



Chicago's Union Station: A Monument to Rail Travel

Union Station's massive train sheds nearly a century ago, as depicted in an early 20th Century postcard.

By Scott Bogren

"Make no small plans."
– Daniel Burnham

Chicago comes by its reputation as the nation's rail capital quite naturally. At the turn of the last century, the city hosted no fewer than seven major passenger rail terminals and more than 20 separate railroads had significant operations within the city. Of those seven stations, one remains the city's passenger rail capitol today: Chicago Union Station.

Designed by famed architect Daniel Burnham, Chicago Union Station was completed in 1925 as a dual structure train station – a concourse (which was demolished in 1969 to clear room for the air rights and office buildings) and the familiar passenger waiting area and grand hall made famous in films such as *The Untouchables*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, and *Flags of Our Fathers*. But Chicago's monument

to passenger rail has not yet been relegated to history. Last year, upwards of 100,000 daily passengers on the city's Metra commuter rail and Amtrak passed through Union Station's venerable halls, surpassing that of its supposed World War II heyday.

What stands today of Union Station has come, in many ways, to represent rail in Chicago. The building guards its greatness well, belying the magnificence of what's inside. Tucked in among the cavernous buildings that comprise Chicago's central business district – known locally as *The Loop* – Union Station has stood silent witness to the Windy City's rail pre-eminence, the slow dismantling of much of its infrastructure, and its current re-innovation.

The modern incarnation of Chicago Union Station is not the first. The city's first Union Station, which pre-dates the current one by nearly 50 years, was conceived by a group of railroads that signed an

agreement to build a joint station on land owned by the Pennsylvania Railroad's Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railway between Van Buren and Madison Streets on the west side of the Chicago River. In addition to the Pennsylvania, the Burlington and Quincy Railroad, the Chicago and Alton Railroad and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway agreed to use the new Union Station. But as was often the case during this early era, passenger rail demand soon outstripped the station's capacity.

Plans for a second, more modern and robust Union Station began well before ground was first turned in 1913 – again along the west side of the Chicago River, though this time between Adams and Jackson Streets. Burnham, whose famed works include Washington, D.C.'s Union Station and the Flatiron Building in New York City, took the design lead on the project yet never got to see his design take form. He died a year before construction began.

With Burnham's untimely passing, the job of seeing the project through fell to the architecture firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. At more than nine city blocks, the mammoth project ended up taking more than a decade to complete. Strikes, labor shortages due to World War I and economic conditions led to these delays, but the end product was no less spectacular. On May 16, 1925, Chicago's Union Station opened, and with it came an entirely new approach to passenger rail station design with innovations that impact rail travel still today.

Chicago's Union Station is a signature structure in what is now known as the *American Renaissance* period of architecture – during which the concepts of nationalism, modernity and technology were fused together in a heretofore unique meeting of art and function. Among the neoclassical Union Station's most innovative features were its internal U-shaped driveways that allowed for the loading and unloading of passengers to avoid further entangling the city's streets. What emerged on the west side of the Chicago River was a full-service rail terminal foreshadowing a broader notion of today's intermodalism.

Author Janet Greenstein Potter, in her book, *Great American Railroad Stations*, notes about Chicago Union Station: "It was a micro-city filled with stores, restaurants, a nursery, a hospital and even a basement jail."

Union Station's Great Hall is one of the nation's most memorable and historic public spaces – and is

Chicago's Union Station through the years. Top, the original Union Station pictured in a turn-of-the-century postcard; middle, the twin structures of the current Union Station soon after they were finished in 1925, the concourse in the foreground of the photo was demolished in 1969; bottom, Union Station today.



Photo courtesy Schenectady Museum



Photo courtesy Metra



Photo courtesy Melanie Colburn

demolished for its air rights – two office buildings now occupy its place in the city. The temple-like structure sat on land that simply became too valuable as passenger railroad service ebbed in the 1960s. Today, the train concourse is connected to Union Station’s great hall through a large tunnel with trains running parallel to the Chicago River.

A unique aspect of the station is that even in a city rich with local rail service like Chicago, Union Station has no direct connection with either subway or the city’s famed El trains. Plans have been proposed for an entirely underground Circle Line – or outer loop – around the current downtown area that would call at Union Station. Proponents argue that it would help transfer Metra and Amtrak riders more seamlessly to their final destinations. That said, the city’s downtown core is so dense that currently Metra riders can walk to most of their destinations upon disembarking from their trains.

The 1992 rehabilitation of Chicago Union Station was launched by the Chicago Union Station Company, which had been originally

Union Station’s majestic Great Hall has been the backdrop for several films and exemplifies the American Renaissance period of architecture.

today’s the building’s undisputed signature. With its Indiana limestone façade, vaulted skylight, Tennessee marble floors, brass lamps, Corinthian columns and sturdy wooden benches, the Great Hall welcomes visitors to Chicago with proper grandeur and purpose. The Headhouse enjoyed a similar design to New York City’s Pennsylvania Station – which is not all that surprising given the Pennsylvania Railroads central role in crafting Chicago Union Station. The structure housing the Great Hall remains today, having been updated and renovated in 1992. But the other of the two structures that made up Union Station met a different fate.

In 1969, the concourse was



Photo courtesy Alexander Craghead/route9west.com



Illustration by Don Jacot

Thousands of Metra commuter rail passengers pass through Chicago's Union Station everyday. Below, photo artist Mike Karlick simulates the spectrum of passenger rail equipment that works out of Union Station.

incorporated in 1913 to oversee replacement of the first Chicago Union Station. Now owned by Amtrak, the Corporation oversaw waiting room and restaurant façade updates and all-new retail areas for both commuter and long-distance train passengers.

Today, Union Station is home to many of Amtrak's most famous trains, including the California Zephyr,

Chicago's Union Station is more than a symbol of the city's stature as the American rail capitol, it is today an apt symbol of rail's future, with millions of people passing through its halls every year and a new-found intermodal future. **R**



Photo courtesy Mike Karlick