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**LOCAL  
LOCOMOTIVES**  
BUILDER ON  
TRACK

**MARCH MADNESS**  
HEADS TO THE WELL

**BMW'S**  
NEW CEO

**CHASING**  
MEDICAL BREAKTHROUGHS



**LOCOMOTIVE MANUFACTURER'S**

# **RIGHT ON TRACK**



By John Jeter  
Photographs By Amy Randall

**It's not every day you get to drive a locomotive**, a brand-new one, just a mile and a half from downtown Greenville. But on a recent icy-rain day, Republic Locomotive allowed a visitor to do just that, to hop aboard one of its engines, the color of a No. 2 pencil, and take 'er for a spin—up a few yards of track and back again toward the shop, all with a simple joystick.

The ride is compliments of Hugh B. Hamilton Jr., who bought Republic in 1984 from an Atlanta master mechanic who started the company four years before. Republic still operates in the West Washington Street shop once part of the Piedmont & Northern Railway, a project of James Duke, the legendary North Carolina tobacco and electric industrialist.

“This facility has been in continuous service since 1911,” says Hamilton, 70, owner of the company whose signature product, the patented RX500 Industrial Locomotive, is billed as the “first major redesign of the industrial locomotive since diesel replaced steam and is the only all-new industrial locomotive built in North America.”

On this late Friday afternoon, all's quiet inside the airy metal building. Industrial cranes dangle from the towering ceiling. A few 100,000-ton steel plates will soon become mainframes; like many of manufacturer's components, the 2- to 3-inch-thick sheets come from third-party vendors, such as Nucor's steel plant in North Carolina.

Republic originally rebuilt locomotives. “About 20 or so years ago, we decided the time had come to start building new locomotives,” Hamilton says; most of America's engines, built after World War II to replace steam locomotives, were “getting a little bit long in the tooth.”

Republic's compact, 150,000-pound locomotives don't operate on mainline tracks the way freight and commercial engines do: "The difference being, we stay in the confines of the customer's plant," says Peggy Haden, Republic's marketing director and a 20-year employee.

For instance, a Class 1 railroad, say CSX, will haul dozens of cars to a coal-fired utility and drop off hundreds of tons of freight, using locomotives weighing more than double Republic's and costing considerably more than Republic's \$1 million-plus engines.

"Instead of tying up all that mainline equipment," Hamilton says, "they'll run back and forth doing what they specialize in, and we'll stay in the plant and get the train unloaded."

Republic sells to automotive, petrochemical, mining, and big grain-agricultural customers, as well as to military and transit clients, Haden says, specifically naming the New York City Transit Authority.

A January 2014 YouTube video shows a Republic diesel-electric locomotive, purchased in 1991, operating under Washington Square in lower Manhattan. "They would run at night when the subways are either shut down or greatly reduced," Hamilton says. "They're running work trains all through the subway system."

Haden adds, "9/11, our locomotives were part of that rescue."

Hamilton bought the company when he was in his 30s. A 1968 Georgia Tech mechanical-engineering graduate who also earned a master's in industrial-business management from there, the Easley native worked for years in the paper industry until he wanted to be his own boss.

"The part that actually makes the paper machines run is essentially identical to what runs on the locomotive," he says. "I said, 'Well, I know all these parts.' I know the cranes, rigging, equipment, and the kinds of people that we had—the mechanics, electricians, instrument people—and I said, 'Shucks, it's not a paper machine, but there's a whole lot of paper machine in a locomotive, or vice versa.'"

Today, he holds several patents. He keeps corporate information close: workforce, revenues, unit sales, and so forth; Republic usually keeps a half dozen engines on hand. "We make all we can sell, and we sell all we can make."

Competitors in Republic's niche are few. (A Republic Locomotive Works in Washington State sells locomotives, too, but those fit in the palm of your hand and cost up to about \$400.)

Most of Republic's locomotives are sold in the U.S., some in Canada. "We do have a couple in Russia," says the jovial raconteur, who then tells a story about a tunneling job in Siberia. "They were looking all over the world to find an appropriate locomotive and, lo and behold, we had about the only thing that would work."

He chugs along, too.

"Do I look like I'm trying to retire?" he says through another deep-throated laugh that sounds a little like a locomotive starting up. "But I may spend a little extra time at the beach now."



Here's a look at the controls inside the cab.

Republic's locomotives stay within the confines of a customer's plant.