



Service Everywhere – From the Heart of America

By Rich Sampson

A plaque in one of the restored hallways of Union Station in Kansas City, Mo., proudly proclaims, “Service Everywhere – From the Heart of America.” Meanwhile, a nearby mural depicts locomotives from a myriad of different railroads striking out in different directions from the city. Still deeper in the massive passenger rail complex, the entrance to the KC Rail Experience museum – itself a former platform gate – permanently

announces the departures of famous named trains that once called at the station: the *Katy Flyer* and the *Flying Crow*.

To argue that a sense of the city’s railroading history permeates Kansas City Union Station is an understatement. There can be no mistake upon entering the doors of the facility – opened on October 30, 1914 – that the station played an essential role in shaping the nation’s railroading destiny. Today, travelers can still board daily trains to Chicago, St. Louis, Albuquerque and Los Angeles, while

also experiencing cultural attractions, shops and restaurants in a location that’s not only in the heart of America, but has also become the heart of Kansas City.

A Proper Railroading Facility

Kansas City has always earned a reputation as a railroading town. The city’s informal nickname as the Heart of America is not without merit, as the area sits roughly in the geographic middle – in both longitude and latitude – of the nation. Such a

Photo courtesy of Galen R Frysingler

Union Station – situated about two miles south of downtown Kansas City – forms an iconic image when coupled with the wide front lawn of the Liberty Memorial.

turn of the century, 12 railroads were operating to and from Kansas City, although many served depots along the banks of the Missouri and Kansas rivers, both of which were prone to flooding. The Kansas City Terminal Railway – which coordinated train movements through the city's center – determined that a new focal point for railway activity was needed, in a location not as susceptible to rising waters.

Through contributions from all the railroads serving the city, the Terminal Railway commissioned Jarvis Hunt to design a central facility reflective of the city's growing importance as a rail hub. A proponent of the *City Beautiful* movement, Hunt returned with a Beaux Arts design that would be the nation's second-largest station after New York City's Grand Central Terminal. It would be defined by a large passenger hall, with ticketing and baggage services, as well as several restaurants and other amenities, along with a long hallway perpendicular to the main hall that would host 16 platform gates. In all, the building would encompass 850,000 square

feet and the ceiling would reach 95 feet from the ground. Additionally, the front doors of the structure would open to a massive landscaped front lawn. Hunt's design received immediate support from its private backers, and the facility opened on October 30, 1914.

Union Station's debut was perfectly orchestrated to capture the height of American passenger rail travel. Just a year after its opening, the station hosted more than half a million passengers. Railroads including the Union, Central, and Southern Pacifics, the Santa Fe, Kansas City Southern, and many others made numerous daily arrivals and departures at the facility, and passengers could access destinations ranging from New York to San Francisco and Atlanta to Seattle through the station. Moreover, the station quickly became the area's de facto public gathering space, hosting political rallies, community festivals and sports championship celebrations. The combination of the massive main hall and the sprawling grounds out front easily accommodated crowds numbering hundreds of thousands.

Trains of the streamliner era pose a dynamic contrast to the more classic Beaux Arts architecture of Union Station. Twelve different railroads once served Kansas City through the station.



location represents a natural meeting ground for travel in all directions. Lewis and Clark established a fort at the confluence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers as they explored the West in 1804, and the heads for the Santa Fe, Oregon and California trails were all located here.

The Missouri Pacific Railroad reached the city first, connecting from St. Louis on September 30, 1865. The Hannibal Railroad Bridge across the Missouri River was completed in 1869 and led to a rapid escalation of railroad traffic to the west. By the





Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

An enormous crowd gathers in front of Union Station for the 1921 dedication of the Liberty Memorial to the nation's World War I troops.

Despite the singularly important role railroads and Union Station played in transforming Kansas City from a frontier outpost to the Paris of the Prairie, the American railroading industry faced a tumultuous downturn in the second half of the 20th Century. This trend impacted the city and its signature station no differently than any other. Annual passenger traffic that had peaked at over 678,000 in 1945 had plummeted to just over 32,000 travelers in 1973, two years after Amtrak assumed all of the nation's passenger operations. Few restorations or improvements to the building were made after 1950, and the station deteriorated to the point that in 1985, Amtrak re-located all its operations to a smaller depot nearby.

The Community Returns to Union Station

After Amtrak departed Union Station in 1985, the station sat virtually unused for over a decade. Frequently, citizens would call for demolition of the structure. The city government attempted to undertake a private transformation of the site, negotiating with a Canadian developer to construct two office buildings adjacent to the

station. While the buildings were completed in 1986, no progress was made in addressing the condition of the station.

By the mid-1990s, the community and its leaders had enough inaction. Convinced by a coalition of preservation activists alongside economic development proponents, voters in five counties in Missouri and Kansas approved the Bi-State Tax in 1996 – a 1/8 of one cent sales tax to fund a series of development and preservation projects, including half of Union Station's \$250 million overhaul. The region's investment strategy marked the nation's first example of a multi-state, multi-county approach to regional preservation and redevelopment.

"We have our mindset; we have our own culture in many ways," said Steve Rose, publisher of *The Sun* newspaper in Johnson County, Kan. Rose was initially an opponent of the Bi-State funding mechanism, but ultimate became one of the project's most outspoken backers. "But I don't think its unfair or unwise to ask the metropolitan area to pay one-eighth cent to renovate Union Station."

The renovation began in 1997 to install the city's science museum, a

planetarium, and a live theatre venue and movie theatre in the station building. Two new restaurants and a range of shops would accompany the new attractions, including a new version of the historic Harvey House railway diner concept.

After removing 10 million pounds of debris, Union Station opened – again – on November 10, 1999. As use of the station as a community gathering place was nothing new to Kansas Citians, the refurbished facility quickly found a new lease on life. New exhibits, events and performances attracted thousands of residents and visitors to the station and allowed its shops and restaurants to gain a foothold. Once the station's renovations were completed, its administration was turned over to the Union Station Kansas City, Inc., a nonprofit entity that would ensure the newfound vitality of the facility.

The burst of activity was an unequivocal success in its own right, but as positive as these developments were, the community felt something was missing in its beloved train station. Of course, the missing piece was quite obvious: the trains.

The Beaux Arts style is reflected in the station's main hall (top), the platform concourse (middle) and platform gates (below).

Where Are the Trains?

Although the changes and enhancements made to Union Station during its late '90s revitalization largely transformed the facility from a passenger rail nexus to a commercial and community space, the railroad tracks that once represented the building's existence continued to remain behind the building, and Amtrak trains passed by every day without stopping. In a city as closely linked with railroading as Kansas City, to have a signature passenger station devoid of a connection to regular train service was unacceptable.

Amtrak and Union Station Kansas City, Inc. worked together following the station's restoration to determine how Amtrak trains could once again call at Union Station. The group worked with TranSystems consultants to design a new rail gateway at the station, using the northwest corner of the main hall and a new platform and walkway to reach the set of tracks behind the station. The new passenger areas would all retain the station's classic Beaux Arts theme.

In December of 2002, Amtrak returned to Union Station via a new platform centered between two tracks, allowing for two trains to serve the station simultaneously. Amtrak trains calling at the station daily are the Chicago to Los Angeles *Southwest Chief*, the *Ann Rutledge* to and from Chicago, and two roundtrip *Missouri Mule* trains connecting Kansas City and St. Louis. Today, between 400 and 1,000 passengers travel through Union Station every day, and the station hosted more than 117,000 riders in 2007 – a far cry from the station's glory days but still a vast improvement on the meager passenger counts when Amtrak undertook its hiatus in 1985.

"The arrival of Amtrak gives the station a complete package of educational and civic use, and now transportation," said Turner White, CEO of Union Station Kansas City. "Amtrak's return symbolizes the usefulness that passenger rail service represents. It's a great day in Kansas



Photo by Rich Sampson



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City.”

Kevin Lewis, Amtrak’s station manager at Union Station explained that Amtrak’s employees “are excited to be back in the heart of Union Station. It’s demonstrated great growth in our ridership here.”

Meanwhile, Union Station finds a prominent role in the region’s transit network. The Kansas City Area Transportation Authority’s Metro Area Express (MAX) bus rapid transit line serves the station on its frequent-service route between downtown and Kansas City’s famous Country Club Plaza commercial district to the south. Additionally, city and county officials are developing plans for a network of regional rail services – light rail, streetcars and commuter rail – that all would focus on Union Station as a central location.

“We have under-invested in transit in the metro area for decades,” said Kansas City Mayor Mark Funkhouser. “The citizens are beyond ready for us to do this.”

Service Everywhere

Owing to its role as a central connection point of the nation’s railroads to the Midwest and West, Kansas City’s Union Station is befitting of its size and grandeur. For a station that witnessed massive numbers of rail passengers in its heyday, its subsequent revitalization as a valued community asset is not altogether surprising. With the return of daily passenger rail service in 2002, Union Station’s continued vibrancy is assured.

Coming years and decades might see the restoration of more passenger rail traffic through the station, whether on intercity trains to distant locations or by commuter rail service throughout the region, as well as local streetcars or light rail vehicles traveling nearby. Regardless of the mode, destination or timeframe of those services, Kansas City’s Union Station is well-prepared to support service everywhere, from the heart of America. 



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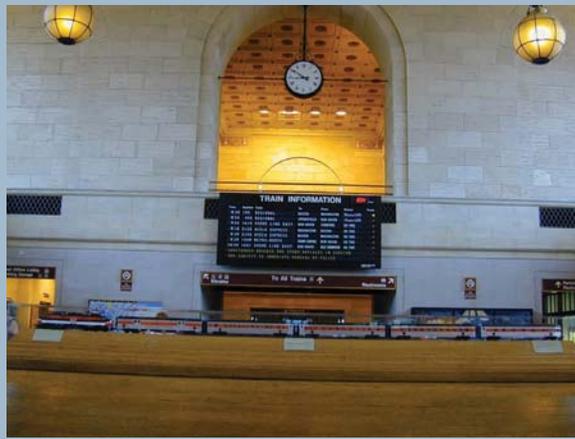
Amtrak returned to Union Station in 2002 following the construction of a new platform area behind the station (above). Kansas City’s MAX bus rapid transit route serves Union Station directly (below).

A More Perfect Union

Many casual rail observers question the meaning behind North America's prevalent use of the term Union Station. Is it a reference to the Union of northern states during the Civil War? Or perhaps a nod to the Union Pacific Railroad? A new record by Allison Kraus?

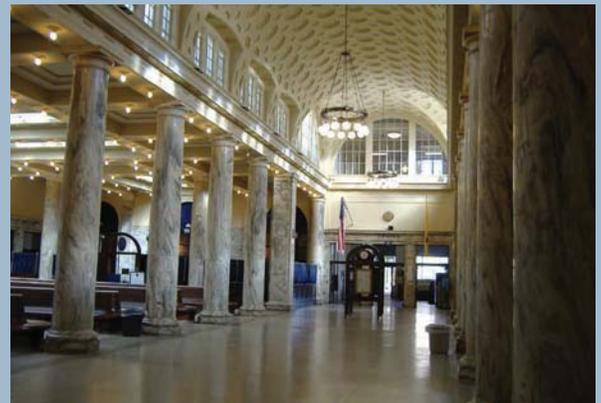
More accurately, a Union Station is one where the tracks of several – and often competing – railroads meet at a common terminal. In the early development of many cities, the routes of these railroads would each serve their own, privately-built depots causing congestion and confusion in city centers. In response, local governments often created terminal railroad companies to centralize all rail traffic over neutral rails. In other areas, railroads acted in cooperation to better arrange their tracks. In these instances a common passenger station was often built to unify services for passengers. These facilities were – naturally – called Union Stations.

Today, Union Stations are still hosting passengers from coast-to-coast and everywhere in between, while others have been restored in a non-railroading capacity. Some of the largest Union Stations can be found in New Haven, Ct., Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ontario, Indianapolis, Ind., Louisville, Ky., Nashville, Tenn., Chicago, Ill., St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., Denver, Colo., Houston and Dallas, Tex., Seattle, Wash., Portland, Ore., and Los Angeles, Calif. Meanwhile, smaller Union Stations in Worcester, Mass., Phillipsburg, N.J., Utica, N.Y., Negaunee, Mich., Joliet, Ill., Ogden, Utah, and Tacoma, Wash., all remain vibrant public spaces in their communities.



New Haven, Conn.

Utica, N.Y.



Tacoma, Wash.

Photos by Rich Sampson