

Union Depot Tower

Union Depot Tower (U.D. Tower) was completed in 1914 as part of a municipal project to improve rail transportation through Joliet, which included track elevation of all four railroad lines that went through downtown Joliet and the construction of a new passenger station to consolidate the four existing passenger stations into one.

A result of this overall project was the above-grade intersection of 4 north-south lines with 4 east-west lines. The crossing of these rail lines required sixteen track diamonds. A diamond is a fixed intersection between two tracks.

The purpose of UD Tower was to ensure and coordinate the safe and timely movement of trains through this critical intersection of east-west and north-south rail travel.

UD Tower housed the mechanisms for controlling the various rail switches at the intersection, also known as an interlocking plant.

Interlocking Plant

Interlocking plants consisted of the signaling appliances and tracks at the intersections of major rail lines that required a method of control to prevent collisions and provide for the efficient movement of trains.

Most interlocking plants had elevated structures that housed mechanisms for controlling the various rail switches at the intersection. Union Depot Tower is such an elevated structure.

Source: Museum of the American Railroad Frisco Texas



CSX Train 1513 moves east through the interlocking. July 25, 1997. Photo courtesy of Tim Frey

Ownership of Union Depot Tower

Upon the completion of Union Depot Tower in 1914, U.D. Tower was owned and operated by the four rail companies with lines that came through downtown Joliet.

Ownership of U.D. Tower went down to three by the 1970s with the bankruptcy of the Penn Central Railroad company, which had assumed ownership of the original Michigan Central Railroad line.

The three remaining railroad companies—Metra, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, and Union Pacific transferred their interests in UD Tower to the City of Joliet when control of the interlocking plant transferred from Metra to the Union Pacific Railroad as part of the Joliet Gateway Center Train Station project, which realigned the tracks and created a new train station and platforms.

Operation of UD Tower

Switch tower workers were called towermen. U.D. Tower was manned 24/7. When all 8 tracks were in use, several towermen simultaneously worked in the tower. Over the years staffing levels dropped due to reduction of rail traffic through the intersection and the eventual elimination of three of the Rock Island's four tracks.

In the later years, switch tower workers were referred to as operators. The operators used a phone and radio to communicate with the dispatchers of the rail lines. The dispatchers would tell the operators when the train was expected to come through, how many cars the train included and the destination of the train.

With the closure of UD Tower, requests for permission to cross the interlocking plant (intersection) are now controlled remotely and are sent via a computer to the Union Pacific dispatch in Omaha Nebraska.

Lift Bridge (Over Des Plaines)

In 1932, the Rock Island had a new two-track, through-truss vertical lift bridge constructed over the Des Plaines River, replacing an earlier five span through-truss bridge. The American Bridge Company of New York and the Ketler-Elliott Erection Company of Chicago constructed the new bridge. This new bridge was one of the first bridges to place the lifting mechanism on the lift towers instead of on the movable span. The movable main span is 305 feet long, and the entire bridge is 537 feet long. A fixed through-truss bridge approaches the main span on either side. The one on the west end is 151 feet long, while the one on the east side is 101 feet long.



THE CHICAGO & ALTON

The Chicago & Mississippi Railroad was completed between Bloomington and Joliet in 1854. On July 31st, 1854, the first train arrived in Joliet from Bloomington, traveling some eighty-five miles in two hours and thirty-five minutes.

In 1854, Joliet was the northern terminus of the Chicago & Mississippi. Arrangements were made with the Chicago & Rock Island to permit passenger trains from the south to run into and out of Chicago over Rock Island tracks without changing cars. For freight trains, however, no such arrangements were made. Instead, the railroad worked with warehousemen of Joliet and officials of the Illinois & Michigan Canal to cooperate in transferring freight from the C&M freight cars to canal boats to move goods from Joliet to Chicago. It was extended from Joliet to Lockport in November 1857, and the remainder of the line from Lockport to Chicago was completed in March 1858.

This railroad went through a series of name changes in its early years, becoming the Chicago, Alton & St. Louis Railroad in February 1855, the St. Louis, Alton & Chicago Railroad on January 21st, 1857 and the Chicago & Alton Railroad on October 10th, 1862.

On May 2nd and 3rd of 1865 the Lincoln Funeral Train, carrying the body of the slain president, passed through Joliet over the Chicago & Alton tracks and on to Springfield to be interred.

The Chicago & Illinois River Railroad began operations in 1874 with a line from Joliet southwest to Coal City in Grundy County, and then south from Coal City to Mazonia, near Braceville, to connect with the Chicago & Alton. It was leased to the Chicago & Alton in 1875 and acquired by the Chicago and Alton in 1879.

The Chicago & Alton's tracks through downtown Joliet were relocated and elevated in 1908-1910. The Chicago & Alton participated in the construction of Joliet Union Station in 1911-1912 and in the construction of Union Depot interlocking tower in 1912-1913.

The Chicago & Alton went into receivership on August 31st, 1922 and was reorganized as the Alton Railroad on January 8th, 1931, under the direct control of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The Alton Railroad went into bankruptcy on November 25th, 1942 and was acquired by the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad on May 31st, 1947.

The Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, and its predecessor railroads, provided a wide variety of passenger train service between Chicago and St. Louis, with all trains stopping at Joliet. Trains such as *the Alton Limited*, *the Prairie State Express*, *the Abraham Lincoln* and *the Midnight Special* featured reclining seat coaches, cocktail lounge cars, dining cars, Pullman sleeping cars and observation parlor cars.

Amtrak took over the intercity passenger train service between Chicago and St. Louis on this line on May 1st, 1971, but the commuter trains between Chicago and Joliet continued to be operated by the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio, using a former intercity locomotive and three former intercity coaches.

The Gulf, Mobile & Ohio Railroad merged with the Illinois Central Railroad on August 10th, 1972 to form the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad.

The Illinois Central Gulf Railroad tried to discontinue commuter train service between Joliet and Chicago in 1974, but was unsuccessful.

In 1978, after the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) was formed and began subsidizing commuter rail operations, modern EMD F40PH locomotive and bi-level coaches replaced the ICG's vintage commuter train equipment between Chicago and Joliet, and a second train was added in 1979. In 1983, the RTA created its Commuter Rail Division and began using the name Metra. In 1987, Metra began operating the commuter service on the Illinois Central Gulf route between Joliet and Chicago, although the ICG retained ownership of the line itself. The line was named the Heritage Corridor to reflect its passage through the new Illinois & Michigan National Heritage Corridor.

On April 28th, 1987, the newly formed Chicago, Missouri & Western Railroad Company purchased most of the former Chicago & Alton from the Illinois Central Gulf. The Chicago, Missouri & Western purchased the line from Jackson Street in Joliet south to East St. Louis and west to Kansas City.

The Illinois Central Gulf Railroad reverted back to the name Illinois Central on February 29th, 1988.

On April 1st, 1988, the bankrupt Chicago, Missouri & Western Railway filed for Chapter 11 reorganization under U.S. bankruptcy laws. In 1989, the Chicago, Missouri & Western sold its trackage from Jackson Street in Joliet south to St. Louis to the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Southern Pacific Railroad was purchased and merged into the Union Pacific Railroad in 1996.

On February 29th, 1998, the Canadian National Railway purchased the Illinois Central Railroad.

In April 1999, Metra added a third daily round trip to the line, and in 2016, Metra added a fourth afternoon outbound train.

Today, Canadian National owns the tracks between 21st Street in Chicago and Jackson Street in Joliet, and Union Pacific owns the tracks between Jackson Street and East St. Louis. Metra operates seven Heritage Corridor commuter trains each weekday between Chicago and Joliet and Amtrak operates ten intercity passenger trains every day between Chicago and St. Louis. Union Pacific owns and operates the CenterPoint Intermodal Facility on the south side of Joliet.

THE ELGIN, JOLIET & EASTERN

The Joliet, Aurora & Northern Railroad was organized on March 22nd, 1884 to build a railroad between Joliet and Aurora. It began operations on August 15, 1886, providing both freight and passenger service.

In April 1888, the Joliet, Aurora & Northern Railroad was sold to the newly formed Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway. Officially, Elgin, Joliet & Eastern operations began on January 1, 1889.

Although the EJ&E built a new depot in downtown Clinton Street in 1892, its commitment to passenger train service was short-lived. When the EJ&E took over the JA&N, it acquired the latter's passenger train service between Joliet and Aurora. In 1907, however, the EJ&E discontinued scheduled passenger train service to Aurora, due in part to competition from the interurban electric line operated by the Joliet, Plainfield & Aurora Railroad Company.

In 1898, Illinois Steel and the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern both come under the control of the Federal Steel Company. Then in 1901, J. P. Morgan acquired Andrew Carnegie's steel holdings and combined them with the Federal Steel Company to create the United States Steel Corporation, of which the EJ&E became a subsidiary. Although the EJ&E serviced numerous industrial customers over years, its fortunes as a railroad were more closely linked to the rise and fall of regional steel production than to any other economic factor.

The Joliet Division of the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway included the East Joliet Yard with its vast complex of switching facilities and buildings. The yard began to take shape in the late 1880's when a roundhouse, a machine shop, and a water tank were built on the Henry Farm on the east side of Joliet. Before long, the facility boasted a blacksmith shop, a wood car shop, a locomotive shop, cinder pits and more. Not only were locomotives overhauled and freight cars repaired, but the EJ&E employees also built new freight cars and cabooses at the East Joliet Yard.

By 1909, the EJ&E had completed its Rockdale Line, which extended 6.46 miles south from Rockdale Junction in Crest Hill through the west side of Joliet to Rockdale.

For many years, the EJ&E was one of the area's major employers, providing jobs for thousands of newcomers to Joliet. Countless immigrant families were attracted to Joliet by the prospect of finding jobs on the railroad. Many of these employees were not only grateful to the EJ&E for their jobs, but also extremely loyal to the company that had hired them.

Historically, the EJ&E prided itself in being a progressive railroad that embraced innovation and pioneered new ideas. The railroad was an early proponent of diesel locomotives and steel freight cars. It illuminated its yards with floodlights and experimented with concrete ties. After World War II, the EJ&E adapted continuous welded rail as a standard. By the mid-1950's, the EJ&E had over one hundred miles of welded rail.

The Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway was commonly known as the Chicago Outer Belt, because it went “Around – Not Thru – Chicago.” While the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern was a common carrier hauling freight of all kinds, it was owned for decades by United States Steel and its main focus was on providing freight service to the steel industry.

In 1988, United States Steel organized Transtar, Incorporated to own U.S. Steel’s railroad and other subsidiaries, including the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern.

In 1991, the EJ&E discontinued service on its 6.46-mile Rockdale Line – between Rockdale Junction in Crest Hill and Rockdale, after a fire severely damaged a wooden trestle. In 1994, the newly founded Joliet Junction Railroad acquired the Rockdale Branch from the EJ&E, which had sought to abandon the line after the fire. It would cost \$90,000 to replace the bridge, plus significantly more for other expenses to bring the line up to code. The Joliet Junction Railroad applied for and received a \$390,000 loan from the Illinois Department of Transportation to fund improvements.

The Joliet Junction connected local shippers with the national railroad network at two connection points: with the EJ&E at Crest Hill and with CSX Transportation at Rockdale.

The Joliet Junction Railroad ceased operations in the summer of 1999, and sold the trackage for \$467,424 to the Forest Preserve District of Will County, which created a recreational trail, called the Joliet Junction Trail, over the former right-of-way.

On September 26th, 2007, the Canadian National Railway announced that it planned to purchase the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway. The U.S. Surface Transportation Board approved the purchase on December 24, 2008, and the deal was completed on February 1st, 2009.

The EJ&E was merged into CN’s Wisconsin Central Ltd. subsidiary on January 1st, 2013. Later in 2013, Canadian National constructed and opened for business an intermodal terminal on the site of the former Elgin, Joliet & Eastern East Joliet Yard.

THE MICHIGAN CENTRAL

The 45-mile Joliet & Northern Indiana Railroad was constructed in 1854 and 1855 to connect Joliet with Lake Station, Indiana where a connection was made with the Michigan Central Railroad. (Before the railroad's construction, the right-of-way had been secured in 1854 to build a horse and wagon road using wooden planks, but the proposed plank road was never built.) On May 7th, 1855, the line was duly opened with an excursion train from Joliet to Lake Station. The schedule, which went into effect in July 1855, showed the importance of the new line as a connecting link. Two trains were run each way daily to connect at the east end with trains from Detroit and Cincinnati and at the west end with trains from the south on the Chicago & Mississippi Railroad and from the west on the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad.

The Joliet & Northern Indiana Railroad was leased as soon as it was opened to the Michigan Central Railroad, and became the Joliet Division of that railroad. The Joliet Cutoff, as it was commonly known, became an important part of the Michigan Central, as it provided interchange with connecting railroads at Joliet while avoiding the congestions and delays associated with routing freight traffic through Chicago.

The one advantage, which Joliet possessed over other Will County communities, was the direct connection with the east over the tracks of the Michigan Central Railroad. This service saved a day or more in time in the exportation of local products and the importation of merchandise by bypassing delays in Chicago railroad yards. It also gave Joliet shippers the same rates to the Atlantic seaboard that Chicago merchants paid, and enabled local dealers to pay approximately Chicago prices for country produce. Farmers came from adjoining counties, especially Kane and Kendall on the west, as far as forty miles away, past other market towns, to take advantage of those higher prices.

The Michigan Central Railroad came under the control of the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad in 1890, but the Michigan Central continued to operate as a separate railroad.

The Michigan Central tracks in Joliet were elevated in 1908-1910. The Michigan Central did not participate in the 1911-1912 construction of Joliet Union Station, but became a tenant there, from 1912 when it opened until 1925 when it discontinued passenger train service to and from Joliet. The Michigan Central passenger trains arrived and departed from the south (Rock Island) side of Joliet Union Station. These trains used the Rock Island's tracks to reach Joliet Union Station from the Michigan Central's Joliet Yard.

In 1914, the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad consolidated with three other railroads to become the New York Central Railroad. The Michigan Central continued to operate as a separate railroad. In 1930, the New York Central leased the Michigan Central and began operating it as part of the New York Central System. The lease of the Joliet & Northern Indiana was transferred from the Michigan Central to the New York Central at that time.

American railroads began a slow decline in the 1950's and the New York Central was no exception. The Joliet Cutoff was allowed to deteriorate as maintenance of the track was deferred. What used to be 40 mile-an-hour track was no longer safe for more than 10 miles an hour.

The New York Central Railroad merged with the Pennsylvania Railroad on February 1st, 1968, forming the ill-fated Penn Central Transportation Company, which filed for bankruptcy on June 21st, 1970. Business continued to decline on the Joliet Cutoff, and Penn Central embargoed service between Chicago Heights and Joliet by the end of 1972, with all freight service to and from Joliet discontinued at that time.

The railroad operations of the Penn Central were taken over by the newly formed Conrail on February 1st, 1976, along with other bankrupt railroads in the northeast. The right-of-way of the Joliet Cutoff between Chicago Heights and Joliet was retained by the Penn Central Corporation, and was never owned or operated by Conrail.

Metra has acquired the site of the former Michigan Central Joliet Yard for use as their Joliet commuter train storage yard.

Between 1992 and 2006, the Forest Preserve District of Will County acquired the former right-of-way of the Joliet Cutoff within Will County and has redeveloped it as the Old Plank Road Trail, a recreational trail used for biking and hiking. While trains will never again operate on this route, it is once again of service to the citizens of Joliet.

THE CHICAGO, ROCK ISLAND & PACIFIC

The actual construction of the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad began in Chicago on October 1st, 1851, and was completed through Blue Island to Joliet in October 1852. With the laying of the last rail into Joliet, public clamor from those along the new rail line brought the decision to operate the first train ever over this route despite the fact that the depot at Blue Island was not yet ready for occupancy, the station at Mokena had barely been started, and at Joliet facilities for turning an engine did not exist.

On October 10th, 1852, a gaily painted little 4-4-0 American-type locomotive built by the Rogers Locomotive Works of Patterson, New Jersey and called the Rocket, coupled on to six new yellow coaches, and at ten o'clock that Sunday morning belched wood smoke from its balloon stack and headed out over the 58-pound iron rails that had been imported from England.

While the train was filled with the adventurous for the forty-mile run from Chicago to Joliet, its departure was unmarked by the usual fanfare of trumpets, the firing of guns, and the ringing of bells. The trip took two hours, and thousands along the right-of-way cheered the train. It made the return trip as a back-up movement, and a banquet that night at the Sherman Hotel climaxed the memorable event.

The rails of the Chicago & Rock Island reached Morris from Joliet on January 5th, 1853, and on February 14th, 1853 entered Ottawa. The Chicago & Rock Island Railroad reached the city of Rock Island on February 22nd, 1854, becoming the first railroad to connect Chicago with the Mississippi River.

The company was reorganized as the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad on July 9th, 1866, and began developing a rail network stretching some 8,000 miles in fourteen states.

The Rock Island provided extensive commuter train service between Joliet and Chicago and, in common with most American railroads, operated extensive intercity passenger train service between Chicago and numerous western cities, such as Omaha, Kansas City, Denver, Colorado Springs, El Paso, Tucson and Los Angeles.

Its tracks were elevated and relocated through downtown Joliet in 1908-1910.

The Rock Island participated in the construction of Joliet Union Station in 1911-1912 and also in the construction of Union Depot interlocking tower in 1912-1913.

From the 1920's on, the commuter train services were operated using 4-6-2 Pacific-type steam locomotives and specially designed coaches, that with their late 1920's build dates, became well known as the "Capone" cars.

In 1932, the Rock Island had a new two-track through truss vertical lift bridge constructed over the Des Plaines River, replacing an earlier five span through truss bridge; the American Bridge Company of New York and the Ketler-Elliott Erection Company of Chicago constructed the new bridge. This new bridge was one of the first bridges to place the lifting mechanism on the lift towers instead of on the movable span. The movable main span is 305 feet long, and the entire bridge is 537 feet long. A fixed through truss bridge approaches the main span on either side. The one on the west end is 151 feet long, while the one on the east side is 101 feet long.

In 1937, the Rock Island introduced diesel power to its passenger service, with the purchase of six-lightweight *Rocket* streamliners that operated through Joliet on their runs between Chicago and Peoria.

Beginning in the late 1940's, new diesel locomotives began replacing the older steam locomotives on the Rock Island's trains. In 1949, new Pullman-built 2700-series arrived as the first air-conditioned commuter cars on the line. The Rock Island took delivery from the Budd Company of its first bilevel commuter equipment in 1964. In 1970, another order, this time for Pullman-built bilevel cars, arrived on the property.

The commuter service was not exempt from the general decline of the Rock Island during the 1970's. Over time, deferred maintenance took its toll on both track and rolling stock. By this time, the Rock Island could not afford to replace their clearly worn out commuter equipment.

By the time that Amtrak was formed in 1971, the once-proud Rock Island was down to just two intercity trains, the *Peoria Rocket* operating between Chicago and Peoria and the *Quad Cities Rocket*, operating between Chicago and Rock Island. The Rock Island opted against joining Amtrak, in part because the government assessed the Amtrak entrance fee based on passenger miles operated in 1970. After concluding that the cost of joining Amtrak would be greater than remaining in the passenger business, the railroad decided to continue their intercity passenger operations.

In 1976, the entire Chicago commuter rail system began to receive financial support from the state of Illinois through the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). Operating funds were disbursed to all commuter operators and the Rock Island was to be provided with new equipment to replace the tired 2700-series coaches and the 1920's vintage Capone cars. New EMD F40PH locomotives arrived in late 1977 and new Budd bilevel cars arrived in 1978.

Never a financially strong railroad, the Rock Island entered bankruptcy on March 17th, 1975 under Chapter 77 of the Federal Bankruptcy Act. The last intercity passenger trains, from Chicago to Rock Island and to Rock Island, were discontinued on December 31st, 1978. On January 24, 1980, Federal Judge Frank J. McGarr elected not to review the Rock Island's final plan of reorganization. He simply initiated the shutdown and liquidation of the Rock Island.

With the 1980 end of the Rock Island, the RTA purchased the suburban territory and remaining Rock Island commuter equipment from the estate, while the Chicago & North Western Railway took over operations for a year before the RTA began operating it directly in 1981. The RTA could have purchased the Rock Island tracks all the way across Will County to the Grundy County line, but choose to only purchase the tracks up to the east bank of the Des Plaines River (they didn't want to own and have to maintain the lift bridge over the river.) The RTA gradually rebuilt the track and added more new equipment to the service, leaving the property in better shape than it was in the Rock Island's heyday. The Rock Island District, as the Rock Island's suburban service is now known, now operates as part of Metra, the Chicago commuter rail agency.

Also in 1980, CSX Transportation took a 50-year lease, with an option to buy, on the Rock Island tracks from Joliet west to Bureau, Illinois. This line is designated as the CSX New Rock Subdivision.

Today, Metra owns the former Rock Island tracks between Chicago and Joliet and operates their Rock Island District commuter service. CSX leases the former Rock Island tracks west of Joliet and operates freight service. Another railroad, the Iowa Interstate, also operates freight train service through Joliet over the former Rock Island tracks. CSX and Iowa Interstate both operate their freight trains over the Metra-owned tracks between Blue Island and Joliet.

Though it no longer exists, the Rock Island will always be remembered as Joliet's first railroad, with its early trains rumbling through the courthouse square.

THE ATCHISON, TOPEKA & SANTA FE

On May 10th, 1882, the Chicago, St. Louis & Western Railroad Company was chartered to establish a railroad from Chicago to St. Louis. Construction began shortly thereafter, and by the end of 1883, this company had laid track between Coal City and Chicago with a route through Joliet. The Chicago, St. Louis & Western was reorganized as the Chicago & St. Louis Railway in March 1885.

The line was opened for traffic between Chicago and Pekin on December 21, 1886, but the management had run out of funds when their tracks had reached Pekin. The Chicago & St. Louis was a promoter's railroad, and was poorly engineered and poorly built. It had numerous grades, was laid with inferior rails and had a defective roadbed, making it wholly inadequate for the traffic of a transcontinental system.

The 154-mile Chicago & St. Louis Railway was acquired on December 15th, 1886 by the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway for use as part of its route between Chicago and Kansas City. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe completely rebuilt the Chicago & St. Louis; heavier steel rails were put down and maximum grades were reduced, making it suitable for heavy traffic. By the close of 1887 through service between Chicago, Kansas City and Los Angeles on the Santa Fe was a reality.

The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway tracks through downtown Joliet were realigned and elevated in 1908-1910, and they participated in the construction of Joliet Union Station in 1911-1912 and UD interlocking tower in 1912-1913.

By the late 1950's freight revenue had far outstripped passenger revenue, but a procession of sixteen streamlined Santa Fe passenger trains pulled by red and silver diesel locomotives passed through Joliet each day. From Joliet Union Station, travelers could take such trains as the *Super Chief*, the *El Capitan* and the *Grand Canyon* to Los Angeles, the *San Francisco Chief* to San Francisco, the *Texas Chief* to Houston, and the *Kansas City Chief* and the *Chicagoan* to Kansas City.

Amtrak, the new National Railroad Passenger Corporation, took over all passenger train service on the Santa Fe on May 1st, 1971. Amtrak's *Southwest Chief*, operating daily between Chicago and Los Angeles, continued the Santa Fe's tradition of passenger service in Joliet.

In 1995, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway merged with the Burlington Northern Railroad to create the new Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, and began the process of meshing the operations of the two former rival railroads. One of the first changes was to link the two railroads just west of Galesburg, which shortened the route between Chicago and Kansas City.

A 108-year tradition of passenger service in Joliet on the Santa Fe came to an end on July 31st, 1996, when Amtrak train number 3, the *Southwest Chief*, departed from Joliet Union Station for the very last time. The next day the *Southwest Chief* was rerouted over the former Burlington Northern line between Chicago and Galesburg, passing through Naperville and Princeton, and completely bypassing Joliet.

On January 24th, 2005, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway's name was changed to the BNSF Railway. BNSF operates the CenterPoint Intermodal Center in Elwood.

Union Station

A Beautiful and Distinctive Railroad Station

Union Station is a magnificent example of a Beaux Arts style railroad station, which was completed in 1912 as part of a comprehensive project to consolidate and elevate the railroad tracks that crossed through downtown Joliet. Joliet Union Station stands as a visible reminder of Joliet's importance as a major center of Midwest commerce during an era when railroads were the most important mode of transit for people and goods. Noted railroad station architect Jarvis Hunt designed Union Station. Adam Groth, a highly regarded local stone contractor and builder, was the contractor for the project. Union Station is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Distinctive characteristics of the Beaux Arts style include the roof-line balustrade, accentuated cornice, arched windows topped by keystones, and a rusticated-stone ground-floor contrasted with a smooth-stone upper-floor. The front-facing street façade features three massive arched windows located atop three entry doors, which lead to the waiting room area from the open balcony. The street and track façade are symmetrical and therefore the track-facing elevation also features three massive arched windows. Ornamental, flat roof, metal entry canopies frame the station's entry ways on the track-facing elevation. The entire building is faced with Bedford limestone. Fine interior finishes include Tennessee marble in the waiting room. The treads and sidewalls of the staircase from the lower to the upper level is also Tennessee marble with massive railings of highly polished marble enclosing the approaches to the main waiting room where the wainscoting is also polished marble.

An Efficient, Magnificent and Monumental Structure

Union Station epitomizes the careful design and planning that went into the construction of buildings of public use during this era of U.S. History. The City Beautiful Movement, inspired by Daniel Burnham's plan for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, was a nationwide planning concept that sought to rectify the clutter and ugliness of gritty American cities with tree-lined parkways, plazas, and light-colored, monumental public buildings. The movement emphasized order and beauty through the spatial arrangement of buildings and through the construction of classically designed monumental buildings. Stations such as Joliet Union Station were often set back from the street and framed by plazas. In addition, they were often sited as terminal vistas of long, converging, diagonal axes. This arrangement led to railroad stations like Joliet Union Station functioning as public monuments. Indeed, the station was and continues to be a focal point of the Joliet City Center. In addition, the spatial arrangement also established carriage courts, which created efficiencies by providing space for off-street loading and unloading.

In a design unique to the Midwest, the station was built as an oblong hexagon with wings extending from the longer axis to face the intersection of the tracks. This careful planning allowed the station to serve both north-south and east-west passenger traffic.

A “Union” Station

Union Station replaced and “unionized” four separate passenger stations that the Rock Island Railroad, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad, the Chicago & Alton Railroad, and the Michigan Central Railroad each operated in downtown Joliet. Strongly pressured by the City to eliminate unsafe and inefficient at-grade crossings, these four companies came together in 1908 and agreed to realign the multiple railroad lines that ran directly through downtown Joliet into one north-south alignment and one east-west alignment and elevate these tracks. In addition, they agreed to consolidate passenger rail service operations into one railroad station. The construction of “union” stations were common around the turn-of-the-century for the very reasons demonstrated in Joliet. The Union Station ground-breaking was on July 31, 1911, and the new station (a \$250,000 project) and track elevation projects were both completed in October 1912. Upon completion in 1912, passenger traffic reached a peak of 100 trains daily.

Union Station Today

Following a period of underutilization and disrepair, the City of Joliet and Metra jointly purchased Union Station in 1987. An extensive, publicly-funded renovation of the station was completed in October 1991. In addition to housing Metra and Amtrak operations, Union Station renovations created leasable space for a coffee shop, restaurant/bar, banquet facility and quasi-government offices. Union Station was officially decommissioned for passenger and commuter rail service in September 2014 when Amtrak and Metra operations physically relocated to temporary stations on the opposite side of the tracks (behind Union Station) while Gateway Center Train Station was nearing completion. Union Station now has a full-service restaurant and brewery on the ground floor and the former passenger waiting area continues to be utilized as a private banquet hall.