louis Picone said. “It definitely goes back to a different time.”

What is interesting for me, after writing seven articles about the history of past presidential funeral trains, is that my previous research was done using vintage newspapers, published books and historical stories and notes. In writing about the Bush funeral
In a photo provided on July 24, 2013 by President George H. W. Bush shows the former president with a shaved head with Patrick, who is the son of one of his Secret Service agents, in Kennebunkport, Maine. Bush shaved his head in solidarity with Patrick, who is losing his hair due to treatments for his leukemia. UPI/Alamy.
train, all of the planners, staffers and funeral directors, including myself, who were involved were available to help with this article.

It took almost 10 years of intensive planning by the Union Pacific Railroad, the office of George Bush, the Secret Service and the Department of Defense Joint Task Force – National Capital Region to make the presidential train a reality. The “Epilogue” plan called for the train to travel from Spring, Texas, just north of Houston, to College Station – a distance of 70 miles, passing through eight towns in two-and-a-half hours. Nancy Lisenby with Bush’s office had the arduous task of creating the passenger manifest and seating assignments on the funeral train.

To honor George Bush’s naval service during World War II, Union Pacific wanted veterans to operate the historic train. The 4141 crew consisted of engineer June Nobles and conductor Randy Kuhaneck, Navy veterans who had served nine and eight years, respectively, including time during the Bush presidency.

Nobles proudly said, “He was my commander-in-chief, and he did so much for our country” and added, “I think my familiarity with the run had a lot to do with it, too. I know the details.” Kuhaneck, who had worked for UP for 23 years, summed it up by saying, “We were just sailors taking care of another sailor.”

The funeral train consisted of two locomotives, UP No. 4141 and No. 8096, and 11 vintage cars, all with a rich railroad history. With the exception of the lead locomotive, all were painted Union Pacific’s distinctive armour yellow with red trim.

The lead locomotive was built by Electro-Motive Diesel in July 2005 and commissioned as UP No. 8423. The SD70ACE locomotive, weighing 420,000 pounds with a 4,300-horsepower V16 diesel engine, can travel at a top speed of 70 mph.

On Oct. 18, 2005, during the grand opening of the George Bush Presidential Library, the locomotive was officially unveiled as Locomotive No. 4141 and presented to Bush. For the occasion, it had been painted in Air Force One’s unique robin’s egg blue and white color scheme, with presidential seals and lettering spelling out “George Bush 41” on the sides. During the dedication ceremony, Bush, said, smiling, “if I had one of these when I was president, I might have left Air Force One behind.”
Ana Garza, of Cypress, Texas, displays coins flattened by the memorial train carrying the casket of President George H.W. Bush when it passed through Pinehurst, Texas, Thursday, Dec. 6, 2018. On Thursday, that same 4,300-horsepower machine left a suburban Houston railyard loaded with Bush's casket for his final journey after almost a week of ceremonies in Washington and Texas. (AP Photo/Nomaan Merchant)
“Cowboy Respect”
Cowboys Casey Rice, Will Nichols and Matt Nichols sitting on horseback paying their “cowboy respect” as the casket of President George H.W. Bush pass near Millican, Texas. Dayna Nichols, Photographer
“During the ceremony, President Bush was allowed to briefly drive the 4141 train,” said Kuhaneck, who was with Bush in the cab for the occasion.

After the announcement of George Bush’s death, Locomotive No. 4141 was taken out of storage at UP’s North Little Rock Shop in Arkansas and brought to Spring, Texas.

The train was assembled in UP’s Westfield auto facility at Spring on Dec. 3, 2018. Locomotives 4141 and 8096 were followed by power car No. 2066, which provided electricity to all the rail cars, then the “City of Portland” and “City of San Francisco,” both vista dome lounge cars built by the American Car & Foundry in 1955, which carried the president’s Secret Service detail, the armed forces body bearers and guard of honor, UP staff and a CNN broadcast crew. Next came the funeral car, “Council Bluffs,” built as postal baggage storage car No. 5769. Modifications to the car included a custom paint scheme depicting a large U.S. flag blowing in the wind, presidential seals on both sides and two large Plexiglas windows installed for the public to catch a glimpse of the president’s casket as it rumbled by.

Following the funeral car were two cars carrying the Bush Family, “Lone Star,” a business car originally built as a coach car by the Pullman Standard Company, and “Harriman,” an opulent vista dome lounge car built by the American Car & Foundry in 1955. The dining cars “Overland” and “City of Denver” were next in line, built in 1949 and 1959, respectively, by the St. Louis Car Company as lunch counter café cars and later converted for fine dining. Between the two dining cars was the “Portola,” a deluxe sleeper car built in 1949. The final two cars were the Walter Dean, another vista dome lounge car built by the American Car & Foundry in 1955, and Pullman Standard Company’s “Kemecick,” a business car built in 1950.

During the day and into the evening on Dec. 5, there was much activity at the Westfield facility, with the UP crews power washing and shining every inch of the locomotives and cars. The train crew, military personnel and funeral directors conducted training exercises into the night.

The next morning dawned cold, gray and rainy. The train crews were arriving, food provisions were being loaded
onto the dining cars, the Secret Service canines were busy performing their security sweeps and the UP porters were making sure the cars were spotless for the guests who were going to arrive within a few hours.

Following the service of celebration and thanksgiving, attended by 1,200 invited family friends at St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, the flag-draped casket was placed in a black hearse in front of the brick church. Presidential seals were affixed to the side doors, and a small American flag was mounted on each fender.

The long funeral motorcade, including the hearse provided by Geo. H. Lewis & Sons Funeral Directors, maneuvered through the streets for the short drive to Spring. The motorcade entered the Westfield auto facility main gates at 1:35 p.m., where the eighth presidential funeral train in U.S. history stood waited.

The hearse came to a stop parallel to the funeral car. With family members watching, the World War II-style copper-oxide metal casket was removed from the hearse and carried by armed forces body bearers between the two columns of a joint military cordon, up steps onto the platform and into the casket display car, “Council Bluffs.”

The casket was placed on a black bier, which was
specifically fabricated from steel and securely bolted to the polished wooden floor. The top of the bier had a metal ridge and a fitted rubber mat to prevent the casket from shifting and vibrating during the trip. The casket was secured in place by two straps and covered by an American flag.

Marlin Harris, Secret Service special agent in charge of the Bush protective detail, entered the funeral car and sat on a metal chair within eyesight of the president’s casket to conduct his security vigil.

President George W. Bush and his family boarded the “Lone Star,” directly behind the funeral car, while other family members and invited guests, including former Secretary of State James Baker, boarded their assigned rail cars, assisted by UP porters dressed in black suits, white shirts and black ties.

The “pilot security” train – UP locomotive No. 9069, built in 2017, coupled to six vintage UP armor yellow rail cars and operated by UP engineer Aaron Braud and conductor Billy Blanton – departed the Westfield facility several hours ahead of the funeral train to inspect the track leading to College Station and ensure that all security measures were in place.

In the cab of the 4141 locomotive, along with engineer Nobles and conductor Kuhaneck, were two UP managers and Secret Service agent Robert Koob. At 2:03 p.m., Nobles increased the throttle and pushed in the yellow reverser handle, and the funeral train moved slowly forward out of the railroad yard and down the track.

Moments later, the special train was passing through the small town of Spring, a railroad hub in the 1800s, at 10 mph. Thousands of mourners stood along the track – some holding up signs and waving flags and others saluting as the train crept past. This same scene was repeated many times throughout the 70-mile journey.

After the last car disappeared from sight, the funeral motorcade, along with the empty hearse, departed the Westfield facility under police escort for College Station, making one arranged stop for fuel. The motorcade was on a tight schedule; it had to be in position at College Station before the funeral train arrived.

As the train continued on its solemn journey, members of Army and Navy ceremonial units alternated standing vigil at the head of the flag-draped casket.

Union Pacific’s Kevin Mosby, wearing his white chef’s jacket, along with his kitchen staff, prepared lunch for President George H.W. Bush’s family, Secret Service agents and others, at least 100 people in all. Among the items on the menu were beef tenderloin and herb-rubbed grilled chicken breast and a dessert of fresh berries and chocolate mousse.

“When you have events like this on the train, we are starting from scratch,” said Mosby, who had worked for Union Pacific for seven years.

Since Lincoln died in 1865, mourners have traditionally gone to the tracks to pay their respects as presidential funeral trains pass by on their final journey home. Even in the 21st century, mourners placed coins on the steel track along the route, anticipating that the heavy wheels of the UP vintage funeral cars would flatten the coins into lifelong keepsakes.

Sitting in an upholstered chair and looking out of the window of the “Lone Star,” President George W. Bush waved to the throngs of mourners, including schoolchildren and scout troops paying their respects to his father, gathered shoulder to shoulder lining the track and even blocking the railroad crossings.

Many of the invited passengers looking out the right side of the funeral train could see in a field near the track a very large American Flag rippling in the breeze and drawn tight by four dozen people clutching its outer edges as the 4141 funeral train rolled by.

A tense moment came as the train rounded a curve and blew its diesel horn, spooking the horses of some cowboys on horseback who were respectfully holding their hats over their hearts.

Along the train route, Nobles, the first female engineer to drive a presidential funeral train, reflected, “As we were getting close to College Station, I could see the funeral motorcade off in the distance on State Highway 6, and we were going to pass them up, so I had to slow the funeral train down to 25 miles per hour so we would not overtake them.”

A cold rain dampened the ceremony as the funeral train slowly came to a stop at 4:41 p.m. at the Texas A&M University campus adjacent to iconic Kyle Field. Its arrival was greeted by thousands of Texans and alumni paying honor to a man who had come to love the A&M community.

The Bush family quickly disembarked the train. The casket, fitted with a rain cover to protect the flag from the elements, was ceremoniously brought off the “Council Bluffs” funeral car as the uniformed Aggie band played “Hail to the Chief,” followed by the “Aggie War Hymn.” The casket passed in front of the family and was placed into the hearse.

The motorcade departed for the short drive to the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library for a private ceremony with military honors at the family cemetery where wife Barbara Bush and daughter Pauline Robinson Bush are interred.

On March 22, 2021, a Union Pacific press release announced the arrival of locomotive No. 4141 at the George Bush Presidential Library, where it will be on permanent display.
“Presentation”

Crewmembers, June Nobles, train engineer and Randy Kuhaneck, conductor of the Bush Funeral Train present June’s UP uniform shirt and Randy’s cap to Bob Boetticher, Sr, Chairman, National Museum of Funeral History as part of the new George & Barbara Bush Exhibit.

Acknowledgements

The George Bush Presidential Funeral Train article is the last of an eight-part series spanning more than two years of research, writing, rewrites and proving the accuracy of the facts in each article. It was both fun and sometimes challenging but a proud moment for me in sharing with you the incredible series of historical events making up each article. It would not have been possible to accomplish this without the help and guidance of two longtime friends I could always reach out to for confirmation of historical events and to prove or disprove a theory. My special thanks to Jim Kurtz, funeral director and funeral historian and former director of the National Museum of Funeral History, who was instrumental in fact-checking many of the funeral undertakers, their firms, casket and hearse descriptions and other related items.

I have known Michael Wagner, chief of National Events Planning, Joint Task Force–National Capital Region and the U.S. Army Military District of Washington since 2002. He shared his vast knowledge of presidential funeral history, and I have been honored to work with him on three state funerals.

Finally, I would like to thank our readers. My goal was simple: to write interesting and factual articles on the history of the eight presidential state funeral trains in U.S. history. I hope I met or exceeded your expectations.