



# Union Station and the Dream of Flying Buses

By Nathan Masters

March 3, 2011



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No Further West: The Design of Los Angeles Union Station



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Interest has been renewed in the future and the history of L.A.'s 117-year-old passenger terminal. While the future is now in Metro's hands, we can turn to Southern California's archives for a glimpse of the station's past.

Originally known as the Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal, the station's name reflected the fact that it united passenger services for all three major railroads then serving Los Angeles: the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe; the Southern Pacific; and the Union Pacific.

Before Union Station, major passenger service was split between two separate terminals in downtown Los Angeles. Central Station serviced both Southern Pacific and Union Pacific passengers at 5th St. and Central Ave. To the east, near 2nd St. and Santa Fe Ave, the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe operated out of Moorish-style La Grande Station. Both terminals are pictured below circa 1915 in postcards from [Loyola Marymount University Library's](#) Werner von Boltensstern Postcard Collection.



In the 1920s, the population of Los Angeles more than doubled. Demand for passenger service downtown swelled, and with trains sharing the streets with automobiles, pedestrians, and streetcars, a new, consolidated passenger terminal became necessary.



### New History Podcast Explores the Many Stories of L.A.'s Chinatown



### Railroads Build – and Destroy: Competing Narratives of L.A. Union Station's Birth

I've often noticed that many environmentally inclined people dislike deserts. Sometimes it's as benign as a matter of personal preference for where to spend time: there are mountain people and forest people and ocean people, and they sometimes ask us desert people what we could possibly see in our favorite arid haunts. Sometimes that disregard is stronger than just a vacation preference. Sometimes that dismissal of the land's value, as for instance saying that thousand-year-old yuccas and threatened tortoise habitat aren't worth as much as a few megawatts of solar power or a convenient spot for trash.

Allan Savory takes it further than that: He wants to eradicate deserts just because they exist.

In 1926, L.A. voters rejected a proposal to keep the station downtown by using elevated tracks and instead opted for a site in what was then Chinatown. That decision resulted in the controversial razing of much of L.A.'s original Chinatown and the displacement of its residents northwest to present-day Chinatown.

Construction on the station began in 1933 and cost \$11 million. On May 3, 1939, Union Station opened with a lavish celebration attended by a half million Angeleños. In the photograph below, from [UCLA's Young Research Library](#), a fully-dressed Santa Fe locomotive arrives as part of the opening day parade.



Interiors are also evident in the station's arches and clock tower. The photo below from the [Pomona Public Library's Frasher Foto Postcard Collection](#) shows the station's waiting room as it appeared shortly after opening.



With soldiers moving between Southern California and other destinations across the county, the station received heavy use through World War II. It soon declined, however, with the ascent of air travel and freeways as viable alternatives to traveling by train. Transportation officials proposed several plans to adapt Union Station to the times. Some proposals focused on linking Union Station with LAX. Monorails were considered, but in 1965 the city floated the idea of "flying buses" (pictured below). As blogger Eric Richardson [explained on blogdowntown](#), jet-powered heavy lift helicopters would have transported passengers between the two transportation nodes in detachable pods, carried by jet-powered heavy lift helicopters.



Other ideas centered on transforming Union Station into a multi-modal hub. In 1959, the city recommended an expanding the facility to accommodate not only passenger trains

rectangular structure adjacent to the heliport would have served a new rapid transit line, meant to replace Southern California's dying streetcar services.

In the 1990s, that long-planned rapid transit system became a reality with the arrival at Union Station of Metro Rail's Red Line (in 1993) and Gold Line (in 2000).

These developments, along with the addition of the Patsaouras bus plaza, finally transformed Union Station into the multi-modal hub dreamt of by the Jet Age planners. Today, the station serves roughly 80,000 passengers per month, including transit riders, Metrolink commuters, and passengers on the five lines operated by Amtrak, which assumed passenger rail operations nationwide in 1971.

Southern California's archives provide a wealth of information for researchers who wish to further explore Union Station's history. [Views of L.A.'s original Chinatown](#), which was demolished to make way for Union Station, are preserved through the photographic holdings of the [Chinese Historical Society of Southern California](#). The [USC Libraries'](#) extensive [Los Angeles Union Station Collection](#) documents the station's planning and construction, preserving correspondence, blueprints, maps, and legal files. The [Getty Research Institute](#) preserves the Parkinsons' original architectural drawings of the station. Finally, nearly 7,500 photos related to L.A. transportation history, including many of Union Station, are available through the [Metro Library's Flickr photostream](#).

## LAasSUBJECT

*Many of the archives who contributed the above images are members of [L.A. as Subject](#), an association of more than 230 libraries, museums, official archives, personal collections, and other institutions. Hosted by the [USC Libraries](#), L.A. as Subject is dedicated to preserving and telling the sometimes-hidden stories and histories of the Los Angeles region. Our posts here will provide a view into the archives of individuals and cultural institutions whose collections inform the great narrative—in all its complex facets—of Southern California.*

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[No Further West: The Design of Los Angeles Union Station](#)

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The socially and historically complex Terminal Island has become a mono-culture of standardized, containerized commerce. Writer D.J. Waldie recounts a personal history of a once scruffy seaside that is now the nation's top cargo port.



## Highlights at the Archives Bazaar: 10 Fascinating Southern California Collections and Historical Organizations

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.



Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.

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