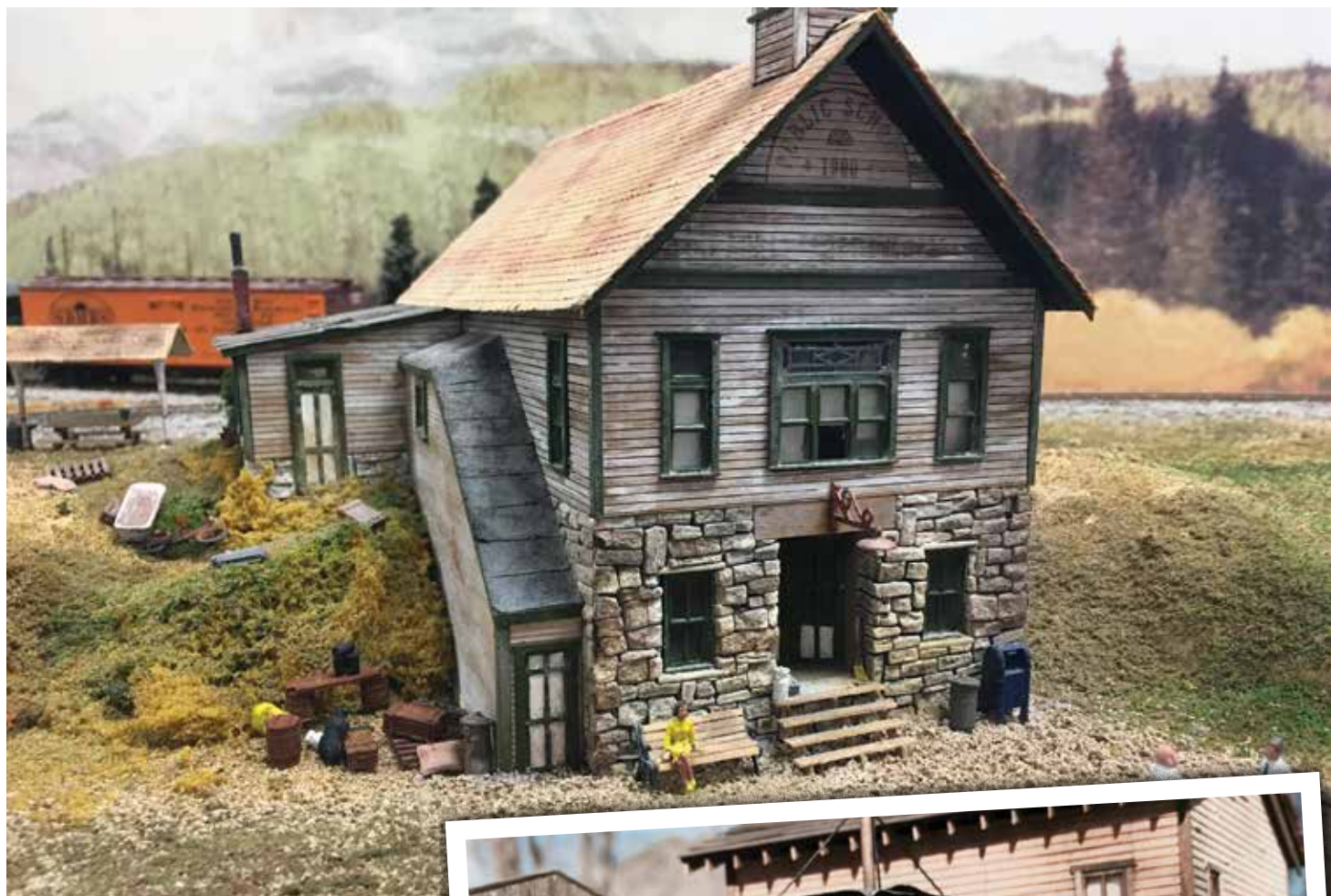


# My Quest for Master Model Railroader

My 5th AP Certificate: Master Builder – Structures

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I didn't know it at first, but my Quest for the Structures Certificate began decades ago. I remember building structures using tape and cardboard from cereal boxes as a kid while I watched Saturday morning cartoons. It truly has come full circle because, once again, I used cardboard from a cereal box for my last structure required to earn the certificate! Coincidentally, I did not use cereal box cardboard for any of my other structures. Instead of a pair of scissors to cut the cardboard, I used a laser, which I just consider a "big fancy knife!" I have always enjoyed creating and building things. As I get older, my tools get "cooler." I believe my skills have improved too, and I know the Achievement Program has helped with that. Having a goal, not only to finish a



certain number, but also to complete different types of buildings (and a bridge), along with achieving a certain level of quality, has made for an enjoyable time. I also like that I have something to show for my efforts.

I won't go into details about my construction techniques here, but instead will share my experiences and observations on this section of my journey on this Quest. You can, however, find details about how and what I did to build my structures on my website: [JamestownTrains.com](http://JamestownTrains.com) As it is with all good Quests, there are those who help you along the way, and there are roadblocks that could keep you from achieving your goal. We all know that the protagonist overcomes the obstacles placed before them and ultimately triumphs in the end.

When I first read the requirements, my first potential roadblock was that out of the 12 required structures, at least half needed

to be scratchbuilt. For many of you, that may not be an issue, but I really like craftsmen kits. To top it off, I learned it's more difficult to get enough points for an AP Merit Award if you use kits. Because you do not need to scratchbuild anything to have a great structure once completed, craftsmen kits start at a disadvantage in one of the five categories in which one can earn points. I had two options to overcome this disadvantage, and I tried to do a little of both. First, I made sure I earned as many points in all the other categories as possible. I made all corners perfectly joined, never left any glue spots, nail holes in boards were added, and so forth. Second, I tried to add some sort of

scratch-built element even though the kit didn't need it. Sometimes, that meant that instead of using the roofing material that came with the kit, I would replace it with something of my own or fabricate some de-





tail parts to enhance the structure in some small way. In the end, both of these options made for a better model anyway. Like many challenges, once having overcome them, you are better because of it.

If you remember back to my article on Cars, I chose to “go for it” and earn Merit Awards on all models instead of just the half required. Structures, for me, was no different. I was doing the work and wanted them to be completed to the level worthy of a Merit Award. I always did a “self-evaluation” to see where I might fall short in a category and put forth a little extra effort before having it evaluated. Knowing what the judges were looking for and how they score items is extremely helpful. I recommend getting on a committee or asking to help at a convention. Plus, you can earn Volunteer Certificate points while learning how to make your models better! My first structure that was judged was at a Regional Convention, where I also received training on being a judge. I then approached the paperwork differently for the rest of



my structures, which made it easier on the judges and me.

This leads me into the next potential roadblock — people. The requirements for the Achievement Program are all listed on the NMRA website. Similarly, the requirements for achieving a Merit Award (and associated points) are also on the website,

as is the direction for how to award those points in each of the categories. The variable, however, is the people. We all have different backgrounds and interests. While I work in the tech field, I have experience in construction. I am not a rivet-counter, but you may be. I like the logging theme, but you may prefer modern main line. We



come from different places and ideas, but the reason the hobby of model railroading is so wonderful is that even with these differences there is a common thread woven throughout: Trains!

Each Division and Region operates a little bit differently as well. Some are large, and others are small; some meet frequently and others not so; the people running things may be strict or more laid back. When it comes to your paperwork, however, it all eventually goes to the Region AP Chairman for Merit Awards and also onto National for the Certificates. When it comes time for paperwork, get to know your Division and/or Region AP Chairman. Talk with them in person when reasonable, but even email will do. They will help you through the process, even if it takes weeks for them to respond to your emails (Yes, that happened to me in the past!) We are all volunteers at different places in our lives, so be patient. The process isn't perfect, but it works.

Another potential roadblock — at least for some — is having their work judged. I like getting feedback. It usually helps to encourage me, and in turn, I want to do more — and improve. I know there are those who don't participate in the AP because of the contests. Personally, I have not had very good experiences with NMRA contests, but I do enjoy the popular vote contests. The good news is that you don't have to enter a single contest if you don't want to!

You can have your models evaluated by AP judges separate from any contests. They use the same set of standards, but you are not going up against anyone else. You only need 87 ½ points out of 125 to get a Merit Award — and only half of your models even need Merit Awards!

I've said a number of times that the AP has helped me finish models that were mostly done for a long time. Out of the 12, I really only had one finished before starting on this Certificate. Several were nearly finished as many as 10 years ago, and there were a few on my “someday list” that I knew I wanted to scratchbuild and had done some preliminary work but never started on the model. I also made sure to try my hand at different techniques.

The requirements say you must build different types of structures but doesn't require you to use different building materials. I like working in wood, and I wanted to try building something with styrene. Interestingly, what I built using styrene was an all-wood building! In one case, I used a laser to cut mortar lines for a brick building. Another time I used strip wood, as well as sheet wood lasered to look like strip wood. I used skills I learned while building craftsmen kits to scratchbuild my structures. I really liked finishing up a bunch of buildings in a relatively short time.

After earning my prior Certificate, I evaluated how many I had already finished

and what structures I still needed to do. I figured that if I could bring one structure every other month to our monthly Division Event, I could finish my MMR in about a year. That included completing two more Certificates that were already about 75 percent done. At that point, I only needed six more structures. Three were kits that were between 80–95 percent done. The other three needed to be scratchbuilt. I hadn't started those yet, but I had already done the research.

I'm really happy I was able to stick to my goal. I'm also grateful to the guys who did the judging and would stay after our Division Events to do a thorough job. I enjoyed trying my hand at different techniques and using various types of building materials. This Certificate is probably my favorite one, and I feel like I accomplished a lot in completing it. I still like craftsmen kits, but now I have even more confidence should I need, or want, to scratchbuild a structure. If you run into roadblocks like I did that might keep you from completing this, or any other Certificate, remember that others have done it before you, and there are many willing to help. Don't get discouraged. Take any advice given and use it to help make yourself a better modeler. Step outside your comfort zone, improve your skills, and share your accomplishments with others so that we can enjoy the journey together! 🚂