

Indianapolis Union Station

By William Benning Stewart

Indianapolis owes its success as a municipality to transportation. Chartered as a new seat for state government during 1825 but plotted on swampy ground beside a river unnavigable by marine vessels larger than canoes or keelboats, the embryo state capital was dependent on traces and plank roads through the forest for its first two decades. Little wonder the state's first railroad company was organized to link Ohio River commerce with this struggling, mid-state frontier town. When the Madison & Indianapolis rolled into town on October 1, 1847, Governor James Whitcomb (not to be confused with James Whitcomb Riley) understandably felt compelled to deliver a commemorative address from high atop the first train.

By 1849 three other railroads, each with their own depots, had entered the capital, leading to a joint proclamation which recognized the need to "locate and establish at Indianapolis joint railroad tracks . . . and to locate and establish at Indianapolis on said joint tracks a passenger depot." From these discussions was born The Indianapolis Union Railway, the first shared railroad terminal venture of its kind and sponsor of the first Union Station in the United States.



Etching of 1853 Indianapolis Union Station, W.H. Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society

Completed in 1853 at a cost of \$30,000, the original Indianapolis Union Station was five-track brick structure 420 feet long and 120 feet wide. Imposing for its time, it prompted a local newspaper editor to proclaim grandiloquently at its opening that "the ends of the earth have been linked under one roof." In fact, the roof was not of sufficient size to harness the needs of its eight member companies; by 1866 more than 100 trains vied daily for platform space at Indianapolis. The remarkable growth of a young nation and the regenerating development of its railroad industry hurried the first Union Station to obsolescence at an early age.

In Indianapolis, a primary vehicle for economic recovery from the Panic of 1873 proved to be construction of the Belt Road, a 14-mile-long, double-tracked railroad designed to serve a vast new stockyard complex and link the city's railroad freight facilities. The Belt Road project brought desperately needed jobs to Indianapolis in 1877 while establishing a blueprint for economic growth. On October 17, 1882, the Belt Road was leased to The Indianapolis

Union Railway for 99 years, strengthening the corporate framework necessary to advance erection of a new Union Station. Through its majority control of The Indianapolis Union Railway, the Pennsylvania Railroad had the votes to carry a message of manifest destiny to the Hoosier frontier. Its vehicle to do so would be a landmark public edifice, one which would bespeak the personality of its principal owner 24 hours a day.

When Philadelphia's financial barons authorized progress on the Indianapolis terminal project in 1885, Pittsburgh architect Thomas Rodd was summoned to artistically portray the feudal power and burgeoning domain of the Pennsylvania Railroad in an increasingly important on-line city. Not surprisingly, Rodd dictated that the new Indianapolis Union Station would be cast in the Neo-Romanesque style recently popularized by Henry Hobson Richardson. Through earlier efforts with small stations for the Boston & Albany, Richardson had drawn notice as the first American architect to radically alter accepted forms of railroad station design. Robust and picturesque, the Romanesque Revival brought powerful style to public architecture in the 1880s. With its textured, horizontal contours of earthy materials layered fortress fashion above massive masonry foundations, a Romanesque Revival structure immediately earned respect and awe from onlookers.

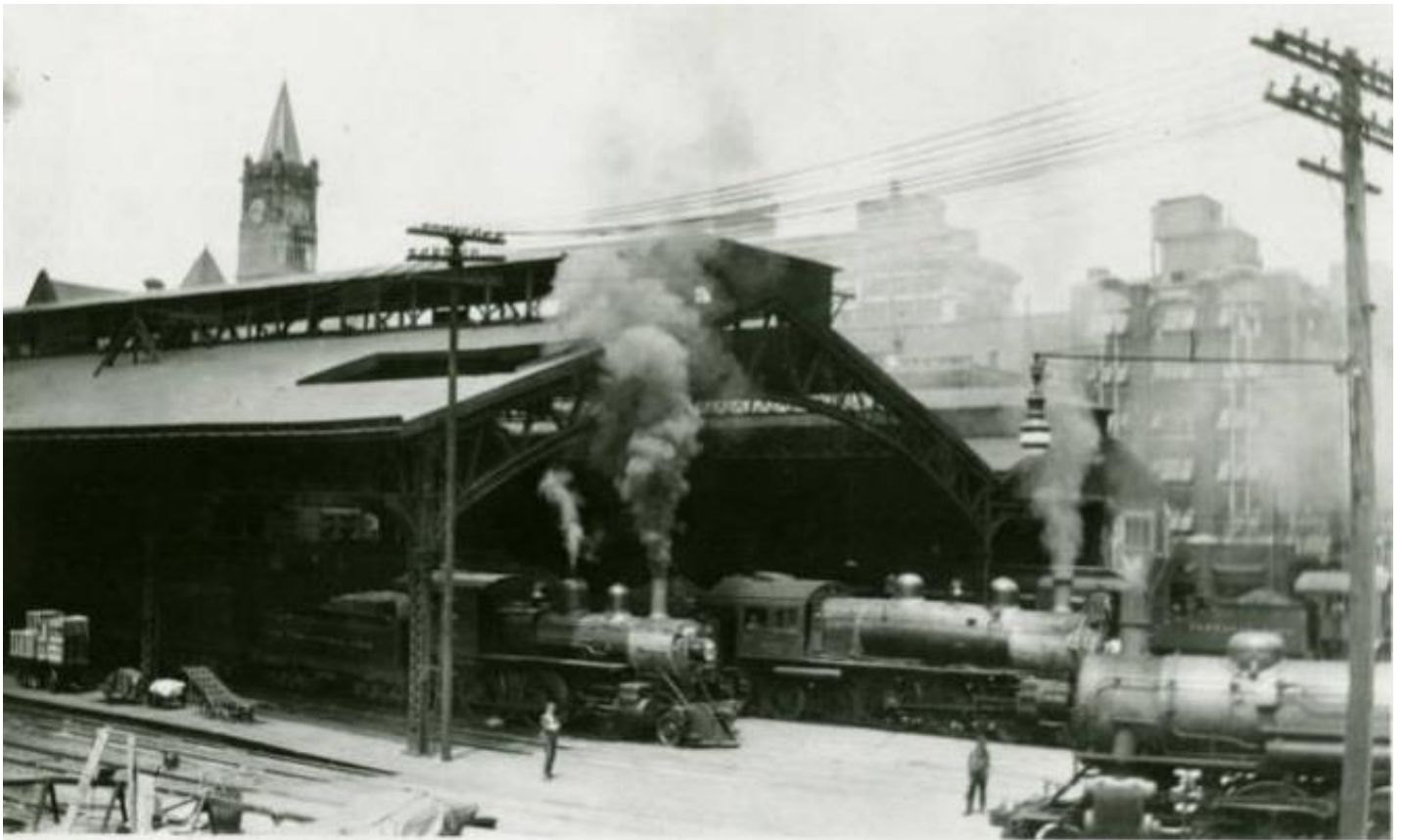


1880 Union Station headhouse c.1970 Library of Congress

Placing the new Union Station's predominant headhouse -- a stunning barrel vault arching more than seventy feet above the earth -- parallel with that axis, Rodd perfectly embraced the symbolic concept of the railroad terminal as

a city gate. On the north facade, six doors opened to a vista of a bustling young metropolis ready to absorb new arrivals, concurrently welcoming outbound travelers to the opulence within and the growing excitement of an impending journey. Identical doors on the southern facade provided access to a long, ground-level trainshed. The central nave soared above ticket windows and terrazzo floors, and sunlight warmed the full length of the concourse through five arched skylights. A third-floor balcony circled this great room, posts between its wrought iron railings carrying handsome luminaries to highlight the movement of the multitudes below. Warm beige colored the walls and gold, green and tan filigree embellished columns, corners, and panels. Outside, rough-hewn limestone formed a foundation worthy of the red brick walls which shaped the monumental headhouse.

Blending these elements with a finely detailed interior were two 20-foot circles of stained glass dominating the ends of the barrel vault. Their form and intricate detail powerfully depicted movement and achievement at both the point of arrival and point of departure in Rodd's cathedral of commerce. "The dramatic wheel or rose window," reflected historian Lawrence Grow nine decades later, "shines forth as a symbol of the wealth and imagination of the high Victorian railroad age, in which the dynamo was fast replacing the virgin as a tenet of faith."



Union Station ground-level trainshed, W.H. Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society

The second Indianapolis Union Station opened for business on October 16, 1888. So busy was the new terminal that passengers risked life and limb climbing between cars on the northernmost tracks to reach their trains. Four Indianapolis Union Railway tracks, normally occupied by at least one of hundreds of daily passenger trains, switch runs or freights, approached Union Station from east and west. Teamsters and buggy drivers faced deadly rounds of roulette at each crossing every day, effectively bringing horse-drawn Indianapolis to an early transportation crisis. A new city ordinance, authored by the mayor in 1899 and hastily ratified by the City Council, called for grade separation by May 1, 1902 -- but construction did not begin until 1904. The elevation project then inched steadily ahead, and the first small section was opened to traffic in 1906.

In 1923 the capstone of the massive project, a new, seven-acre, 12-track elevated trainshed behind the Union Station headhouse, was completed. Thousands of automobiles then passed unblemished each day as trains of heavy steel

Pullmans trundled safely overhead. Six stairwells provided all-weather access to the boarding tracks while "E" track, extending only half the length of the trainshed, was designated solely for the transfer of express traffic to and from baggage cars. Adjoining track No. 1 paralleled a conveyor leading to downstairs bulk mail sorting facilities.

In 1921, 62,055 trains called at Indianapolis Union Station. The city soon became known as the "setout capital of the world," a colorful reference to the remarkable number of interconnecting car movements at the station. Switch engines spent busy lives reaching deep into the Indianapolis coach yards for Pullmans, dining cars, club cars and coaches, dancing through puzzle switches assembling trains and hurrying out of the way when a haughty limited swept through the curve at Kentucky Avenue and plunged into the trainshed. Three full shifts of railroaders attended to the trains and their passengers, and the rosters of restaurant, maintenance, Railway Express Agency, and Post Office employees added hundreds to the tabulation of those depending on Union Station for their livelihood. Still, a hint of future events came in the spring of 1932, when the Nickel Plate Road became the first railroad to discontinue all passenger service to Indianapolis. Nickel Plate branch line locals 23 and 24, vestiges of a once-flourishing business over the rails of the former Lake Erie & Western, were easy prey for rapidly increasing numbers of automobiles and improved highways.

For many, the most poignant memories of Indianapolis Union Station dated to World War II, years of chaos in the concourse. More than two hundred trains pounded the beams of the trainshed each day as crowds swirled up and down its stairwells around the clock, prayerful of a seat on an outbound train or the sight of a loved one in the headhouse.



NYC DPA-2a 4201 (Alco PA-1) and PRR T-1 5504 line up on the west end of the Indianapolis Union Station train shed. NYCSHS PB531010

Streamlined trains and the pageantry surrounding their debut brought brighter moments at Union Station. In 1941 New York Central won words of praise in Indiana by naming its new Cincinnati-Chicago limited the James Whitcomb Riley, honoring the state's poet laureate. Hoosier hearts warmed again in 1947 when new management replaced the Monon's sagging expresses with tastefully appointed trains styled by industrial designer Raymond Loewy. Both the New York Central and Pennsylvania, seeking redemption for service reputations soiled during the war, invested heavily in new streamliners during postwar years. But the secondary schedules at Union Station, including the last Indianapolis passenger trains of the Baltimore & Ohio and the Illinois Central, were slipping quietly from the timetables. The day of reckoning for the remaining trains was not far away.

By the late 1960s trainshed pigeons outnumbered patrons in the bleak, final hours of the traditional passenger train. In the headhouse, twenty-minute resuscitations of traditional train time activity surrounded the arrival and departure of the four remaining trains: the remnants of the New York's Central's Cincinnati-Chicago "deluxe all-coach streamliner," the *James Whitcomb Riley*, the Pennsylvania's once-grand *Spirit of St. Louis*, the *South Wind*, and

nameless Penn Central 315 and 316, Indianapolis-Cleveland mail trains with attached – but often empty -- rider coaches. The menacing stillness that followed, broken only by the rumble of passing freights, foretold the inevitable.



DFA-3e 1042 (Alco FA-1), DRS-12b 8035 (Alco RS-32) DRS-10a 8004 (Alco RS-11), DRS-12b 8036 (Alco RS-32) and DRS-6b 8326 (Alco RS-3) lead train MA-8 past the west end of Union Station's train shed with track removed on September 9, 1963. Louis A. Marre, NYCSHS PB532016

By the early 1970s, Amtrak, the new operator of the majority of the nation's intercity passenger trains, scheduled three trains through Indianapolis – the combined *James Whitcomb Riley/George Washington* linking Washington, D.C. and Chicago, the *National Limited* between New York and Kansas City, and the *Floridian* between Chicago and Miami. The ghostly atmosphere of Union Station remained unchanged.

In those grim surroundings two bands of community volunteers sought to repudiate the depot's tarnished legacies. As early as 1958 suggestions had been made to demolish most of Union Station and use the site as a heliport. Over the next 15 years others recommended recycling the structure as a tourist and visitor center, a hub for the city transit system or a terminal for a proposed people-mover project. The best and most comprehensive plans suggested that the headhouse be used as an emporium of shops and restaurants and the trainshed refurbished to serve Amtrak trains and a proposed rail commuter service to the airport. In the absence of funding, none came to fruition.

With the departure of the last *National Limited* in September 1979, the City of Indianapolis became the owner of a giant structure with little purpose, a grand public building with no public use. Corpses of famous trains lined the trainshed, used now by Amtrak as the final resting ground for postwar passenger equipment awaiting retirement at its nearby Beech Grove shop complex. After realizing that travelers might well pay to ride trains shuttling cars between Beech Grove and its Chicago hub, Amtrak instituted the *Hoosier State* train in 1980 but, wanting no part of the still decaying headhouse ruins, remodeled a small corner of the trainshed as a station facility. Plywood panels sealed the tall marble archway that had welcomed four generations of travelers to Indianapolis Union Station.

In 1982 a new revitalization proposal included not only the headhouse but also the complete trainshed complex, including such long abandoned ancillary features as the mail room, train crew quarters and the Railway Express loading dock. The city then approved a \$12,000,000 grant for basic repairs to the long-suffering structure. Borrowing from the "festival marketplace" concept enjoying popularity in other cities, plans called for filling every available space at Union Station with restaurants, hotel rooms, entertainment, and a diverse array of retail enterprises.

The city administration's newfound optimism for the future of the station was fueled by the success of the Indiana Convention and Exposition complex one block west of the headhouse, plus construction of a domed stadium on the site of the former Pullman Company Capitol Avenue Coach Yard, which lured a National Football League franchise. A wave of new restaurant and retail enterprises in the adjoining historic Wholesale District also supported movement on the emerging Union Station project. Drawing particular notice in the revitalized complex was a new hotel occupying the Railway Express dock and what had been the northwest quadrant of the trainshed; squeezed into the long, linear space were 276 hotel rooms, no two exactly alike, three atriums, a swimming pool, and thirteen heavyweight Pullman cars rescued from Conrail work train service, refurbished and converted to sixty-two suites.

Bringing back the grandeur of the headhouse was undeniably the greatest artistic challenge of the three-year project. Scaffolded to a height of sixty feet, the barrel vault became home to one swarm of craftsmen replacing and painting plasterwork, another removing, repairing, and cleaning leaded glass. Only five to ten percent of the original century-old glass required replacement, but dirt, sometimes an inch thick, clung to every pane. A three-man crew then devoted 20,000 hours to the task of applying 250 gallons of paint and gold leaf to the vault.

While the festival marketplace eventually failed, the hotel continues to prosper, and the headhouse is used for special events. Rail travelers, however, remain subordinated to a secondary role at Indianapolis Union Station. Amtrak *Cardinal* passengers find themselves in a mundane addition to the trainshed of one of the nation's greatest railway passenger terminals. No mention is made of the historic role of the railroad in shaping the contemporary city as well as providing the frame for today's hotel and special events space. Such lapses aside, the resurrection of the great headhouse is all that one could ask, particularly those who know the tribulations surrounding the long struggle to keep the structure erect. The splendor of Rodd's 20-foot wheels of leaded glass still churns the soul; the dynamo whirs on.

Excerpted from the article "Two Cities, Two Stations," published in Locomotive & Railway Preservation Magazine, January-February 1987, pages 32-41.

Trains Arriving and Departing Indianapolis Union Station

March 1945

Railroad	Train	Name	AR	LV	Origin	Destination
NYC	431	St Louis Special	0:05	0:30	Cleveland	St Louis
NYC	43	Peoria & Eastern	-----	0:15	Indianapolis	Peoria
NYC	437	Royal Palm	1:45	1:55	Florida	Chicago
PRR	155		1:50	-----	Pittsburgh	Indianapolis
PRR	307	Kentuckian	2:05	2:20	Louisville	Chicago
NYC	438	Cincinnati Night Express	2:10	2:20	Chicago	Cincinnati
NYC	427	Gateway	2:40	2:45	Cleveland	St Louis
NYC	44	Peoria & Eastern	3:34	-----	Peoria	Indianapolis
PRR	33		4:03	4:15	Pittsburgh	St Louis
NYC	410	Royal Palm	4:10	4:20	Chicago	Florida
NYC	434		4:10	6:35	St Louis	Galion
NYC	446	Cleveland and Cincinnati Special	4:15	4:35	St Louis	Cleveland
PRR	306	Kentuckian	4:20	4:45	Chicago	Louisville
Monon	35	Midnight Special	5:00	-----	Chicago	Indianapolis
PRR	6		6:10	6:30	St Louis	Columbus
PRR	27		6:48	7:10	Pittsburgh	St Louis
NYC	307	Indianapolis Express	7:00	-----	Detroit	Indianapolis
PRR	88		-----	7:05	Indianapolis	Columbus
NYC	312		-----	7:30	Indianapolis	Detroit
NYC	430		-----	7:30	Indianapolis	Galion
NYC	436		-----	7:40	Indianapolis	Cincinnati
NYC	41	Knickerbocker	7:45	7:55	New York	St Louis
NYC	222	Springfield Div Local	-----	8:15	Indianapolis	Springfield
PRR	31	Spirit of St Louis	8:50	8:58	New York/Washington	St Louis
NYC	3	James Whitcomb Riley	9:00	9:10	Cincinnati	Chicago
PRR	65	Jeffersonian	9:07	9:16	New York/Washington	St Louis
PRR	21	Spirit of St Louis	9:15	-----	Washington	Indianapolis
NYC	402	Motor Train	9:40	-----	Terre Haute	Indianapolis
NYC	23	Missourian	10:20	10:40	New York	St Louis
PRR	315	Chicago Daylight Express	10:23	10:30	Louisville	Chicago
NYC	415	Chicago Special	10:25	10:35	Cincinnati	Cincinnati
B&O	48	Motor Train	11:00	-----	Hamilton OH	Indianapolis
NYC	13	Peoria & Eastern	-----	11:00	Indianapolis	Peoria
PRR	308	South Wind	11:30	11:33	Chicago	Louisville
B&O	49	Motor Train	11:40	-----	Decatur	Indianapolis
NYC	11	Southwestern Limited	11:50	11:59	New York	St Louis
PRR	67	American	11:58	12:08	New York/Washington	St Louis
Monon	31	The Hoosier	12:30	-----	Chicago	Indianapolis

NYC	414	Indianapolis Mail	12:40	-----	Chicago	Indianapolis
NYC	419	White City Special	13:15	13:25	Cincinnati	Chicago
PRR	66	American	13:36	13:45	St Louis	New York/Washington
NYC	416	Cincinnati Special	14:00	14:15	Chicago	Cincinnati
Monon	30	The Hoosier	-----	14:10	Indianapolis	Chicago
NYC	12	Southwestern Limited	14:10	14:15	St Louis	New York
PRR	316	Louisville Daylight Express	14:28	14:40	Chicago	Louisville
NYC	401	Motor Train	-----	15:10	Indianapolis	Terre Haute
PRR	319		15:27	15:37	Louisville	Chicago
B&O	49	Motor Train	-----	16:40	Indianapolis	Hamilton
NYC	14	Peoria & Eastern	16:40	-----	Peoria	Indianapolis
NYC	405	Sycamore	16:40	16:50	Cincinnati	Chicago
PRR	30	Spirit of St Louis	16:45	16:44	St Louis	New York
B&O	48	Motor Train	-----	16:50	Indianapolis	Decatur
NYC	406	Carolina Special	16:55	17:05	Chicago	Cincinnati
PRR	11		16:55	17:20	New York	St Louis
PRR	64	Jeffersonian	16:58	17:08	St Louis	New York/Washington
NYC	223	Springfield Div Local	17:00	-----	Springfield	Indianapolis
PRR	20	Spirit of St Louis	-----	17:00	Indianapolis	Washington
NYC	303		17:25	-----	Detroit	Indianapolis
NYC	407	Cleveland St Louis Special	17:25	17:40	Cleveland	St Louis
PRR	320		17:25	17:45	Chicago	Louisville
NYC	418		17:45	18:10	St Louis	Cleveland
NYC	24	Knickerbocker	17:50	18:00	St Louis	New York/Boston
NYC	408	Queen City Special	17:50	18:00	Chicago	Cincinnati
PRR	309	South Wind	19:07	19:10	Louisville	Chicago
NYC	4	James Whitcomb Riley	20:10	20:20	Chicago	Cincinnati
NYC	304	Toledo-Detroit Express	-----	22:00	Indianapolis	Detroit
PRR	26		22:00	22:55	St Louis	Pittsburgh
PRR	32	St Louisan	22:34	22:47	St Louis	New York/Washington
NYC	38	Missourian	22:45	22:50	St Louis	New York
PRR	13		22:50	23:20	New York/Washington	St Louis
NYC	420	Cleveland Special	-----	22:55	Indianapolis	Cleveland
Monon	36	Midnight Special	-----	23:30	Indianapolis	Chicago
NYC	443	Chicago Night Express	23:55	0:10	Cincinnati	Chicago

Information is taken for the March 1945 Official Guide to the Railways. In addition to NYC, PRR, Monon and B&O the Illinois Central and Nickel Plate operated freight service only branch lines into Indianapolis.