

The History of Union Station

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The arrival of the first train in Indianapolis, on 1 October 1847, was occasion for great celebration. Although most of the townspeople had never seen a railroad or a locomotive before, yet alone comprehend speeds of twenty miles an hour, there had been much anticipation. And most of the people turned out to see the first train of the Madison and Indianapolis Rail Road steam into town. Some even took an excursion on it to Franklin, Indiana, and back.

Spalding's Circus was in Indianapolis that day, and the whole troupe, with the band of the celebrated bugler Ned Kendall, along with a company of cavalry, participated in a parade celebrating the arrival of the railroad. Gov. James Whitcomb made a speech from the top of a railroad car, and then people headed for the hotels "up town" for dinner. That evening there were fireworks and a "general good time."

In 1847 Indianapolis was a wilderness village of about four thousand hardworking settlers. Settled in 1820, the town became the permanent state capital in 1825. Indianapolis, however, lacked any navigable rivers and, thus, easy access to the outside world. The Madison and Indianapolis Rail Road (later the Jeffersonville, Madison and Indianapolis) provided that access, prompting historian W. R. Holloway to write:

With the opening of the Madison Rail Road, there came with it such a change as comes upon boyhood at puberty. There was a change of features, of form, a suggestion of manhood, a trace of the beard, and voice of virility. Manufacturers appeared and would not disappear. Stores that had formerly mixed up dry goods,

groceries, grain, hardware, earthenware, and even books in their stock began to select and confine themselves to one of two classes of their former assortment. . . . The price of property advanced. A city form of government was adopted. A school system was inaugurated. Everyone felt the impulse . . . of prosperity.

In the three years after the arrival of the railroad, the population more than doubled, to 8,100. And by 1852, when work began on the town's—and the nation's—first Union Depot, Indianapolis had 10,800 inhabitants.

The National Road, which cut through the city a few years ahead of the railroad, and the other roads were little more than marked trails through the woods with the largest trees and stumps removed. In wet weather roads were almost impassable. In addition, Holloway wrote, the National Road “became a thoroughfare for emigration to the Mississippi and beyond, but it left here little of the deposit that was borne along by its current. It was a vast deal for the West but not much for Indianapolis.”

There had been a lot of interest in railroads in Indiana for several years, and in 1831 the state chartered companies to build six railroads to center at Indianapolis but did not provide funds for construction. However, in the economic condition of the country at the time, there would have been no profitable use for them all. Therefore, nothing much happened. In 1836 the state took over several of the railroad companies and tried to open the state to commerce through a massive internal improvement project of railroads, canals, and turnpikes. Three years later the state went bankrupt under the load.

By that time, the Madison and Indianapolis Rail Road had been completed from Madison, on the Ohio River, to Vernon, twenty miles to the north. And the railroad was

operated by the state's leasee, D. C. Branham and Company, until 1843, when the legislature authorized its sale. The new owner completed the road in increments—first to Scipio, then to Clifty Creek, then to Columbus, then to Edinburg, then to Greenwood, and finally—in October 1847—to Indianapolis.

In 1846, as the railroad approached Indianapolis, the company selected its depot ground on South Street, east of Pennsylvania Street. It was a quarter mile from the south edge of town, but the ground was high, the price cheap, and the location convenient. So the first angry complaints of citizens about the location soon died out in the excitement of the actual arrival of the railroad.

The depot would not go to the town, so the town went to the depot, building businesses all around it and creating for a time a separate commercial center there. Pogue's Run, which flowed between the town and the depot, was straightened from Virginia Avenue to Meridian Street by the property owners, and the streets were graded and filled across the low, muddy space of the creek bottom.

The isolation of the town ended with the completion of the Madison line. Because the railroad was the first to arrive, it could—and did—charge all the traffic would bear. Soon, however, its high rates and heavy profits not only aroused opposition but also spurred the development of competing lines. Within a very short time, eight railroads were completed, and Indianapolis became widely known as “the railroad city of the west.”

By December 1848, although no lines were yet competing with the Madison, several were being planned. Encouraged by the prospect of competition and demonstrating extraordinary vision, the city fathers decided that a common passenger

depot was a necessity. On 20 December 1848 the council authorized the creation of the Union Railroad Company, which was to build a union depot and city tracks connecting the different railroads. On 19 December 1849 four railroad companies adopted a resolution saying:

Resolved, that it is expedient to locate and establish at Indianapolis a joint railroad track, connecting the Madison and Indianapolis, the Terre Haute and Richmond, the Peru and Indianapolis, and the Indianapolis and Bellefontaine railroads. And to locate and establish on said joint track a joint passenger depot for said companies.

Later, the Peru railroad decided not to participate, so the other three companies became the founders of the Indianapolis Union Railroad Company and the first Union Depot.

Track construction was begun 19 June 1850 and, not long afterward, land was purchased for the Union Depot, which was to be located on Louisiana Street between Meridian and Illinois Streets, a short distance west of the Madison and Indianapolis depot.

By 1852 there was construction on the Bellefontaine, Cincinnati, Jeffersonville, Terre Haute, Peru, Lafayette, and Indiana Central Railroads. The union track, connecting all of these, had been completed. And the Union Depot—"union" because it sought to serve all the railroads—was under construction. Holloway wrote: "We were beginning to feel our importance as a railroad center, and (we) exhibited our conceit in such sensible forms as new hotels, manufactures and business houses."

Local historians seem to agree that no other city in the nation, maybe no other city in the world, had a union railroad depot at this time, making it of national significance when Indianapolis Union Depot opened on 28 September 1853—one hundred and fifty years ago this month.

Just a few years ago, John H. White, professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and a well-known railroad historian, took note of that significance in an article in *American Heritage* magazine, calling Indianapolis Union Depot the “most underrated railroad station.” White wrote:

This is rarely mentioned in historical texts, yet it [Union Depot] appears to have been the first to collect all the major rail lines entering a city and put them in one building. The building was hardly a marble palace, nor did it likely spend much in the way of gilt ornamentation. It was just a great barn, 425 feet long by 200 feet wide, a cheap commercial structure built for a purpose rather than a look. Here, passengers could change trains for destinations throughout the area just by walking between platforms. Platform 1 might be limited to trains for Cincinnati, Platform 2 for Madison and Louisville, and so on. By 1870, it was serving eleven railroads and handling 76 trains a day.

A few other cities, such as Chattanooga and Cleveland, followed Indianapolis in just a few years, but other major cities punished rail travelers with the old inefficient multiple-station system.

By the time the Union Depot opened, the Union Railroad Company was an association of five railroads, the original three plus the Indianapolis and Cincinnati and the Indiana Central. Gen. T. A. Morris, as chief engineer, oversaw the construction of the depot, and William N. Jackson was appointed as the first general ticket agent, a job he held for many years.

The station was designed by Joseph Curzon, who had moved to Indianapolis in 1851 from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. A native of England, he was one of only six professional architects in Indianapolis in the 1850s, and he quickly acquired a successful practice.

The first Union Depot was 120 feet wide with tracks inside for five passenger trains. Two tracks for freight trains ran along the south side of the building. The Madison and Indianapolis Rail Road station, a short distance away, was turned into a freight station after the Union Depot opened. The depot was enlarged to 200 feet wide and improved in 1866. An eating house, as it was described, was added, and the offices were transferred to the south side.

By 1870 the population of Indianapolis had grown to 48,244. The depot was handling an average of eighty trains a day, “many of them of great length,” according to one writer at the time. About two million passengers arrived or departed from the Union Depot that year, causing Holloway to write, “The erection of a similar building and on a larger scale, now urgently demanded, must ere long become a necessity if the great convenience of one passenger depot for all our railway lines is to be continued.”

For the railroads in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the competition was intense—at times ruinous. Wild speculation in railroad stock, over building, endless rate

wars for both passenger and freight business, and the economic crisis of 1873 led to widespread bankruptcy and complicated reorganization schemes. But, even though the railroads were often financially unsuccessful, they were great for the growth and economic prosperity of Indiana, especially by 1880, when the steam railroad became the major mode of transportation.

In Indiana five trunk lines crossed the state, running east and west. Three other systems went the length of the state, north and south. Those eight, with about forty more small railroads, served most of Indiana's cities and towns. Indianapolis was at the hub of this rail network, linking the state with Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and other American cities across the continent. "Railroad city" was now also being referred to as the "crossroads of America."

Most of the major lines were represented in Indianapolis, and connecting all of the entering tracks was a belt railroad, one of the first in America. It was constructed in 1877 for the Union Stockyards and leased in 1882 on a 999-year lease by the Union Railroad Company, which operated the Union Depot and handled switching and transfer operations for the lines served by the depot.

In 1883 the Union Railroad Company was incorporated as the Indianapolis Union Railway Company, at least in part for the purpose of seeking a new building. The need had existed for some time, but action became imperative that same year when the fifteenth railroad asked for accommodations on the Union tracks and in the Union Depot.

James McCrea was president of the Indianapolis Union Railway Company throughout the planning and construction of the new Union Station. A few years later, as president of the Pennsylvania system, McCrea participated in the opening of a Union

Station in Washington, D.C., and then presided over the completion of the railroad tunnel under the Hudson River into New York City and the opening of New York's Penn Station. An 1886 article in the *Indianapolis Journal* emphasized the vision and leadership that McCrea brought to the project: "The fact is that nothing would have been done for years to come about a new union depot (for Indianapolis) but for Mr. McCrea's persistent urging the matter. . . . The Journal has the best of authority for saying that the first time he met the board of directors, he brought the matter up, and there has not been a meeting since which he attended that the subject of a new union depot has not been discussed."

In December 1884 the directors of the Union company met and passed a resolution beginning the process, instructing V. T. Malott, vice president and general manager of the Indianapolis Union Railway Company, to get the state legislature to pass "such legislation as was needed in the way of vacating streets and providing for other necessities." Legislative approval came in March 1885, and options on the needed real estate were immediately sought. At the same time, the *Journal* reported, "legislation was being pushed through the City Council and the Board of Aldermen, this work being rather tedious."

Thomas Rodd, an architect and engineer from Pittsburgh, was hired to design the new Union Station. He was assisted by F. C. Doran of Richmond, Indiana.

By September 1886 McCrea was able to report that "the city authorities have acted very honorably with the company, in fact granting them all the favors they expected, and the Union Railway Company now has good titles to every piece of

property between Illinois and Meridian streets, both north and south of the Union Depot, which they need, with one exception, and the property is paid for.”

As part of its agreement with the city, the railroad company was to make improvements to the tunnel under the railroad tracks on Illinois Street, construct a viaduct over Meridian Street, and cover part of Pogue’s Run over which tracks were to be laid. The tunnel had been built in 1872 for the use of the mule-drawn trolleys, and Pogue’s Run had been a problem since the first Union Depot was built.

In November 1886 Joseph Downey of Chicago was awarded the contract for construction of the station proper, including everything except the electric lighting. C. J. Shultz of Pittsburgh got the contract to build the train sheds. Before the end of the year, hundreds of carloads of stone had been hauled in for construction of the station’s foundation, and the excavation work had begun.

The new Union Station was built between Illinois and Meridian Streets just north of the existing station, allowing the old depot to remain in use during much of the construction of the new facility. By the time it was torn down in the summer of 1888 to allow completion of the new train sheds, the general ticket agent and his staff were able to move to temporary quarters in what was to be a baggage room of the new station. Other occupants of the old depot moved to nearby buildings.

By June 1888 the tunnel improvements had been completed, and the trolleys were not the only ones to benefit. The *Journal* reported that “the Illinois Street tunnel under the Union tracks is daily becoming more popular as a driveway. It is now so light and airy that it is much preferred to waiting for trains at the grade crossings.”

Not long afterward, heavy iron girders were placed over Pogue's Run between Meridian and Delaware Streets and tracks were laid over them, "greatly increasing the facilities at the east end of the station."

But the viaduct to carry Meridian Street traffic over the grade-level tracks was not to be. Although the city wanted it and the railroads were willing to pay a reasonable price for it, it became a great source of controversy. Arguments over its width and exact location led some property owners to file lawsuits.

Even after the new station opened, the executive committee of the railroad was empowered to proceed with the work as soon as the question of damages was settled so that the company could know where it stood in the matter. As a result, Meridian Street was left, in the words of the *Journal*, "as it has been for 30 years, a very dangerous and inconvenient crossing of the Union tracks."

The old Union Depot got electricity in 1882 and, when the new facility was built, the station and train sheds were illuminated with 65 arc lights and 1,150 incandescent lights provided by the Indianapolis Jenney Electric Light Company. The power was generated by four stationary engines in the station's basement. The building was heated with natural gas.

Early in 1888 the railroad board announced that the dining rooms in the new station would go "not to the man who will pay the most for the lease, but to the party who will give the best table service." In June of that year, Thomas Taggart of Indianapolis was selected as the best man to take charge of the station restaurant.

Taggart, an amiable Irishman active in Democratic politics in Indianapolis, had worked in railroad restaurants for seventeen years, since he was fifteen years old. He

came to Indianapolis in 1877 to work in the restaurant at the old depot. He was sole proprietor of the restaurant in the new station and later acquired control of the Grand Hotel and the Denison Hotel. However, he is remembered today because he went on to become one of the city's most powerful politicians, serving as mayor from 1895 to 1901.

One of the last, and most prominent, features of the new station to be put in place was the giant clock that was to enhance the station's distinctive tower and be visible for a great distance in all directions. Fredrick Herron of Indianapolis got the contract to provide the clock, which was to have four faces, each nine feet in diameter, and was to be lighted at night.

On Sunday, 16 September 1888, the Union Railway Company began moving into its permanent quarters in the new building, which was to be called Union Station, replacing the old Union Depot. Some passenger trains had begun using the new train sheds a couple weeks earlier, and on Monday, 17 September, travelers would begin to use the new station.

The grand opening was another exciting day for Indianapolis, but there were not any parades, speeches, or fireworks as there had been when the first train arrived in 1847. Still, thousands of persons turned out to see the new facilities. And everyone seemed to agree this was probably "the finest" union station anywhere. Of the three daily newspapers in town, only the *Indianapolis News* reported the story on page one. The *News*'s story on Monday began:

Yesterday was a busy day at the new Union Passenger Station. The building had been declared ready for occupancy, and a large force was busily engaged in

moving the furniture and all appurtenances into it from the temporary quarters, where they have been established for several months. At midnight last night the task was complete. The great structure was brilliant with electric lights, the engines in the basement moved off in perfect order furnishing both light and heat. The employees appeared in blue uniforms and white caps, and like a transformation scene on the stage, everything was changed entirely. This morning the rush to the State Fair began, and the crowds found everything ready to accommodate them. Travelers of broad experience declare the Indianapolis passenger station to be the finest in the United States. In this connection it is well to remember that the old union station, lately demolished to make way for the new, was the first union depot in the country, and at the time of its erection in 1853, was much the finest structure of the kind in existence. Thus it is that Indianapolis is always in the van of progress.

The *Journal*, which regularly carried the most railroad news of the three Indianapolis newspapers, had a long story and an editorial on Sunday and a brief story the following Tuesday. The *Journal's* Sunday story, which ran on page 12, included a detailed description of the new station. It said, in part:

The station proper is 150 feet square, three stories high, with basement and attic rooms. The tower is 185 feet high, and besides this structure there are two baggage rooms, one at the west and the other at the east end of the train sheds. The baggage rooms are each 150 feet long by 25 feet wide.

The train sheds are 741 feet long by 200 feet wide, constructed of iron with a tin roof. The station proper rests on a granite foundation, the stone coming from Iron Mountain, Missouri. The walls above are constructed of pressed brick, with brown-stone trimmings, which were shipped from Pennsylvania. . . . Under cover of the sheds are ten long tracks, 741 feet long, and two short tracks.

[Entering the main entrance], after one passes through the vestibule, one comes to the gentleman's waiting room, 144 feet long by 50 feet wide. The ceiling of this room is a semi-circle and is 65 feet high. On the west side is, first, the package room, then the union news room, next the barber's shop, and in the center one of the most elegant and complete ticket offices in the country.

Directly adjoining the ticket office is the ladies' sitting and elegant private room. The ladies' room is 70 feet long by 40 feet wide and is finished in an attractive manner, one feature being a huge fireplace constructed of red sandstone shipped from Wisconsin.

Crossing to the east side of the main waiting room comes the dining room, which is 60 feet long by 40 feet wide. Next to that is the sleeping-car office, which faces the general ticket office, the serving room for the dining rooms being in the rear. Adjoining this is the lunch counter.

The story goes on in a similar vein for several more paragraphs before concluding, "The Union Railway Company has thus far expended \$1,156,000, part of which was for the Pogue's Run improvement, the tunnel on South Illinois Street, the asphalt and concrete payments about the building and the streets around the building. There is still

considerable to do in the way of putting on the finishing touches, which will increase the cost of the improvement to \$1,200,000.”

Lest you think all this praise is just local boosterism, it should be noted that *Harper's Weekly*, in an article published in August 1888 said Indianapolis's Union Station was “one of the handsomest and most convenient stations in the country. Architecturally considered, it is by far the best building in Indianapolis.”

At the time of the grand opening, the big complaint was about the fact that the viaduct over Meridian Street was never built. Also, the express companies were not too happy about being relegated for the most part to offices across the street (where the Crowne Plaza is today). At the time, there were six express companies, employing about 130 local men and requiring, as the *Railroad Gazette* reported, “four two-horse wagons and 24 single wagons to do the delivering, calling and depot work.”

But there were other complaints as well. On 22 September the *Journal* reported:

There is a good deal of complaining among the male population who are not admitted to the ladies' (waiting) room in the new Union Station. This is a rule at all large railway stations in the country and will doubtless be enforced until men have better habits. There should be one room at a large railway station, in fact, at a small one as well, where a lady can move about without her skirts dragging in tobacco spit.

As the world turned to the twentieth century, few cities in America had a large and beautiful passenger station to accommodate all its train-riding public. Few cities

were served by as many as seventeen railroads. Few had a belt railroad circling much of the city to conduct switching and transfer operations for all its railroads. And few had more than 150 passenger trains arriving and departing each day.

Indianapolis had all of these. It was still Railroad City. And city and railroad officials from other parts of the country came here regularly to see how it functioned. However, the tremendous growth of rail travel—and of population—posed problems as well as opportunities for Indianapolis and the railroads that served it.

Within a very few years of the time the new Union Station opened, it was being called inadequate, and there were demands for expansion. In 1920 the *Journal Handbook of Indianapolis* said those who planned the new station “did not dream of the rapid growth of Indianapolis that was just then fairly starting on its new era of prosperity, and now it is seen that a building of almost twice the size of the present one is as badly needed as a new and larger one was in 1887.”

In fairness, it would have been difficult for anyone to anticipate the growth of the city. The population of Indianapolis more than doubled in the twenty years from 1880 to 1900, and it nearly doubled again in the next twenty years.

The dangers and delays for street traffic, which led to demands for a Meridian Street viaduct in the 1880s, continued to be a problem wherever thoroughfares crossed the railroad tracks. And in 1913 a committee of the Track Elevation Commission concluded with this statement:

It is now nearly 20 years since the elevation of the tracks was first seriously proposed for the city, and some progress has been made, mainly on the outskirts

of the city, but the main work as first laid out has hardly been touched as yet, only the approach from the west having been completed. The main streets are still open to the same dangers and complaints of the days of the first railroads, increased and intensified by the vast increase in traffic and in required speed of travel both on railroads and streets. The committee therefore wishes to emphasize to the utmost the need for promptness in getting action and is willing to concede some details if thereby the time of completing the elevation of the east and west tracks through the heart of the city can be shortened.

In that same report, the committee called for enlarging and improving Union Station and making it “a proper gateway to the city.” The committee said, “The Union Station in the modern city is its gateway and is the first structure by which the traveler can judge the beauty and dignity of the city.” It said having one passenger station to serve all railroads “gives an opportunity to make the structure one commensurate in dignity and beauty as well as in size and completeness of equipment with its importance as the only entrance to the city and the receiving point of the million of visitors and new arrivals landing in the city, not to mention the other millions who spend but a few minutes about the station as they pass through.”

Some track elevation projects over specific streets, mostly in outlying areas, began to occur as early as 1906, when work was started on elevations over Kentucky Avenue and Missouri Street. But 1913 was really the beginning of a decade of modernization affecting Union Station and the wholesale district surrounding it.

Changes in the station were controlled by the management of the Indianapolis Union Railway Company, which at this point was being run primarily by representatives of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the Big Four, and the New York Central. Changes outside the station required the railroads to deal with city officials, the many shippers and freight handlers in the city, the property owners in the areas affected, and the general public. All of these groups had specific, and often conflicting, interests. Finally, the problems with Pogue's Run were solved by putting the stream underground in the downtown area. And, gradually, the tracks got elevated.

On 1 August 1918 four permanent tracks with one permanent and one temporary passenger platform were put in service at Union Station on an elevated structure erected in 1916 and 1917. Eventually the new train shed was to have twelve permanent tracks, with three tracks of freight service south of the train shed.

In its 1922 annual report, the Indianapolis Union Railway Company reported that the new train shed had been completed and work on the passenger concourse underneath it was completed except for the installation of clocks, which was to be finished within sixty days. It said all track elevation work had been completed except on tracks between East Street and Washington Street, which had been delayed on account of construction on the East Washington Street Bridge.

But by now the city was agitating for elevation of the Belt Railroad tracks in other parts of the city, and by 1925 that work was under way.

The early years of the twentieth century were definitely the era of the railroad in Indianapolis. And the number of trains arriving and departing from Union Station each year continued to increase through the years when the renovation was taking place.

But, ironically, in its 1924 annual report, when the railway company reported that “at the end of 1924, all construction work in connection with the elevation of the Union tracks had been completed,” it also reported the following:

Attention is drawn to the decrease in 1924 in the number of tickets sold at the Union Station ticket office. . . . The decrease in local ticket sales is probably due to the extensive use of privately owned automobiles and bus lines for interurban travelling. This decrease does not affect the income of the Indianapolis Union Railway Company, but (it) does affect the revenues of the tenant lines using these terminal facilities.

A similar report was contained in the 1925 annual report, marking the beginning of the end of the passenger train era.

In 1920 Union Station handled 64,343 trains—an average of more than 176 trains a day every day of the year. That number dropped to about 40,000 trains a year in the 1930s. It jumped up again during World War II, topping 60,000 trains in 1945 for the first time since the 1920s.

The station was redecorated in 1937, and a new marquee was built over the north entrance in 1941, after that little if anything new was done. Following the end of the Korean War, in the summer of 1953, the decline of passenger train travel became rapid and irreversible.

Today Indianapolis’s Union Station is still regarded by some experts as an outstanding example of Romanesque Revival architecture, with its extensive use of the

Roman arch in its design and its predominant exterior materials: red-pressed brick over an exposed foundation of rock-faced red granite. The variation in detail by floor is also typical, as are the upper-story tourelles with conical caps, the continuous hood moldings of round arches, and the use of medieval motifs of decoration, such as the entwining leaf patterns.

Union Station is one of the oldest examples of Romanesque Revival architecture in the state. It is also the largest and most impressive example of a nineteenth-century railroad station. In 1974 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Regardless of the design features, however, the 115-year-old station has certainly played an important part in the history of Indianapolis. And I hope it has a role to play in the city's future.