

Union Station Appreciation

Union Station Redevelopment Corporation recently hosted the Guild for a behind the scenes tour.

Finally completed in 1912, five years after it opened, Union Station never had White and Colored water fountains. It was the station where Jim Crow ended if one was traveling north during the Great Migration. In the 1920s it had the only integrated formal public dining room in Washington, according to station historian Sarah Mayerson. These are just three ways the Gateway to DC helped to bring people together.

It is about the only “Union” landmark in DC that doesn't refer to the Civil War, but rather the cooperation between the Pennsylvania and B&O Railroads., and the District. Most American cities have a Union Station; ours was among the first, and the largest.

Architect Daniel Burnham, fresh from his triumph designing the “White City” at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, was hired to create a gateway to Washington. This “White City” referred to the new technology of floodlighting entire buildings; Union Station was the first in DC.

If Chicago had a Columbian Exhibition, we got a Columbus Circle with a statue partially blocking the view of the Capitol Dome which greeted visitors. The Knights of Columbus had parades there. Native Americans spattered the statue with red paint the night before Columbus Day, from the 1960s until opening of the National Museum of the American Indian facility in DC, peace came to the circle. The fountains may be restored, but they are under Park Service jurisdiction, so our guides, who work for the development corporation, could not say when that may be.

The grand statues atop the entryway are about 18' of granite, sculpted by Louis St. Gaudens. His older brother Augustus had the original contract to sculpt the Legionaries inside, but passed the job his younger brother. After Augustus' passing, Louis designed the six allegorical statues over the entry. The original plans called for marble statues, but the Ellis Granite Company of Vermont, which supplied the exterior stone, had other ideas. It invited Burnham to visit and see a prototype granite statue, which convinced him to have “The Progress of Railroading” series done in granite. Ex Harvard president Charles Elliot wrote the commentary. When it came time to install the nine-ton statues, the company had a crane system in place that lifted each statue in -- ten minutes. It may have taken five years since the station opened in 1907, but, most folks though the spectacle worth the wait.

Yesterday's interior Guild Tour began with a trip to the President's reception room. Many of us remember B.Smith's restaurant there. After it left, and the carpet was pulled up “we discovered the only original marble floor in the station,” reported station historian Sarah Mayerson. She noted that presidential security was a concern back in architect Daniel Burnham's time, after Garfield's assassination at the Mall station. There is still a tunnel leading from the tracks out to the plaza, as well as the Presidential Reception and dressing rooms. (They are the enclosed areas flanking the door on the east end of the building). In 1939, the British Royal was welcomed there, as was Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.

During WWII, the Presidential room was used as the USO Lounge, where soldiers to socialize and relax while in transit. This was the station's busiest time. “Imagine how the station was crowded during the Women's March last year . . . that's how crowded it was every day during the war,”

Mayerson observed. Originally, the West Hall had the information and ticket counters on the street side, and the baggage areas closest to the trains. During the war, additional ticket counters crowded out some benches here in the Main Hall, where people waited. Women who wanted to be away from men had an additional optional waiting area where Thunder Grill is now, while the men's smoking room and barbershop was across the Hall where one finds Shake Shack today. The trains stopped in what is now the shopping area. It was open to the tracks behind. The current Amtrak station, which was simply tracks back then, is where A. Philip Randolph welcomes workers and visitors alike. Before he introduced Martin Luther King at the March on Washington, he was head of the Pullman Porters union. Besides providing decent wages for African-Americans, the union served as a channel of communication. When some southern postmasters refused to distribute papers such as the Defender, the porters spread the news.

Some films shot in the station include "Mr. Smith goes to Washington", "Silver Streak", "Silence of the Lambs" and "Strangers on a Train". A recommended coffee-table book about the station is Carol Highsmith's "Union Station, a History of Washington's Grand Terminal".

After the war, as rail traffic declined, Harry Truman decided to give the President's Lounge to the USO. Smoke from the trains blackened the vaulted roof where the trains arrived. Martin Luther King's 24th birthday, January 15th, 1953, was the Station's worst day. The brakes on a DC-bound train failed. The stationmaster had a two-minute warning from the K street tower to evacuate the station. The train crashed through the steel barrier at the end of the track, and tore through the waiting-room floor, which was six inches above the tracks. The subfloor was not designed to hold the train's weight, so the it crashed down into the basement. Fortunately, workers underneath the station, about where the movie theaters were in the 80s were on coffee break. No one was killed or seriously injured.

The station continued to decline, and was eventually taken over as a "national visitors center" in time for the Bicentennial. All on the tour agreed that there were few pictures of this effort preserved because – in was a failure. Only historians of the 1970s will remember "conversation pits", sunken structures with couches around the edges to facilitate conversation. The current Columbus Club, above the East Wing, had a few exhibits. Train passengers had to take a plywood tunnel that ran alongside the station to the temporary Amtrak shack in back. The West Hall was shortened for the Metro station which would come soon. The visitor's center was abandoned. We smiled at the idea that there are few pictures of that time out of embarrassment.

Elizabeth Dole, secretary of Transportation, spearheaded the station's redevelopment efforts in the early 1980s. The Federal Railroad Administration, which owns the building, was charged with creating a self-funding redevelopment plan. "The parking lot actually pays for the renovations," Mayerson said. The shops and restaurants do chip in, but the costs have been high.

The 2013 earthquake actually moved the plaster ceiling about an inch from its supports, and then shifted it back. Restoration required structural work before the cosmetic plastering and gilding could begin. Finally, we can tell students entering the great hall "yes, that is real gold.". Another thing we can mention is that there are 36 statues in the main hall, and a total of 46, the number of states in 1907. There was one model for the Legionaries, and there are three designs. The hands on the shields are different: left, right, and both. The clock where we often meet was restored with the unique Roman numeral four which Burnham preferred. (Did he not like Ivs?)

Plans for Union Station include expanding the concourse, which is under Amtrak jurisdiction, and more construction above the tracks. Entire city blocks will rise above the switching yards, as they did in

Chicago. Burnham is probably pleased that his station is still on track to become even more vital.

C Span has produced a video on the history and the architectural features of the station: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?426142-1/history-union-station>