



Sandwiching in History Tour Union Station

1400 W. Markham St., Little Rock

July 7, 2023

Adapted and expanded by Ashley Sides from Rachel (Silva) Patton's 2011 script

*Special thanks to: Patrick Wardlow, Hathaway Group,
Next Level Events, Bill Pollard*



Welcome and Intro

Hi! I'm Ashley Sides, Preservation Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the Sandwiching in History tour of Union Station! I'd like to thank the Hathaway Group and Bailey Properties for allowing us to tour the building. I'd especially like to recognize Facility Manager Patrick Wardlow for his generosity in providing access and helping orchestrate this tour. And in case you haven't heard, Steve Shadid with Next Level Events, a catering and events company located downstairs, has generously offered to provide FREE LUNCH for today's tour participants who RSVP'd, so a big thank-you to him and his staff as well!

There has been a train depot on this site since 1873. The current Union Station is the third one to stand here and it dates to 1921. Also known as the Missouri Pacific or "MoPac" Station, it

was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. It has been a key part of the story of the development of Little Rock, and this is its story...

The Inception of the Railroad in Arkansas

Long before iron horses ever rolled the rails, overland travelers across Arkansas had already worn trails following the paths of least resistance as they made their way from populous eastern states to the frontier lands out west. One famous route entered Arkansas from Missouri in the northeast and cut diagonally across the middle of the state running southwest toward Texas. This Southwest Trail avoided the most mountainous terrain of the Ozarks and Ouachitas to the west as well as the lower, often swampy lands to the southeast. So naturally, when Captain Joshua Barney was sent by the War Department in 1850 to survey a feasible railroad route from St. Louis to the Red River, the route he mapped across Arkansas followed the Southwest Trail. It would be decades more before rails would be built, but this route would eventually become a backbone of the railroad system in Arkansas.

The other major transportation routes of those early days were rivers, and the spot where the Southwest Trail intersected the Arkansas River became the city of Little Rock. The reason we are meeting in a railroad depot at this geographical location is no accident. It has deep historical roots.

But why here on Victory Street and not closer to downtown, say at the Point of Rocks? There's an anecdote related to that which I will tell you in a minute.

The first railroad companies were chartered in Arkansas beginning in the early 1850s, but for twenty years, very little track was actually laid due to financial difficulties and the impact of the Civil War.

In August 1871 the Memphis & Little Rock Railroad opened with service from Memphis to Argenta and was the first operating railroad in the state. But any goods being delivered to Little Rock over here on the south side of the river had to be loaded off the train and ferried across, as there was no bridge at that time.

Cairo & Fulton Railroad

Another early railroad was the Cairo & Fulton Railroad, and it is a distant, direct ancestor of this Union Station. It was chartered in 1853 in Arkansas and 1854 in Missouri to build a railroad line from Birds Point, Missouri, on the Mississippi River opposite Cairo, Illinois, diagonally to the southwest, crossing Arkansas to Fulton on the Red River, and ultimately on to Texarkana. As you might have guessed, the tracks followed Captain Barney's survey along the Old Southwest Trail.

However, like most other railroads during this period, construction of the Cairo & Fulton line was delayed due to financial shortfalls and the Civil War. It was January of 1873 before a train from St. Louis reached the northern bank of the Arkansas River at Argenta. The railroad company originally operated two separate divisions—one north of the Arkansas River and one south of the river—with cargo and passengers making the transfer from one line to the other by ferry. But on December 21, 1873, the original Baring Cross Bridge was completed, allowing trains to continue along the route unimpeded. It was the first bridge to span the Arkansas River at Little Rock, and although other bridges were eventually constructed to conduct rail traffic, the Baring Cross Bridge is the only one still in use by railroads today (though it's not the original one).

History of Union Station

1873 Cairo & Fulton Station / Iron Mountain Depot / Union Depot

It was also in December 1873 that the Cairo & Fulton opened the first railroad station in Little Rock on this site, which took advantage of the newly opened Baring Cross Bridge. So this year is the sesquicentennial—the 150th anniversary—of the establishment of a train station at this location as well as a bridge spanning the river right here to connect the rails to north and south.

A 1909 *Arkansas Democrat* article relayed a story about why the bridge and the station were located here, outside of the main part of town at the time:

An interesting story is also told in connection with the location of the Union Station on its present site. Many people have often wondered why the station was located in the hole, which necessitated the digging of a deep cut through almost solid rock from the river bank. It is said that Allen & Marquand, the two men who owned the Cairo & Fulton railroad, desired to cross the Arkansas river at the foot of Rock street, and go straight through Little Rock, south to Texarkana. The story goes that the town of Little Rock refused to consider the proposition of allowing the railroad to run through the city, and that a right of way and a franchise through the streets was refused the company. Thereupon Col. Thomas H. Allen is said to have remarked that Little Rock would rue the day the decision was made and that the railroad would cross at the present Baring Cross bridge site, and build a station in the flat, where a new town named Allentown might be built. The station was built, but Little Rock grew so rapidly that the suggested Allentown became lost in the deal, and the station became to be known as the Little Rock depot.¹

That original Cairo & Fulton Station was a wood-frame structure designed in the Second Empire style of architecture, with its cornices with brackets, vaguely classic windows, and a large mansard tower. The first floor of the station housed the waiting rooms, ticket office, newsstand, and a kitchen. You walked out to your train directly at platform level. The second

¹ (Daniel Webster Tells of Erection of the Old Union Station Building: It Was Opened 36 Years Ago 1909)

floor of the station was occupied by a hotel and dining room. Until around 1887, it was Captain L.D. Gleason's dining room and hotel, and then for the next twenty years, it was Captain Charles A. Pratt's Hotel up there.

The railroad companies seemed to always be in flux. In 1874, within a year of the depot opening, the Cairo & Fulton and St. Louis & Iron Mountain Railroads consolidated to form the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Railway, so this became known as the Iron Mountain Depot or Iron Mountain Station at that time. Close to that time, the new passenger depot also began to be shared with the Memphis and Little Rock Railroad, leading it to be called the *Union Depot* or *Union Station*. The Memphis and Little Rock Railroad left Union Station in the 1890s, but between 1888 and 1910, the St. Louis Southwestern Railway (Cotton Belt) was also a tenant in the building. At any rate, the name Union Station stuck.

1909 St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern Station

As the century turned, Little Rock was experiencing a surge of growth and development, and people began to feel it was time to upgrade to a grander station more befitting a city on the ascendancy. The new state capitol was being built mere blocks away, and the aging depot that Little Rock was quickly outgrowing did not present a fitting welcome at the gateway to the city.

In 1906 the Iron Mountain Railway began demolishing the Second Empire-style station and started construction of a new depot. Not all of Union Depot was removed at once, though; some portions of it and other buildings on site continued to serve rail traffic until the new station was ready to take over.

You'll notice that in today's Union Station, when you enter the main entrance on the southeast side at ground level—as we did—you actually have a level below you. On the northwest side that faces the tracks, ground level is one story lower. That arrangement happened with the construction of the 1906-1909 building. In the fall of 1906 the contracting firm of Westinghouse, Church, Kerr & Company poured the concrete foundation and built the concrete retaining walls for the new station. They filled the area in front of the station with earth so that what we call the second floor was on grade with Victory Street. According to an article in the *Arkansas Democrat* at the time it was being built, "It is hard for the average man to understand that the ground at the union station will be raised to a point eighteen feet above the top of the present foundation, but such is the case. ... An enormous amount of filling is to be done before this is completed, but at that time the station plaza will be on a level with Victory Street."²

In other words, in the new station, they raised the level of the passenger lobby and the access to the trains. Since travelers entered at ground level, it was still called the first floor, but when exiting at the far side of the lobby to go to their trains, they found themselves a level above the trains, passing through a long concourse that extended from the building out over the tracks. Stairs from the concourse led down to the various platforms and trains. Just like in an airport

² (Arkansas Democrat 1906)

today, baggage was handled on the track level, below the first-floor passenger level. So in those days, the track level part of the building was referred to as the basement. (The building was conceived of as having a basement and three floors; now it's considered to have four floors.)

Prominent St. Louis architect Theodore C. Link designed the new Union Station building using a combination of the Renaissance Revival and Gothic Revival styles—the brick building featured large arched openings and decorative cast-stone detailing as well as a steeply pitched roof with parapets at the gable ends. The concourse was made out of steel and reinforced concrete and had a gabled roof. Murch Bros. Construction Company of St. Louis was awarded the contract to build the actual station. (They did everything besides the concrete work, which was done by Westinghouse). The station was completed in 1909 at a reported cost of \$750,000.

The Neighborhood Grows Up Around Union Station

I want to zoom out a bit and look at the impact of Union Station on the community in its immediate vicinity. One of our former interns at AHPP, Alex Crawford, has done some interesting research into the nature of the local neighborhood during the time of the second Union Station. Remember that for most of the time prior, this had been the western edge of town. At the start of 20th century, even as the city was expanding and experiencing a building boom, the blocks near the station were still not very densely populated. The construction of the grand, new Union Station, though, prompted speculative development of the remaining lots in the area. The neighborhood became filled with small, single-family frame homes, primarily in the Folk Victorian style. In an era before the widespread adoption of the automobile and the limited availability of public transportation, people needed to live near their work. The neighborhood's immediate proximity to the station and rail yards made it ideal for people who worked for the railroad directly or provided services to the people the railroad brought in. The district essentially became a miniature railroad town.

When a train was expected to arrive, the railroad would send messengers around the neighborhood to call in the new crew: the engineer, fireman, conductor, and brakeman. Waiting till they were called kept the railroad from having to pay the crew as they would if the crew reported to work and had to wait on a train arriving late. This practice of calling the crew when needed gave rise to the neighborhood being referred to as "Railroad Call."

Railroad Call did not have defined boundaries, but it appears to have loosely referred to an area from Union Station down to around 5th Street and Chester Street. Although many people rented their homes, the simple houses also provided an affordable avenue to home ownership for many blue-collar workers and for more than a few African Americans. In addition to people working directly for the railroad, the neighborhood also had several hotels, restaurants, and billiards halls, barbers and physicians, a shoemaker, a dentist, a grocer, a news company, and a supply company. Private individuals also rented spare rooms to boarders, which was one way that widows brought in additional income.

As the twentieth century entered its second and third decades, the opportunities for Black people in Railroad Call dwindled as the neighborhood followed broader patterns in society. One of Little Rock's wealthiest Black men had once run the successful Grand Pacific Hotel near the first Union Station and had competed with Pratt's Hotel, but by around 1920, Black people in Railroad Call had largely been sidelined to menial jobs and domestic or physical labor.

Meanwhile, the rise of the automobile in the mid-twentieth century heralded the decline of Railroad Call itself. As more people began to be able to commute from the suburbs, and as fewer people traveled by train and railroads themselves began to decline, Railroad Call began to be leveled until little of the original character of the neighborhood remained. In 1997, three single-story, transitional Colonial-Revival-style houses originally built in 1906 were listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Railroad Call Historic District, a tiny intact remnant of what had once been a thriving neighborhood. That historic district is being nominated for expansion later this year or next by an additional three adjacent houses so that most of the 100 Block on the west side of South Pulaski Street between 2nd and Markham will be in this little district.

Another property on the National Register that harkens back to the turn of the twentieth century is the historic Terminal Hotel. It stands at the corner of Markham and Victory Streets facing Union Station and is now an apartment building called The Station House. It was originally constructed in 1905, shortly before the first Union Station was torn down and the second one was built. To give you an idea of the vitality of this neighborhood in that era, the Terminal Hotel was one of *seven* railroad hotels that served this depot. It is the only one that remains.

The Missouri-Pacific Railroad (MoPac)

In May 1917 the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern merged with the Missouri Pacific Railroad line. Thereafter, the station was also known as the MoPac station. Missouri Pacific became the largest and most important railroad in the state for many years. By 1927, MoPac operated 1,810 miles of railroad in Arkansas, which was more than 35 percent of the state's total railroad mileage.

1920 Fire

On the night of Wednesday, April 7, 1920, a fire devastated Union Station. About 8:00 p.m., Chief Train Dispatcher W.A. Anderson saw the fire as he approached the station to report for work. He called the fire department 3 times, but their response was delayed for a total of about 30 minutes due to complications with the telephone system and clocks at the fire station. The fire originated on the third floor near the Tire & Timber Department and caused a series of loud explosions. When the city fire department attempted to use the four nearby MoPac water plugs, they were all dry. So the firemen then had to use a water plug at 2nd & Victory Streets, wasting valuable time. The fire heavily damaged the building, leaving just a shell of outer walls and the clock tower standing. The roof totally collapsed, and many interior walls had to be

demolished and rebuilt. The western exterior wall was also destroyed. The estimated loss in buildings and equipment was \$1 million. In addition, at least 250 suitcases, 12 sacks of mail, and 2 carloads of express were destroyed, totaling several thousand dollars in damages. It was reportedly the largest fire in Little Rock to that point.

People flocked to the fire, requiring the entire police force to keep them in order.

Just by chance, Benjamin F. Bush, president of MoPac; Alexander Robertson, VP & General Manager of MoPac; and about 30 MoPac officials arrived by train in LR at 11:30 p.m. on the night of the fire. They were on their way from Louisiana to St. Louis and had no knowledge of the fire until they pulled into the station. Bush announced that Missouri Pacific would rebuild the station as soon as possible.

On the morning of April 8, 1920, several hundred people showed up to help clear the debris at the station. Carpenters constructed a temporary wood building to serve as an information center. Additional temporary buildings were later built on the main drive of the station grounds to serve as a passenger depot and ticket office. Fortunately, train service was not disrupted, as the train shed and concourse were unharmed.

A man named Charles S. Fallon, a fanatical anti-smoking activist, claimed that he had set the fire as a protest against the public smoking policy. There is no record that legal action was ever taken against him, and it is assumed that he made the statement for publicity.

1920-1921 Missouri Pacific Station

Construction began immediately on a new MoPac station using as much of the existing building material as possible. Architect E.M. Tucker of St. Louis designed the building, keeping many of the 1907 Renaissance Revival-style characteristics and changing the roof from gabled to flat. This kept the station in the traditional Mediterranean / Italianate style characteristic of MoPac depots around the state.

The Stewart Construction Company of St. Louis built the new station at a cost of \$1.25 million. The grand opening was held on August 1, 1921, at the stroke of midnight. According to a write-up in the *Arkansas Gazette*, the station was “one of the finest and most modern in the South.”

Baggage, express, and freight were handled on the basement level. On the eastern end of the building by the retaining wall was a loading dock and baggage facilities. The middle of the basement had a small dining car commissary. And the western end of the building was occupied by the Railway Express Agency, which was a package delivery service like UPS or FedEx that utilized the railways. Its loading docks were on the southern side of the building about where the entrance to Next Level Events is now.

Like in the previous station, the first floor (what is now the second floor, where we are now) contained the main lobby. There were white and colored passenger waiting rooms, 12 ticket windows, and a restaurant and dining facilities (on the west end of building).

The second and third floors housed offices for railroad personnel as well as the telephone and telegraph offices. An unusual feature of the building is that there is a small crawl space between each of the upper floors, which was designed into the building to ease the servicing of electrical and plumbing connections.

The large concourse and train shed built in 1907 was incorporated into the 1921 station and remained intact until 1973. That structure is no longer extant, but from the northwest (back) side of the station, you can see where the steel beams were cut off. And it is interesting to note that the train yard was originally much larger than it is now—there were at least 8 tracks running under the concourse alone, and at least 7 more tracks to the northwest side of the concourse (which would be out where the Episcopal School buildings are now).

Bill Pollard describes the track usage:

The tracks were numbered from left to right, with track 1 being against the station building and used exclusively for loading mail and express. Tracks 2-3-4 had fuel facilities and were generally used by northbound trains. Track 4-A was a stub track which ended at the fuel facility and was where a tank car of diesel fuel could be spotted to refill storage tanks located on the hillside to left. Tracks 5-6-7 were generally used for southbound trains and had similar fuel facilities on the south end of the passenger yard complex. Track 8 was adjacent to the brick servicing structures and were used for servicing and resupplying both dining cars and Pullman sleeping cars for runs which originated/terminated in Little Rock. Tracks 9-10 were repair tracks, with an open air shed located south of the midway and visible in the distance in this photo. Tracks 11-12-13 were the coach yard, where extra cars were stored. The last two tracks on the far right were the mainline tracks, allowing freight trains operating to and from Texas to bypass the passenger station yard tracks.³

In the twentieth century, Union Station saw historical figures pass through. President Taft saw the 1909 station as it was being completed. When Senator Joseph T. Robinson died in 1937, many senators and representatives from Washington came to Little Rock by train into Union Station to pay their final respects. During World War II, it was a point of arrival for new military recruits to Camp Robinson and the point of departure for soldiers being deployed from there to the war front. Prisoners of war also passed through here on their way to or from Camp Robinson or other POW camps.

³ (Pollard 2023)

President Truman used the present station as a whistle stop during his first full-term election campaign. And in 1996, President Clinton cast his vote in the presidential election (for himself, presumably) at Union Station.

Missouri Pacific ceased passenger service at this station in 1971. They tore down the passenger concourse and train sheds in 1973, and their railroad offices relocated out of the building in 1974. In 1982 Missouri Pacific merged with Union Pacific. Today the Union Pacific Railroad and Amtrak continue to use this route.

Recent Past

In the 1970s, a large portion of the basement area was converted to restaurant space. In the late 1970s, the southwest end (where Railway Express Agency had formerly been) was occupied by two very well-known establishments—Buster’s and Slick Willy’s. Buster’s Restaurant & Bar was in the easternmost space, and Slick Willy’s World of Entertainment (which was full of pool tables and other games for adults) was in the westernmost space. After observing customers going from one business to the other, James “Buster” Corley of Buster’s and David Corriveau of Slick Willy’s got the idea to combine the two business concepts under one roof. In 1982 they started the first Dave & Buster’s in Dallas and the chain now operate restaurants all over the U.S.

There was also a popular restaurant on the east end known as Tracks Inn from the early 1970s until the early 1980s. According to Bill Pollard, the original large oak waiting room benches were acquired by Tracks Inn and cut into sections for booth use in the restaurant. So when passenger travel resumed with Amtrak’s entry into Union Station in 1974, the passenger waiting area had to use plastic chairs because the benches were now at Tracks Inn restaurant.

Bailey Properties, LLC purchased the station in July 1991. Several changes were made to the interior of the building in the early 1990s.

In July 1992, the Amtrak ticket office and waiting room were moved from street level to what had been the basement. Great effort was made to recreate a 1920s passenger waiting room, including a traditional tile floor. True historic waiting room benches replaced the plastic chairs at this time, but they are not original to Little Rock. They came from Memphis Central Station (which was completed in 1914). I don’t have pictures of the Amtrak waiting room, but we will go see that area in person.

Currently most of Union Station is used as office space, as much of the top two levels have historically always been. Only now the offices aren’t used by MoPac, the Pullman Company, or American Refrigerator Transit anymore. There are around 20 companies and nonprofits housed here. So we won’t get to wander these upper levels out of respect for people working there.

Other than the fourth floor, those spaces have been mostly altered anyway. Also, the clock tower is unsafe for anyone to visit.

What had been the original lobby area / main passenger waiting room on the second floor was sectioned off into office space. Since we will not get to tour that area, Patrick Wardlow, the station's facility manager, has provided some pictures of how it looks now and some historic portions that are still visible, particularly the doors in Suite 206 that once led from the lobby to the trains. He notes that "the original hardware that has been removed to prevent the doors from be opened today was bright brass, and the original leaded glass windows above" are still there too. Looking at the doors from the outside, where the concourse once attached to the building, Wardlow points out that "during the process of preparing for restoration, a scraping of the door and window frame was done that revealed the hand painted word PULL that can be lightly seen in the picture along with the natural tiger oak wood (common high end wood for the period but very rare wood today) that was originally finished in a shellac that would have darkened over the years to what you see today on the inside woods. The original color of the window frames [was revealed] to be a chocolate brown paint and only the exterior doors were a natural color."⁴

There are some areas on the fourth floor that are still as they were historically. Here are some photos of the hallway, original labeling on a restroom door, and a vacant office which is still in its original configuration. One of the staircases is also still unaltered.

Our Tour Route

We're going to tour around the outside of the building, and then see what's on the level below us. Patrick Wardlow will lead this part of the tour. We'll start by stepping out to the plaza out front by the parking lot to talk about what we can see there. From there we will make our way around the building and see the track side of the station. We will pass through the Amtrak waiting room down there on the first floor and follow the hallway to Next Level Events, where the tour will conclude.

Next Level Events is an event venue and catering business that is located in the spaces that used to be Buster's and Slick Willy's. They have graciously offered to feed us lunch after our tour is over. If you aren't having lunch, you can return to the lower parking lots easily from there.

⁴ (Wardlow 2023)

Bibliography

- Arkansas Democrat*. 1906. December 21: 8:2.
- Arkansas Democrat*. 1909. "He Impersonated Taft: Notes of the Trip." October 25.
- Baker, William D. 1992. *Historic Railroad Depots of Arkansas, 1878-1940*. Historic Context, Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.
- Becknell, James C. 1977. "MoPac Station." *National Register of Historic Places nomination form* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service). Accessed 2023 July. https://www.arkansasheritage.com/docs/default-source/national-registry/pu3098-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=5829b4ca_0.
- Christ, Mark, Ken Story, and Christie McLaren. n.d. *Pulling Into the Station: Arkansas Railroad Depots on the National Register of Historic Places*. Brochure, Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.
- Crawford, Alex. 2022. *"The City of Now": Impermanence, Class, and Race in the Vicinity of Little Rock's Union Station, 1898-1923*. Master's Thesis, Davidson, NC: Davidson College.
- Daily Arkansas Democrat*. 1909. "Daniel Webster Tells of Erection of the Old Union Station Building: It Was Opened 36 Years Ago." September 25.
- Jarrard, John. 1997. "Railroad Call Historic District." *National Register of Historic Places nomination form* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks Service). Accessed July 2023. https://www.arkansasheritage.com/docs/default-source/national-registry/pu9767-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=50e77d9d_0.
- Miller, Frezil. 1978. "Terminal Hotel." *National Register of Historic Places nomination form* (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks Service). Accessed July 2023. https://www.arkansasheritage.com/docs/default-source/national-registry/pu3249-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=9bd5dd4d_0.
- Normington, Mick. 1991. "Businessman, wife buy Union Station for development." *Arkansas Democrat*, August 1: 32.
- Pollard, Bill, interview by Ashley Sides. 2023. *Union Depot* (July).
- Roy, Sr., F. Hampton, and Charles Witsell, Jr. 1984. *How We Lived: Little Rock as an American City*. Little Rock: August House.
- Shuffield, Laci. 2023. "Union Station." *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. June 16. Accessed July 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/union-station-9385/>.
- Silva, Rachel. 2011. *Sandwiching in History: Union Station*. Tour script, Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program.
- Sutherland, Cyrus A. 2018. *Buildings of Arkansas*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.