

Duluth's Past, Present and Future Converge at its Union Depot

By Scott Bogren

As is the case in many major American cities, it is impossible to tell the history of the Duluth, Minnesota [Union Depot](#) without telling the history of the city itself – so intertwined are the two. In fact, it is altogether fair to say that two forms of transportation – rail and steamship – along with nearby rich iron ore veins and timber gave rise to an inevitable city on the western shores of Lake Superior: Duluth.

Duluth: Built by Transportation and Trade

In the second half of the 19th century, Duluth appeared almost overnight. The local population was 71 in 1860. By 1900, the city was home to more than 55,000 people. In many ways, it was the opening of the Sault Ste. Marie Canal Locks in Michigan, in 1855, that prompted Duluth's meteoric growth. The locks opened Lake Superior shipping to not only the lower Great Lakes, but to eastern U.S. and even to the Atlantic Ocean. As was often the case, 19th century railroads and their entrepreneurial leaders seized upon these new-found trade options and a city was born.

The first railroads into Duluth were the [Northern Pacific](#) and [St. Paul & Duluth](#), which jointly commissioned a rail depot at Michigan



Photo by Rich Sampson

Street and 5th Avenue with a commanding view of Lake Superior. They built a wood-frame structure that was quickly in need of expansion, for at about the same time, miners and speculators seeking gold and copper had instead struck iron ore and hematite in abundance in a series of ranges throughout

Northeastern Minnesota. This so-called iron range would fuel the U.S. industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as shipments of ore made their way to steel mills across the Midwest and East. It also built Duluth.

A Train Depot Befitting a Great City

Duluth rapidly outgrew the first iteration of its Union Depot. And with this rapid growth came municipal aspirations to have a new train station befitting a city that some thought would soon surpass Chicago in population. Enter the Boston firm of [Peabody & Stearns](#) and one of its founders, Robert Swain Peabody. Using locally quarried granite, brownstone and limestone as well as yellow

brick, Peabody fashioned bookend-like towers with a triple-arch entry building in a French Norman design topped with a Pennsylvania green slate roof.

Construction took two years at a cost of more than \$600,000 (around \$16 million today). Throughout the construction of the new Depot, the old one continued in use at the center of the new facility's train shed. When the new Duluth Union Depot opened, the old facility was disassembled.

March, 1892 marked the first train to service Duluth's new depot, and soon five more railroads (bringing the total to seven – The Great Northern, Northern Pacific, St. Paul & Duluth, [Duluth & Iron Range](#), [Duluth Missabe & Northern](#), Duluth Superior & Western, and [Duluth South Shore & Atlantic](#)) served the station, making for more than 50 trains daily at its peak in the early 20th century. The station housed a barber shop, railroad offices, ticketing facilities, a newsstand and lunch room. A cast-iron portico was added to the structure in the early 1900s, while the long-span train shed behind the station was removed in 1924.

The Ore Gives Out, the City Declines and the Union Depot is... Saved!

With a thriving economy built on the iron-ore trade, Duluth became a haven for Scandinavian immigrants, and was home to the largest population of Finnish people outside Finland. Fueled by international trade, the city boomed throughout the first half of the 20th century. In the early part of the 1900s, Duluth outstripped both the ports of Chicago and New York City in terms of gross tonnage handled, making it – for a short while – the busiest port in the U.S. It wasn't until mid-century when the high-grade iron ore of the Iron Range finally gave out, that Duluth began to experience economic decline. Population in the city peaked at 160,000 in the 1960s, followed by a slow decline to today's 90,000.

Fewer trains began calling at Duluth Union



Photo by Rich Sampson

Union Depot: On Location



RAIL Editor Rich Sampson reports on location from Duluth's Union Depot.

Depot as the city experienced the same transportation priority shift to the automobile as the rest of the nation in the 1950s. In 1969, passenger trains ceased serving the Station. A lone Budd Diesel car was the last to leave Duluth Union Depot with a handful of passengers determined only to say they were the last to leave the station. Later, in 1970, the railroad merger that created the Burlington Northern (today's Burlington Northern Santa Fe, or, [BNSF](#)) left the Duluth Union Depot slated as surplus property and squarely on the list to be demolished. However, something unusual had occurred that would prove the station's salvation.

Four local Duluth residents stepped forward with a plan to convert the Union Depot into a home for local cultural, arts and history organizations. Don Shank and Frank King of the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range Railroad along with local railroad enthusiast Wayne Olson and local attorney Leo McDonnell began their efforts to save the Depot a full two years prior to the last train, in 1967. Fortunately, the

structure itself was in relatively good shape, making its saving a more reasonable outcome.

As they worked to build support with local politicians and residents, the Duluth Union Depot was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Three years later, Amtrak launched daily passenger rail service between Duluth and St. Paul – the [North Star](#), a service that would run for more than a decade.

New Life and Hope for Rail's Return

One of the saved Duluth Union Depot's original tenants was the Lake Superior Museum of Transportation – now known as the [Lake Superior Railroad Museum](#). The museum was – and is – housed in the Depot's train shed, which was rebuilt specifically for this purpose. The Museum features seven steam, 14 diesel and two electric locomotives in addition to 40 various cars and rolling stock – as well as the first train to operate in the state of Minnesota in 1861.

In addition to the train shed being rebuilt, a 1945-era false ceiling was removed from the nearly 90-foot great hall, providing a central lobby area for the building. Currently, the Duluth Union Depot is home to four museums, a community playhouse, the [Minnesota Ballet](#), the [Duluth Art Institute](#) and the [St. Louis County Historical Society](#), among others. More than a quarter million people visit the revitalized station each year.

Looking past its re-birth as a cultural incubator and museum host, the Duluth Union Depot remains, first and foremost, a transpor-

tation center. And that original purpose may soon, too, be reborn as the Northern Lights Express rail proposal gains momentum.

Proposed to serve the 155-mile corridor between Minneapolis and Duluth, the Northern Lights Express entered the environmental impact assessment phase in 2010 and would return intercity rail to Duluth for the first time since Amtrak left in 1986. Plans call for stops in Superior, Wisc., Sandstone, Minn., Hinckley, Minn., Cambridge, Minn., Coon Rapids, Minn., and Minneapolis' Target Field Station. It's far from a done deal, but the proposed Northern Lights Express would bring the Duluth Union Depot full circle.



Amtrak's *North Star* (above) served Union Depot until the mid-1980s. Today, the Lake Superior Railroad Museum (below) hosts excursions with well-maintained rolling stock.



Photos courtesy of Twin Ports Rail

A Return to Glory

The Duluth Union Depot is once again a community gathering place that speaks to both the past and future of this great American city. Construction is underway nearby that will add to its transportation future.

A new downtown transit center operated by the Duluth Transit Authority will soon be finalized a block away from the Union Depot that will not only increase pedestrian traffic in the station, but that will – one day – offer local mobility options to intercity travelers once trains return to Duluth. 



Rendering courtesy of Duluth Transit Authority

The Duluth Transit Authority's new downtown transit center will be a fitting modern counterpoint to Union Depot, much in the same manner as Minneapolis' Target Field Station compliment's Saint Paul's corresponding Union Depot.

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