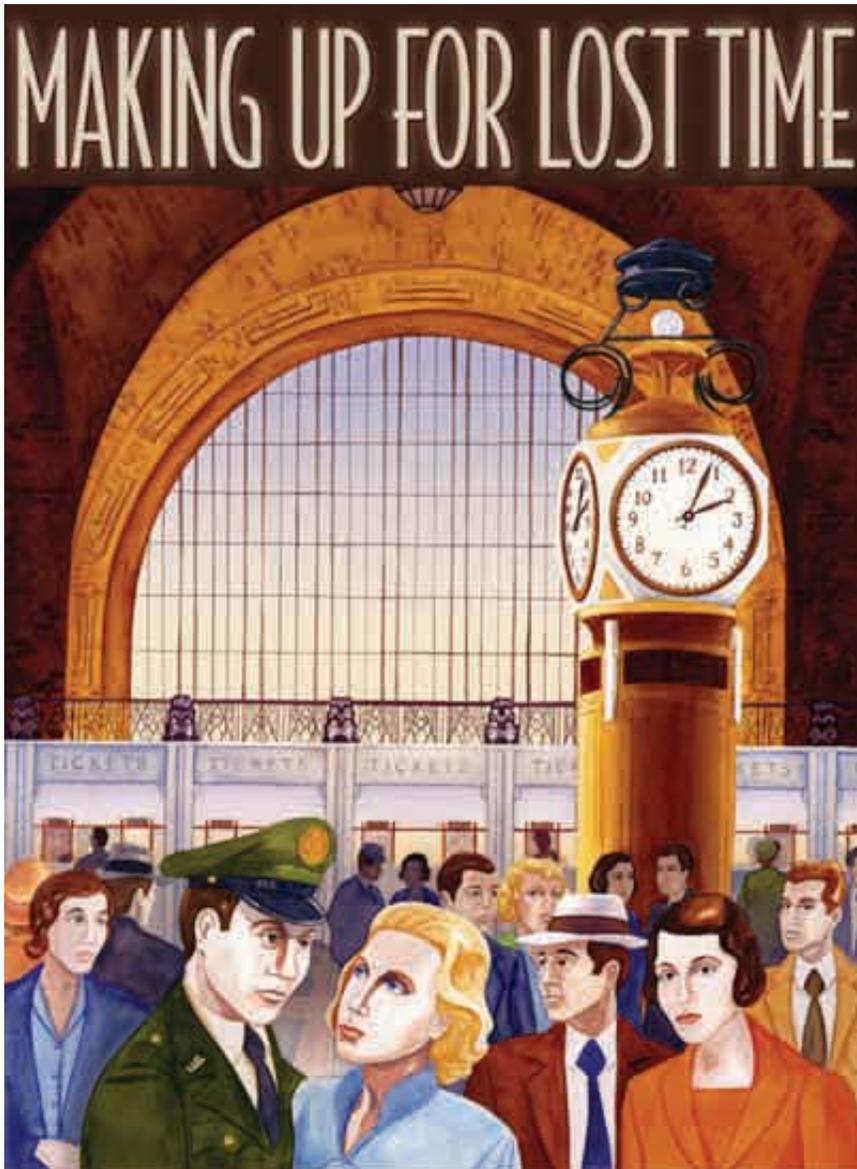


Image courtesy of the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation



By Rich Sampson

Featuring a 17-story office tower, a main concourse capable of hosting 3,200 passengers per hour, 30 miles of railroad track, a four-story baggage building and a two-story mail sorting facility all spread over 17 acres of land, Buffalo's Central Terminal complex might be the most physically imposing passenger rail structure yet created in the western hemisphere. The New York Central Railroad – believed by many to be the finest of all American railroads at its zenith in the first half of the twentieth century – spared no expense to create a signature station in the city positioned almost exactly between its hubs of

New York City and Chicago along its main line, the Water Level Route.

Despite the manifestations of grandeur that constituted Central Terminal, it tragically has been the unwitting victim of bad timing. It opened on June 22, 1929, just a few months before the onslaught of the Great Depression that fundamentally changed the nation's economy, especially for its railroads like the New York Central. By the time the American economy had regained its footing after World War II, new trends in transportation set the stage for the general decline of passenger rail travel until just recently. Moreover, while many metropolitan areas in North America have experienced a

The Central Terminal Restoration Corporation (CTRC) commissioned this commemorative poster depicting the station's glory days during the World War II era.

resurgence in passenger rail in the past few decades, the city and region where the station spread-out its massive roots has faced the toughest economic conditions, which ultimately led to the abandonment of Central Terminal in 1979.

The story of Buffalo Central Terminal is one where the grandest of designs were met with fierce changes in climate – social, economic, and even physical. Now approaching its 80th anniversary, the great old station has been battered like few others. Yet, and perhaps owing to the sturdy foundations established by its builders, it somehow still stands, and recent years have seen signs of new life, as its community gradually attempts to reclaim what once was – and may be again.

The Challenge of Railroad Geography

The City of Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier – located at the confluence of Lake Erie and the Niagara River – has always been a transportation nexus. It was an early trading post for Native Americans and European settlers, followed by the western terminus of the Erie Canal. And while these institutions of commerce and transport provided the spark for the region's development, nothing fueled its growth like the railroads. The Buffalo and Black Rock Railroad opened in 1834 and would eventually be acquired by the New York Central. Surprising for a region bounded on two sides by Great Lakes, only Chicago saw more railroad traffic – both passenger and freight – than Buffalo. Almost a dozen competing railroads built tracks in the city, heading east across New York State, south through Pennsylvania, west towards Chicago and St. Louis via Ohio, and across the Niagara River to Ontario and then on to Michigan – combining to build more than 600 miles of track carrying over 90,000 trains each year.

This rush to shuffle trains off to Buffalo eventually produced a city



Photo by Rich Sampson

Central Terminal's namesake railroad was emblazoned above the station's entrances in its Art Deco style.

with an uncoordinated hodgepodge of tracks, yards and depots. As many as six competing passenger terminals were located in downtown Buffalo, and street traffic quickly became ensnared by blocked grade crossings. Additionally, the location of the city's downtown itself soon became a challenge to railroad operations, as it was impossible to route trains heading to and from east and south to the southwest – in the direction of places like Cleveland, Cincinnati and Chicago – through the heart of Buffalo without a massive detour around the city's perimeter to continue in the correct direction. This became a particular concern for the New York Central, as its main line between New York and Chicago depended on a direct route along the shores of Lake Erie.

The New York Central set its team of planners and engineers to work to devise a plan to best serve Buffalo, while also meeting its needs for efficiency in operations. They returned with a solution that would become Buffalo Central Terminal. The railroad already owned hundreds of acres of land about 2.5 miles east of downtown where it operated large freight yards, and where freight trains already continued their trip between New York and Chicago unencumbered by the congestion downtown. In 1927, the railroad's officials determined they would construct a new passenger terminal here to bypass their downtown terminal on Exchange Street, which, in addition to

being inconvenient for rail traffic had exceeded its capacity years earlier.

Creating an Icon

With ample land and capital resources, the New York Central set out to create a facility that would be unparalleled in its scope. While the railroad had opened one of the most architecturally stunning public buildings in 1871 with New York City's Grand Central Terminal, its counterpart in Western New York would match that flair with brute strength. The Central's President, Patrick Crowley, personally selected architects Fellheimer & Wagner to design Buffalo's new rail gateway, the same firm that went on to

create plans for Cincinnati's renowned Union Terminal. The team relied heavily on the popular Art Deco style to fashion a theme for the building, but its distinctiveness was truly crafted by the station's size.

The centerpiece of the station complex would be the main passenger terminal building, for which Fellheimer & Wagner designed two signature elements – the central passenger concourse and an accompanying office tower. Accounting for the increasing passenger volumes New York Central was moving through Buffalo each year, they stipulated a massive open space – 225 feet long, 66 feet wide and nearly 59 feet high, which was tapered to rise to almost 64 feet at

The massive Central Terminal complex on Buffalo's East Side contained miles of track in addition to the terminal building, tower, and mail and baggage facilities.



Photo courtesy of the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation



A massive crowd gathers at Central Terminal for a political rally (above), while two World War II-era servicemen admire the station's signature stuffed buffalo (below).

each end to host banks of windows along nearly half their height – a defining look of New York Central's stations, including Grand Central. Meanwhile, the station would serve as a nerve center for the railroad's staff throughout the region via a 17-story office tower above the main concourse, topping out at more than 270 feet. The tower's octagonal frame roughly mirrored that of Buffalo's equally iconic City Hall downtown. Work spaces for dispatchers, bookkeepers, personnel managers and all other sorts of administrators rounded out the

office floors.

Beyond the core spaces of the concourse and office tower, equally crucial were the means by which passengers reached their trains. Spanning out from the passenger concourse was a broad elevated walkway to allow passengers to safely and comfortably cross above the station's 14 working tracks to reach their platforms. The platforms – seven in all – were accessed by both gently sloped ramps and conventional stairways, which both sped traffic flow and also offered better access for

people with disabilities, a rare feature for the era.

Meanwhile, the facility offered passenger amenities as advanced and luxurious as any public space in the world at the time. A bank of ticket windows stretched along the entire western width of the concourse, allowing for improved customer service. The main hall also featured a full-service restaurant and lunch counter, coffee shop, soda fountain, barber stand, newsstand, baggage check, parcel shipping, waiting room – with accompanying men's and ladies' adjointer rooms – conductors' ready room and even a small emergency hospital operation. Streetcars circulated underneath the station on a special loop, while the taxi stand above could accommodate dozens of cabs. No traveler convenience or accessory available at the time was eschewed. Underneath the main floor, an army of conductors, trainmen, laundry service, cooks, porters and baggage-sorters had offices and locker rooms available to do their work.

Meeting Its Mission

Buffalo Central Terminal opened to passengers on June 22, 1929, with the departure of the eastbound *Empire State Express* at 2:00 p.m. The Buffalo Chamber of Commerce feted the railroad and its new masterpiece with a 2,200-plate luncheon gala, believed to be the largest indoor gathering ever in Buffalo at that time. The New York Central had spent an estimated \$14 million on the station project.

The Chamber proclaimed on its luncheon program, “in the last few years, this railroad has invested millions of dollars in improvements vital to the industrial development of the Niagara Frontier. The construction of this magnificent terminal by the New York Central indicates complete confidence in the growth of Buffalo. Today the City meets this challenge of confidence and pledges itself to cooperation in works conducive to civic advancement.”

The new terminal quickly lived up to the promise of its billing. In the 24 hours following its opening, Central Terminal had already hosted over



Image courtesy of TLC Publishing, Inc.

The midnight meeting of the *20th Century Limiteds* at Buffalo is chronicled in Walter L. Greene's "Eastward, Westward." Note the contrast between the fly-by-night aircraft hovering just below the moonlight at the top of the painting versus the grandeur afforded to rail travel – the more acceptable mode at the time.

200 trains. The station was a bustling scene at nearly every hour of the day and night. Shorter routes to and from destinations such as Cincinnati, Detroit and Toronto would call during daytime hours, while long-distance trains connecting terminals in New York, Boston, Chicago and St. Louis would arrive in the evening or early morning. In fact, Central Terminal's hallmark moment arrived each day at midnight, when the east- and westbound counterparts of New York Central's signature train – the *20th Century Limited* – would meet in Buffalo. As the city was nearly equidistant between the train's New York and Chicago termini, their schedules were neatly coordinated to mirror each other midway.

Beyond the hustle of regular passenger rail travel during the early-to-mid 1900s, the station also served as the central point of departure for most of Buffalo's armed forces troops during World War II – including both

of this author's grandfathers, who left Central Terminal to serve in the air and on the ground in the European theatre. Troop trains whisked thousands of soldiers, sailors and airmen off to training bases to the south and west. On their way to these trains, it became a good luck tradition for servicemen to pluck a strand of hair from the gigantic stuffed buffalo that stood sentry in the terminal's main hall to remind them of home. At the War's end, the buffalo had become so tattered by the military traffic that a bronze replacement was installed in its place.

To Every Action, An Equally Opposite Reaction

In as much as Buffalo Central Terminal was defined by its largess – both in physical stature and level of activity – it also experienced an equally tragic diminishment of its capacity. Just over four months after its debut, the stock market

crash of October 29, 1929 ignited the Great Depression. By 1933, New York Central's annual revenue had plummeted from more than \$130 million in 1929 to around \$53 million. And while the onset of World War II provided a solid upturn in railroad activity during the 1940s, a devastating blow to the nation's railroading industry had already been struck. After the War, a combination of consumer trends and government incentives promoted the development of automobile and air travel across the nation.

Meanwhile, the region whose population and industrial strength once demanded such a high-profile passenger rail station began to experience massive demographic and economic shifts. Western New York's industrial base in the production of steel, grain and heavy manufacturing collapsed nearly entirely during the 1960s and 70s, taking with it hundreds of thousands of area



Photo by Rich Sampson

Today, Central Terminal still strikes an imposing figure against the Buffalo skyline.

residents. The city of Buffalo lost more than half its population from its height of more than 600,000 in the 1950s to under 300,000 after 2000, although many residents moved to the region's suburbs. The East Side of the city – where Central Terminal was located – was the hardest hit by the changing housing patterns, as average incomes fell sharply, crime grew and neighborhood cultures gradually disappeared.

In 1943, Central Terminal averaged 172 arrivals and departures each day. By 1954, that number was 124. On December 3, 1967, the legendary *20th Century Limited* made its final run through Buffalo. In 1971, Amtrak assumed control of all passenger rail service in the United States and provided service at the station until 1979, when the railroad opened smaller, undistinguished and less costly to operate depots in downtown Buffalo and the eastern suburb of Depew.

Between 1979 and 1997, a series of three individual owners passed along ownership of the property, which had ceased functions as a railroad facility, although Amtrak continues to own the passenger platforms and lease the space as a storage site. Over 18

years, these private holders stripped the buildings of anything of value – including ornamental furnishings and iconic fixtures such as the main clock and the bronze buffalo from the main hall. Windows and doorways were destroyed by Buffalo's infamous winter weather, stairways in the 17-story tower collapsed and vagrants broke into the facility, often setting fires and looting at will. More than a decade passed with no electricity or water to the buildings. In 1997, the city of Buffalo took possession of the property through back taxes owed by its then-owner. Conrail – which took over freight rail service in the region following the demise of the New York Central and its merger with the Pennsylvania to form the Penn Central – was allowed to sever the passenger platforms from the main building to provide clearance for double-decker freight trains to travel through the area.

Seeds of Rebirth

Despite the years of neglect and abuse heaped upon Central Terminal from the late '70s to the late '90s, the station never faced the wrecking ball. A testament to the sturdy design and

construction of the New York Central, the facility's hallmark structures – the main hall, office tower and passenger platform concourse all remain standing. Once it controlled the station property and buildings, the city of Buffalo refused to transfer the site to another private entity. Instead, it turned Central Terminal over to the people of the region. A nonprofit group – the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation (CTRC) – was formed by community leaders and concerned citizens, and the city has leased the site to the organization for \$1 per year.

Buoyed by the architectural and historical significance of Central Terminal, the CTRC found support among the larger community to begin the process of reclaiming the station. The first step was securing the site to prevent any further natural or man-made damage. Through a \$1 million grant from Erie County, CTRC sealed the 4,000 windows and dozens of doors of the main hall and office tower, and also re-powered the tower's four large clocks on the tower's exterior – illuminating them as a beacon of the facility's rebirth that can be seen from miles away. Once the buildings were enclosed, the group

went to work removing 350 tons of debris, conducting asbestos abatement and repairing roofs. By 2003, the site was deemed safe to allow public tours and events at the terminal. The group celebrated its collective work in 2004 with the celebration of the station's 75th anniversary.

"Local companies and individuals have been very good to us," says Michael Miller, CTCRC President. "We have good working partnerships, and this is a such a large job. Dollars have really been our biggest obstacle. And we can always use more people whose strength and experience lies in getting a project like this moving forward."

Now past its first decade of work on and in Central Terminal, CTCRC conducts a schedule of more and larger events at the site. During 2008, the organization is hosting 15 events at the station, ranging from the city's unique Dingus Day celebration, to instrumental music concerts and, of course, a model train show. It also hosts open public tours every month during the spring and summer. In 2007, more than 100,000 people visited the terminal. CTCRC also rents the station for film productions, weddings and numerous other private events.

While CTCRC is restoring vibrancy to the once-bustling terminal, it is also considering the long-term direction of the facility. Various proposals for the building's use have been floated since Amtrak left in 1979 – concepts such as a hotel in the office tower, a casino, or a community center – but no investment of dollars, public or private, has followed these ideas. Meanwhile, the station's site sits on a planned expansion line of Buffalo's light-rail route, connecting downtown with Buffalo-Niagara International Airport and retail zones in the suburbs. Moreover, Amtrak's *Empire Service*, *Maple Leaf* and *Lake Shore Limited* – the contemporary version of the *20th Century Limited* – still pass by the station each day. Thus, a role for passenger rail transportation in Central Terminal's future is still a distinct possibility.

"Our goal has never been to restore it to the sole function of being a train station," says Miller. "But, if we can build foot traffic, the terminal will

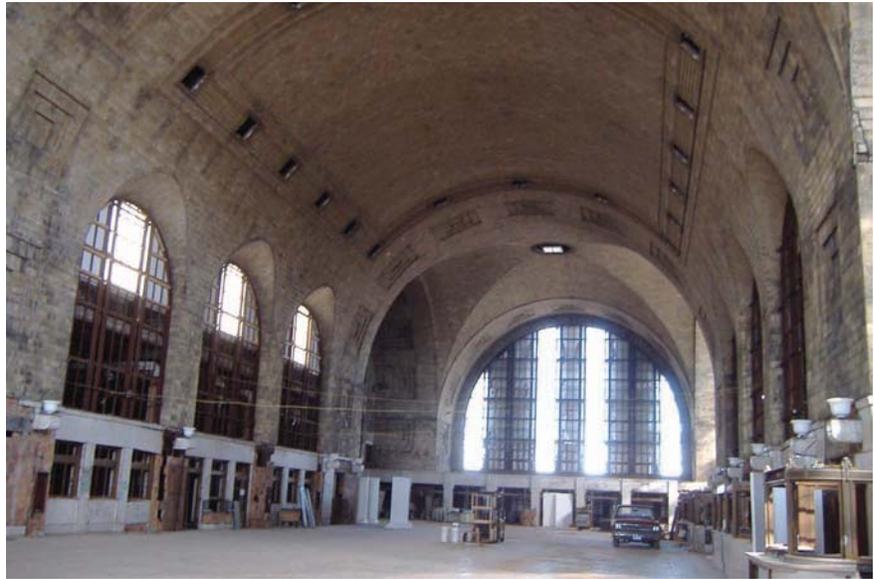


Photo by Rich Sampson



Photo courtesy of the Central Terminal Restoration Corporation

The main hall is gradually returning to a vital community space through the work of the CTCRC.

have purpose again and could possibly be used for Amtrak and light rail."

Still Standing After All These Years

In the meantime, CTCRC and the Niagara Frontier community will continue to gradually restore access and activity to the massive complex. Although Central Terminal may never again see the number of rail passengers traversing its grand hall and wide concourses heading to hundreds of daily trains, the fact that it still stands as witness to passenger

rail's halcyon days may be its best hope for the future.

Many grand passenger terminals – namely New York's Pennsylvania Station, among others – did not survive the mid-century downturn of passenger rail. Buffalo's Central Terminal, despite a cavalcade of forces working towards its demise, has persevered. The size and scope of its profile suggest not only the historic times of its past, but also the potential for great days in its future. 