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## **Preservation Alert: The freight depot.**

### **Excerpts from *The Memphis & Charleston Railroad in Alabama 1850-1898: The Railroad Comes to Huntsville* *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*, 1981, Vol. VII, No.3**

Linda Bayer Allen

The Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company (M&C) was chartered through Alabama in 1850, and the Alabama commissioners then acquired the property of the Tennessee Valley Railroad (TVRR) along whose route the M&C tracks were laid. For \$75,000, paid in stock, the M&C received not only the tracks and land of the TVRR, but also the warehouses, depots, shops, and tools.

Construction of the M&C began in Madison County in the summer of 1851 when the engineers arrived to survey the route. The track was completed in sections so that by 1855 one could travel by train from Memphis to Pocahontas, then take a stage line into Tuscumbia, transfer back to the train for the trip from Tuscumbia to Huntsville, and continue to Stevenson, again by stage, to connect with the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad. The section of road between Decatur and Huntsville had been completed in October of 1855; the train whistle could be heard daily as the track layers approached within two miles of the Huntsville depot. Finally on October 13 the first engine "General Garth" entered town, and regular service with Tuscumbia began shortly thereafter...

The following year, 1856, the M&C opened their Railroad Hotel on the present site of Dilworth Lumber Company, across the tracks from the depot. [Note: now a professional office complex] It was under the operation of James M. Venable and became known as Venable's Hotel. During the Civil War it closed but was opened after being thoroughly refitted and newly furnished. In 1873 the railroad offered for sale all of its real estate along the tracks including "that valuable property in Huntsville know as the Donegan Hotel, together with many lots lying near the depot." ...

Although the railroads' most pressing concerns throughout the 19th century were the operation of the trains and the development of new technologies, they were also forced to create a new building type—the depot—for which there existed no historical precedent. The earliest depots were designed for the purely functional considerations of selling tickets and providing shelter from the elements. However, by the end of the 19th century, they had evolved into something quite different: they had become the gateway to and the symbol of the city.

Earlier forms of transportation, the canals and turnpikes, usually had provided no special buildings for passengers but instead used convenient inns or taverns as their collection points. When railroading began, the companies were forced by economics to invest all their funds in track, bridges, and equipment in order to start operations as quickly as possible. There was no money to spare for depots, and railroads continued the earlier practice of operating out of public houses. However, the necessity for depots quickly became apparent, and they were soon erected in every town the railroad entered. The earliest and those in small towns tended to resemble cottages, perhaps in an effort to reassure a skeptical public that railroad travel was safe by providing it with a domestic image.

Furthermore, unlike Europe, the United States at the start of railroading was composed of numerous small cities spread at great distances from each other so there was no need for large scale stations; but as the 19th century progressed, cities grew, the railroads became large and successful, and depots became the focal point for the whole community. Gradually railroads replaced water and turnpike travel; consequently, it was through the depot that goods, people, and news arrived and departed. In short, the depot became the most important building in the community.

After the Civil War, railroad technology was concentrated on luxury, safety and speed. The depots grew into impressive, opulent structures and became "...to the 19th century what monasteries and cathedrals were to the 13th century. They are truly the only real representative building we possess.... Our

metropolitan termini have been leaders of the art spirit of our time.” (*Building News*, 1875) The railway terminal became the symbol of the age; it represented the progress of modern technology and civilization. It was this symbolic role of the station that led to the building of ever larger and more impressive structures. By the turn of the century, Grand Central station in New York City had a concourse that was 125 feet wide, 375 feet long and 120 feet high. Obviously these gigantic dimensions were not based on functional considerations but rather were an “... attempt to contribute splendid, monumental structures to the urban scene... public buildings should be supremely impressive.” (*The Railroad Station*, 1956) The residents of each city identified with their local stations, and each station was viewed by travelers as the image of its city.

Architecturally the stations were representative of the numerous revival styles which achieved popularity in 19th century America, and often they influenced architectural taste through their prominence. To the designer, either the railroad engineer or a professional architect commissioned by the company, stations were a challenge since they were a totally new type of building. There existed no historical precedents to consult for either plan or style so that numerous experiments were tried in both areas. Those architectural styles that were considered most suitable for depots were Italianate, Gothic, Romanesque, and Classical Baroque. The first three could incorporate towers of various design, which provided an immediately identifiable image and also housed the railroad clock, which in early days often served as the official time for the town.

After 1900 the railroads began to experience steady competition from the automobile, which was more convenient; the bus, which was cheaper; and the airplane, which was quicker. In order to meet this competition, the railroads found it necessary to cut expenses, the most obvious being the massive, ornate terminals. Economy often forced several railroads to consolidate their operations in a single building in each city, which produced the union station serving the trains and customers of more than one road.

Siting was another factor that contributed to the prominence of the terminal. In the pre-automobile era, it was slow and tedious to move goods and people to and from the station so that a centralized location within the business district and convenient to the most people was essential. Conversely, a business site near the depot was the most desirable causing the city to grow up around the station.

In 19th century America, the train's arrival at the local depot was the primary means of contact with the outside world through its delivery of merchandise, mail, newspapers, food, money, and people.

During the years of its operation, the M&C erected numerous stations along its line. The first building phase was completed just in time for the Civil War. Because of the road's strategic importance during that conflict, many of these depots were destroyed and had to be rebuilt in the late 1860s. The M&C ran through a sparsely populated, rural area so that the depots were, for the most part, modest frame structures. The railroad was principally a freight line built to haul cotton. Although after the Civil War, the tonnage of both lumber and stone exceeded that of cotton; because of this, the M&C stations were predominantly freight depots incorporating a ticket office. Also common during the days of steam were stops without depots where the train took on fuel and water. These water stops, established by the railroad, often grew into small communities, which were referred to as tank towns. The frequent stops were observed by an English traveler who commented: "Upon second-class lines, especially in the Southern states, the popular criticism upon a slow train, that 'it stops at every wood pile,' has in it not much of exaggeration."

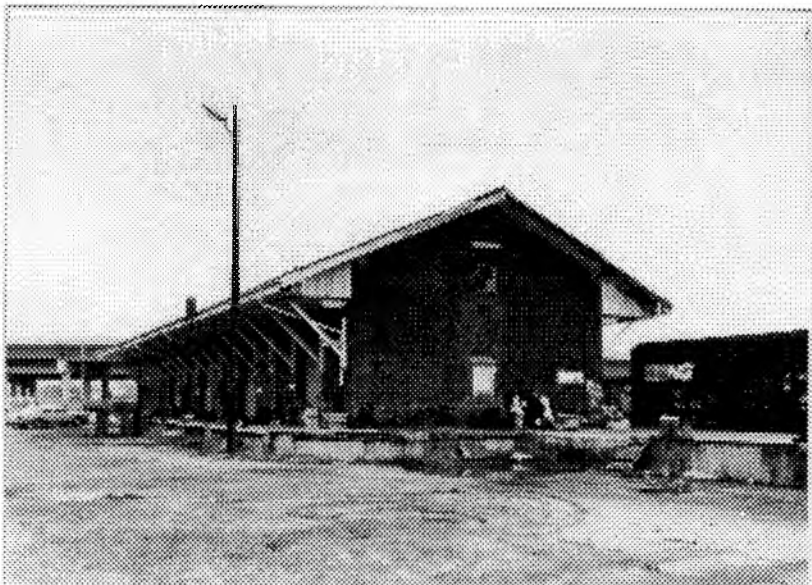


Fig.1 West end of 1856 freight depot, December 1994.  
Courtesy Harvie P. Jones.



Fig.2 Track side and office of 1856 freight depot, December 1994.  
Courtesy Harvie P. Jones.



**Fig.3 Office end of freight depot, October 1998. Notice Courthouse in background.**

Courtesy Malcolm Tarkington.



**Fig.4 Track side and office end of freight depot, showing roof with shingles stripped off, October 1998.**

Courtesy Malcolm Tarkington.