

Lost LA

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Lost Train Depots of Los Angeles History

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History & Society

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Before the Jet Age brought safe and comfortable air travel to the masses, most newcomers in Los Angeles arrived by rail. Train depots thus provided tourists' and emigrants' first introduction to Los Angeles, helping shape their ideas about the city. The city's grandest passenger terminal, Union Station, survives today. But its historic predecessors, which welcomed millions to the city, have all vanished from the cityscape.

Compared with those that followed, and especially to Union Station, Los Angeles' first passenger depot was a modest affair. In the days before tourism became the lifeblood of the region's economy, after all, there was little point in expending capital on an impressive structure or decorative embellishment.

Serving Phineas Banning's **Los Angeles & San Pedro Railroad**, the city's first station was a tiny wooden structure on the southwest corner of Commercial and Alameda streets. When it opened on October 26, 1869, freight was at least as important as passenger service to the railroad's operations. Accordingly, amenities were sparse. Chronicler Harris Newmark was not impressed:

Really, it was more of a freight-shed than anything else, without adequate passenger facilities; a small space at the North end contained a second story in which some of the clerks slept; and in a cramped little cage beneath, tickets were sold.

The Los Angeles & San Pedro's life as an independent railroad was brief; in 1873, the Southern Pacific acquired the 21-mile line, and for a brief time the Commercial Street depot served as the terminal for the Southern Pacific's overland route to Los Angeles.

In 1876, the Southern Pacific opened a new depot on the current site of Los Angeles State Historic Park (the Cornfield). Known as the River Station, the two-story depot offered separate "ladies' and gentlemen's reception and waiting rooms," the Los Angeles Star reported, and was "finished on the outside with redwood rustic, all material being used of the very best quality." The railroad later upgraded the facility with many more passenger

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destinations. Later depots, beginning with the Southern Pacific's Arcade Station, would be located to the south.

In 1888, the Arcade Station opened at Fourth and Alameda. Built on the former site of William Wolfskill's pioneering orange groves, the depot was flanked by gardens and landscaping meant to showcase Southern California's salubrious climate. A fully-grown Washington fan palm, moved from a site nearby, stood outside the station's entrance, **symbolically welcoming** newcomers to a supposed subtropical paradise.

The depot itself was a massive, wooden Victorian structure reminiscent of European train stations. Five hundred feet long, the depot's rail shed featured skylights and an arched roof that soared 90 feet above the platforms below. Upon its opening, the Los Angeles Times praised the Arcade Station as "second to none on the Pacific Slope."

Less than 25 years later, though, the newspaper was describing the depot as "ancient" and "unsightly and inadequate" as it welcomed the arrival of a new Southern Pacific depot, which came to be known as Central Station. Designed by architects John Parkinson and George Bergstrom, it was located at Fifth and Central, directly next to the Arcade Station. Central Station was the city's most impressive depot to date. The white stuccoed building was an imposing edifice. Steel umbrella-style train sheds replaced the arched roof of the Arcade Station, which tended to trap soot and smoke. Inside, the station offered passengers an elegant waiting room with chandeliers, fine woodwork, and marble wainscoting.

Central Station opened to passengers on December 1, 1914. The Arcade Station, meanwhile, "passed into history unhonored and unsung," the Times noted. There was no public outcry as wreckers dismantled the old wooden building to make way for new outdoor platforms.

Several blocks away, at the corner of Santa Fe Avenue and Second, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad's La Grande Station had been welcoming tourists and overland emigrants since 1893.

The station's exotic design incorporated several architectural styles, but what stood out most was its hulking Moorish dome that, wrote the Times, was "a suggestion of the

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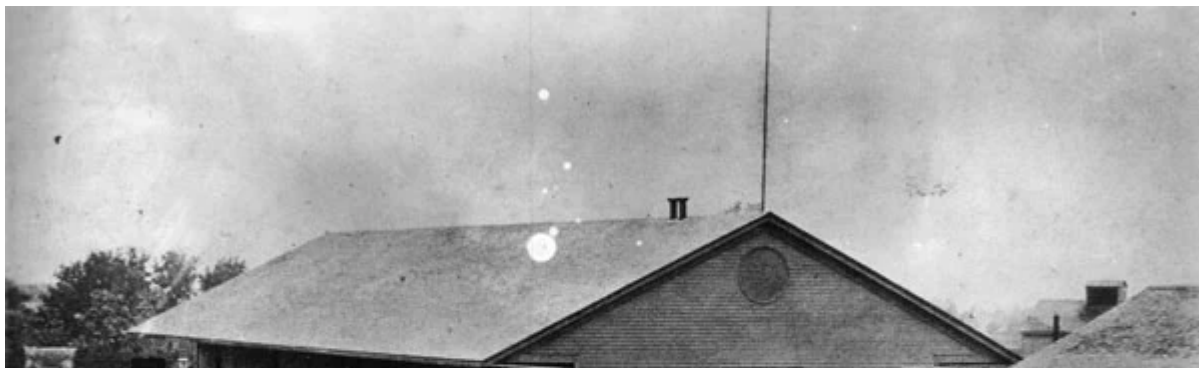
destroyed wooden depots. Unfortunately, the station's engineers failed to consider whether masonry construction was well-suited for earthquake country. When the 1933 Long Beach earthquake shook the region, the depot sustained serious damage. The Moorish dome, damaged beyond repair, was removed.

By then, plans were already well under way for a new, unified passenger terminal. The Union Pacific, having lost its depot on the east bank of the Los Angeles River to fire in 1924, had already moved its passenger operations to the Southern Pacific's Central Station. Now, the Santa Fe would join its two competitors at a grand new station, located on the site of **Old Chinatown**, where trains could more easily be separated from the city's bustling automobile and streetcar traffic.

By 1939, Chinatown had been razed and its residents displaced, and the **Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal** opened to a huge civic celebration. The two legacy depots, whose histories are richly documented in **this thesis** by Holly Charmain Kane, meanwhile, faded into obscurity. The La Grande station, which despite the earthquake damage continued to serve passengers until 1939, became a freight terminal. It was torn down in 1946.

Central Station suffered a similar fate. The Young Market Co. acquired the site, and the old depot was demolished to make way for a meat-packing plant. Though the station had welcomed countless newcomers to Los Angeles, the end came with little fanfare. On August 22, 1956, the Times reported the station's demise in a 92-word story on page B-2.

Commercial Street Depot — Los Angeles & San Pedro



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River Station — Southern Pacific



The Southern Pacific's River Station stood on the present-day site of the Los Angeles State Historic Park. In 1901, it was torn down and replaced by a new station, also called the River Station, across the street. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust, and C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

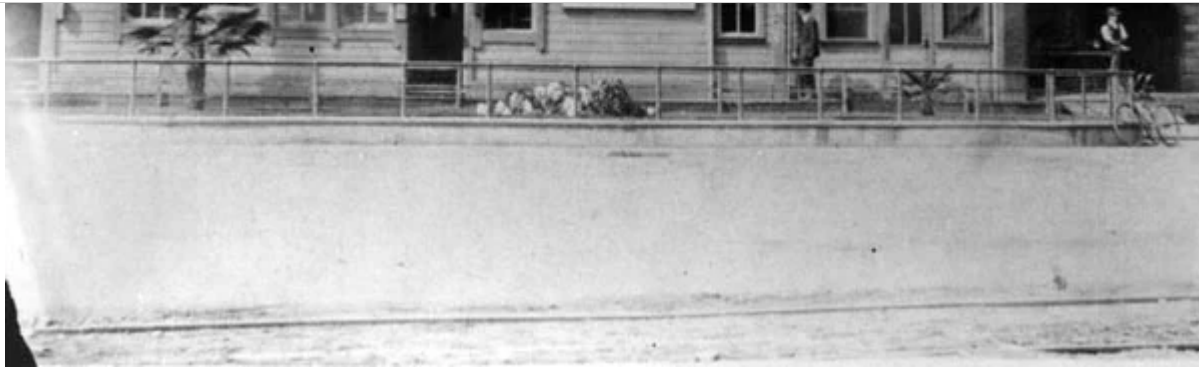


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Undated photo of the Southern Pacific's River Station. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Arcade Station — Southern Pacific



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Streetcars await passengers in front of the Arcade Station in this ca. 1900 postcard. Courtesy of the James Rojas Collection, Metro Transportation Library and Archive.



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Circa 1905 postcard of L.A.'s Arcade Depot, courtesy of the Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.



Circa 1914-1939 postcard showing the Arcade Depot's waiting room, courtesy of the Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University.



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Three trains could fit inside the Arcade Station's rail shed. Soot and smoke from the steam locomotives collected inside the building, annoying passengers. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



A fan palm greeted tourists and emigrants when they arrived at the Southern Pacific's Arcade Station. Circa 1890 photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Examiner Collection, USC Libraries.

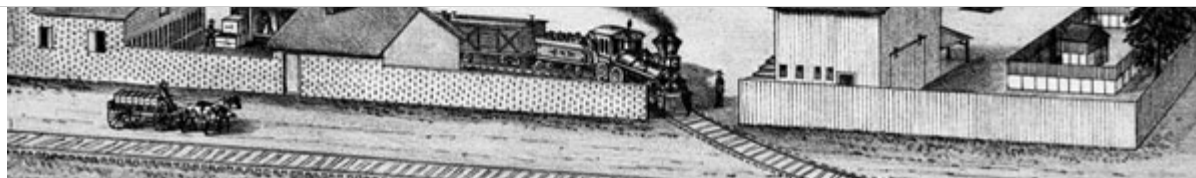


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The Southern Pacific built its Arcade Station on the Wolfskill ranch, where William Wolfskill pioneered the growing of oranges in Los Angeles. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

La Grande Station — Santa Fe Railroad



Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltensern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library.

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The Moorish dome of the Santa Fe Railway's red-brick La Grande Station welcomed newcomers to Los Angeles from 1893 to 1939. Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltstern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library.



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Circa 1904 postcard depicting La Grande Station. Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltensern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library.



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courtesy of the Herman J. Schultheis Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Passengers wait for a train at the Santa Fe's La Grande Station, circa 1937. Courtesy of the Herman J. Schultheis Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



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1924 aerial view of the Santa Fe's La Grande station. Courtesy of the Security Pacific National Bank Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.



Damaged beyond repair by the 1933 Long Beach quake, the station's Moorish dome was removed. Circa 1937 photo courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

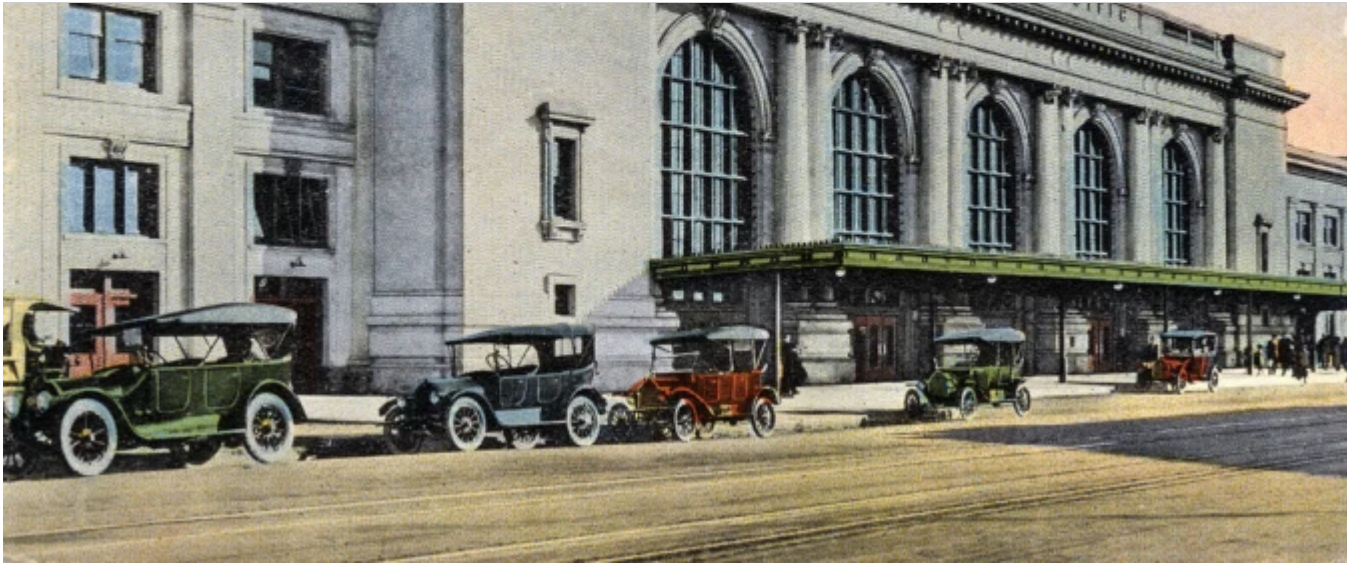
Central Station — Southern Pacific and Union Pacific railroads

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Courtesy of the Werner Von Boltensern Postcard Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Loyola Marymount University Library



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A crowd gathers outside the Central Station. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Examiner Collection, USC Libraries.



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In 1924, the Union Pacific moved its passenger operations to the Central Station. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Examiner Collection, USC Libraries.



An abandoned Central Station, circa 1956. The historic depot was replaced by a meat-packing plant. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Examiner Collection, USC Libraries.

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Every year, Southern California museums, libraries and archives come together at the annual Archives Bazaar to exhibit historic items and artifacts. Here are 8 collections and historical organizations whose archives tell a fascinating story of L.A.



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The history of commercial avocados in California comes from a collection of chance discoveries, Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.



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The deaths of early Angelenos didn't always lead to eternal rest. When the first Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in Los Angeles were abandoned by 1910, the displaced dead were scattered to other cemeteries — but not all were found and reburied.

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