

Union Station

Pershing Road and Main Street
completed 1914

by Susan Jezak Ford

The term “monumental” applies to nearly every aspect of Kansas City’s Union Station. The efforts expended to prepare the station’s site, the immensity of the building’s design, the enthusiasm with which the city received its new station, the constant daily use for 40 years and, ultimately, the effort to successfully preserve it contribute to Union Station’s status as an architectural and historical landmark. Perhaps no other building in Kansas City has such a rich history or has touched the lives of so many people.

At the turn of the century it became obvious that Kansas City desperately needed a new railroad depot. The city of 200,000 citizens had outgrown the old Union Depot, built in the west bottoms for a city population of 60,000. As the community and the Kansas City Terminal Railway Company explored new sites and considered the possible expansion of the Union Depot site, the 1903 flood struck, nearly destroying the Depot and clearly showing that the constricted site had no future.

After securing a location at 24th and Main streets next to an open sewer named O.K. Creek, several years of give-and-take negotiations between the railways and the Kansas City city council took place. The enclosure of the sewer, construction of viaducts, and orientation of the station were finally agreed upon in 1909, pending approval by the general populace. The proposed ordinance specifically outlined ownership and maintenance responsibilities for the station, tracks, and adjoining roads. In addition, the terminal company would be required to purchase 8.5 acres south of the station for a park. On election day, the dissenting 708 votes were overwhelmed by 24,522 supporters.

As early as 1901, the railroads had secretly approached architects about designs for the new station, finally selecting Jarvis Hunt in 1906. Hunt was an outspoken proponent of the City Beautiful movement, an effort to combine well-designed buildings and



street plans with green spaces in the urban streetscape. Nephew of prominent architect Richard Morris Hunt, he graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and began practicing architecture in 1890. He relocated from Boston to Chicago after receiving the commission to design the Vermont State Building for the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Kansas City commissions included the Commerce building at 922 Walnut in 1907 and the Kansas City Star building at 18th Street and Grand Avenue in 1909. Jarvis Hunt's Union Station became the most prominent architectural contribution to the City Beautiful movement in Kansas City.

Hunt's ultimate design for Union Station was a T-shaped structure, outfitted with every modern convenience and estimated to cost \$5.7 million, more than 2.5 times the original budget for a new station. The six-story head house of the Beaux-Arts building was fronted by three 90-foot tall arches flanked by massive paired columns. This main block was flanked by two three-story pavilions; the entire structure was faced with Bedford limestone and accented by polished New England granite. Ornamentation included classical adornments of enormous entablatures, pediments above windows, simply embellished friezes, and carved swags and wreaths. The rear "T" of the building extended 450 feet north of the head house and served as a waiting room for travelers, allowing the railroad tracks to run beneath it. The building was constructed to last 200 years and at the time was the third largest train station in the country.

The grand opening of Union Station on October 30, 1914, began with a morning parade of 137 industries presenting floats and delegations. A 21-gun salute, fired after a signal from President Woodrow Wilson in Washington, declared the station open in the afternoon. The crowd, estimated at 100,000, surged through the entrance doors and filled the station beyond capacity. The band inside played "America" and speeches began, although the noise of the crowd made it nearly impossible to hear the remarks of the orating dignitaries. The ticket window opened at 11 p.m., and the first purchase went to Wichita businessman, F. W. Hockaday. The first trains began running in and out of the station at midnight on October 31. At ten seconds after midnight, a special car from the Frisco railroad arrived carrying the "Hanky Panky" theatrical company. Passenger service the following day did not go so smoothly; no train in or out of the station was on time and delays often stretched to hours. The problems were blamed on the new machinery and the inexperienced men using it.

The interior of Union Station was designed to serve every need of travelers. The ticket office and main lobby were encased in the soaring head house, along with railroad offices, restaurants, the city's largest barbershop, a post office and drug store in adjoining spaces. A small jail and emergency hospital space were also included in the station. Hunt's plan utilized three sub-levels of the station to reduce collisions between departing passengers, baggage transportation, and local citizens using the station's services. Arriving passengers were channeled down concourses on either side of the north waiting room toward the grand lobby, allowing separate space for those arriving and departing. The complex was lit, heated and cooled by its own power plant, located west of the station.

Local residents claimed Union Station as their own and enthusiastically utilized the structure. The large clock that hung from the ceiling between the lobby and waiting room served as a meeting location for many businessmen, couples, and gatherings. The rose-brown marble interior walls of the station gave visual warmth to the immense space and were accented by vividly painted plaster ceilings and terra cotta floors in geometric designs. The Harvey House coffee shop and elegant Westport room were well known for their popular meals and efficient service.

At the time of its construction, Union Station represented a city's optimism towards growth and the potential of the railroad industry. Both views were on target for the time, as Kansas City boundaries moved south and the station teemed with people day and night. Soldiers filed through the station while being transported during two world wars and the front plaza was filled at the dedication of the Liberty Memorial in 1921, located atop the hill directly south of the station. During its busiest years, approximately 200 passenger trains came through Union Station.

Train travel began to decline in the 1950s, and the need for a massive railroad station also became less important to Kansas City. As time passed, the north waiting room was closed, and the monumental structure gradually took on the quality of a white elephant—too big, unneeded, and too difficult to maintain. Although Union Station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, the building began to seriously deteriorate. Local preservationists offered a variety of plans to save and use the building, but it wasn't until the successful ratification of the bi-state tax in 1996 that concrete plans to preserve the building began. The 1/8 cent sales tax, the first in the country, was approved by voters in Kansas and Missouri to raise funds for the restoration of

Union Station and to provide a site for Science City, a new science museum.

The monumental building that played such a prominent role in Kansas City's social and architectural history is undergoing the city's largest ever historic building renovation. More than \$250 million will be spent in public and private funds to ensure that the mammoth train station designed to last for 200 years will remain a part of the urban landscape.

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