

# DONNER CROSSINGS



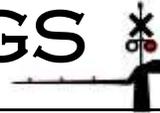
A Publication of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society  
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**\*\*Colfax Passenger Depot Renovation Special Issue\*\***



The circus is in town, brought by the railroad to Colfax circa 1937. The passenger depot is at lower left, and the Railway Express building is near the center beyond the row of baggage carts. A Nevada County Narrow Gauge mixed passenger-freight train is at bottom center, and the Southern Pacific mainline tracks run diagonally across the photo, beyond the depot. At far right is the Marvin Hotel, destroyed by fire in 1939, and a Greyhound bus of the period. At top center is the freight depot, and familiar Main St. store fronts can be seen at top left. The rail fence at far right can be seen in the background of many Colfax photos of NCNG trains. *Bill Fisher photo courtesy of Joe Halton.*

Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route



## From the Editor:

PSRHS member and Depot Project Manager Tony Hesch, along with your editor, serving as Project Administrator, have been very busy these past months, putting the finishing touches on the interior renovation of the Colfax Passenger Depot. We have been living and breathing this project for nearly three years, and it seems fitting to make the depot renovation story the focus for this issue of Donner Crossings.

Being involved in a volunteer project of this scope has been both rewarding and frustrating, and has involved a lot more physical labor than either Tony or I had anticipated we would need to provide. We have had some major successes, and have had to overcome numerous pitfalls. Probably the biggest ongoing frustration has been the unpredictable volunteer labor force. We have had to revise the completion date several times due to either delays in securing the next phase of funding, or to shortage of labor to carry out the many tasks involved in a complete building renovation.

In our initial project planning, we had anticipated the participation of local contractors during the slow winter season. However, there wasn't a

slow winter for the local construction industry in either 2004-5 or 2005-6. Thus, Tony and I have performed the majority of the renovation effort, supported by community volunteers.

On the positive side, the 1905-vintage Colfax Passenger Depot is a grand building, and there is tremendous satisfaction in bringing this piece of local railroad history back to life. While the building structure was modified to meet new earthquake codes, those who worked on the building feel it would have lasted many more years without the earthquake retrofits.

In further support of the PSRHS objective to preserve and display items of railroad history along the Donner Pass Route, PSRHS will be maintaining historic exhibits in the depot waiting room, and in the area outside the building. If you know of any photos or artifacts depicting local railroad history that could be included, please let Tony or me know. Displays will include placards describing each item and its significance, and acknowledging the person who has provided the artifact for public enjoyment.

We hope that this "story" of the Colfax depot and its renovation will help stimulate interest and participation in future projects. *Roger Staab, ed*

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*You are invited to submit feature articles and/or photos for future issues of Donner Crossings. Please contact Roger Staab, email [rsrr@ncws.com](mailto:rsrr@ncws.com), or by mail at PSRHS, P.O. Box 1776, Colfax, CA 95713. Assistance is available to format your information or photos into final form for publication.*

### **Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society**

Individual Membership	\$20/yr
Family Membership	\$25/yr

Make Check Payable to:	PSRHS
	P.O. Box 1776
	Colfax, CA 95713

# Colfax Southern Pacific Passenger Depot



*New Life at 100*



**Colfax Depot circa 1940. A Colfax-based consolidation helper is on the point ahead of a mallet cab-forward about to depart Colfax for the climb over Donner summit. J.F. Orem photo from John Signor's book, *Donner Pass - Southern Pacific's Sierra Crossing*.**

**Introduction.** A multi-year effort has been underway to renovate the 1905-vintage Colfax, CA Southern Pacific Passenger Depot. With the renovation complete, it seems an appropriate time to review the depot's role over the past 100 years on Southern Pacific's Sierra crossing, and to summarize the efforts that brought this piece of railroad history back into public service.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Colfax Passenger Depot was a center of activity in this bustling railroad town. In addition to the many Southern Pacific (SP) and Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) passengers who moved through its doors, the depot housed a Western Union office,

and an adjacent building north of the depot, no longer on the site, was home to Wells Fargo (later Railway Express). The Colfax Depot served NCNG passengers traveling to and from Grass Valley/Nevada City until the narrow gauge line ceased operations in 1942, and SP passengers until AMTRAK assumed passenger operations in 1971.

Today, the Colfax Passenger Depot once again serves as a focal point for travelers and community. Housed in the renovated depot are a passenger waiting area/meeting room, public rest rooms, visitor information center staffed by the Colfax Area Chamber of Commerce, and Colfax Area Historical Society's Colfax Heritage Museum.

Information in this summary has come in part from the Colfax Passenger Depot Registration Form submittal to the National Register of Historic Places prepared by PAR Environmental Services, Cindy Baker, Historian, 1998, and from John Signor's book, **Donner Pass, SP's Sierra Crossing**.

## Colfax Depot Construction

The Colfax Passenger Depot was built in 1905, and began serving SP travelers in November of that year. This new building replaced the old Central Pacific depot, which was destroyed by fire earlier in 1905. It had been located one block north of the current location.



Colfax Depot circa 1920. *PSRHS collection.*

The Colfax Depot was built in what was known as SP's colonnade style, used extensively by SP in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some 25 depots were built by SP to this design, in both one- and two-story models. Some examples of nearby depots built in this basic style include those in Woodland, Suisun City, Redding and Lodi. The Colfax depot is longer, and has a larger baggage room than these other depots. It's possible that it was built with larger dimensions because of the need to service both SP and NCNG passengers at the Colfax location.

The original construction included a perimeter concrete foundation and wood girders supported by wood-and-concrete piers. The exterior was covered with redwood tongue-and-groove drop siding. The hip roof was originally covered with wood shingles. Four dormers, two on each side, provide attic ventilation and visual interest to the roof line.

The west side of the depot consists of the covered colonnade, supported by 12 cast iron columns, with eight of these 10-inch diameter columns evenly spaced along the west edge of the structure. Windows are double-hung, and there is a 5-section bay window at the center of the west (SP track) side of the depot.

The baggage room, located at the north end of the depot, featured sliding freight doors on the SP and the NCNG sides. Both freight doors were originally at ground level to allow easy movement of baggage carts to tracks on each side of the building. In later years, the freight door on the NCNG side was raised to the height of an exterior platform, which was likely used for carriage and truck loading.



Depot & NCNG cars, circa 1912. *Best: NCNG*

The baggage room had beaded tongue-and-groove siding on walls and ceiling. The telegrapher's office, south of the baggage room, was finished in lath-and-plaster, with vertical tongue-and-groove beaded wainscot and wood floors. The waiting room, located next to the telegrapher's office, was also finished in lath-and-plaster with wainscot and wood floors. Bathrooms were located off the waiting room. The roadmaster's office at the southern end of the building was finished in lath-and-plaster.

## **SP Mainline Realignment & Double-Tracking**

The location chosen for the new passenger depot coincided with a reconfiguration of railroad operations in Colfax to reduce confusing and congested traffic flow. Prior to 1905, NCNG freight cars had to be shunted across the SP mainline tracks to reach the freight depot, which was on the west side of the SP tracks. In 1905, the freight depot was moved to the east side of the SP mainline, and the new passenger depot was sited south of the freight depot to serve SP and NCNG passengers. Under the new configuration, both freight depot and passenger depot were located between the SP and NCNG tracks.



Colfax Depot & McKeen motor car local, 1911.  
*Postcard: PSRHS collection.*

The present Colfax passenger depot sits in its original 1905 location. At the time of its construction, the SP tracks followed a different alignment through Colfax, and the mainline and passenger spur ran parallel to and immediately in front of the building. Nevada County Narrow Gauge railroad tracks ran on the east side of the depot, along what is now Railroad St. In 1915, as part of a project to double-track the SP Donner route, the mainline through Colfax was straightened to its present alignment, but the passenger depot remained in place, thereby accounting for the depot location relative to the present-day tracks.

The depot was a beehive of activity during World War II, since many special military trains passed through Colfax, transporting soldiers and sailors being sent to and returning from the European and Pacific war fronts.

## **The Heyday of Steam**

Until the 1950's, Colfax was a major watering location for the steam engines, including cab-forward mallets that provided power over Donner Pass. The cab forward design, in which the engine cab was moved to the front of the engine, ahead of the boiler and stack, was developed to reduce the smoke experienced by engine crews when going through the many tunnels and snowsheds on Donner Pass. Since these engines were oil-fired, the cab did not need to be adjacent to the tender. In Colfax, water columns were located adjacent to the passenger depot and in the yard. Most steam trains stopped in Colfax for water or fuel, including several presidential specials. In some cases, there was an opportunity for a public appearance and speeches; in others, the train slipped through in the dark of night. All these scenes played out in sight of the depot.



Passenger train Sierra at Colfax, 1941. *A.C. Phelps.*

In 1918, there were 16 scheduled passenger trains per day at Colfax (8 each way, including two locals). In June 1942, five passenger trains daily each way ran through Colfax, with names such as Challenger, Pacific Limited, Overland Limited, and the City of San Francisco, the new streamliner.

From 1909 to 1933, Colfax was also served by McKeen gasoline powered motor-car locals that traveled between Colfax and Sacramento.

Colfax also provided helper engines for trains about to start the serious climb over the Sierra. In 1912, the Colfax yard was expanded and a seven-stall engine house constructed south of the depot, located in what is now the open area beyond the fruit sheds. Consolidation-type and mallet cab-forwards were stationed at Colfax and cut in to trains as needed. The need for helper service at Colfax began to fade in the late 1940's, and in 1951 the engine house was razed.

### **Diesels and AMTRAK**

By the 1950's, the change from steam to diesel was nearly complete, and the Colfax depot was seeing a variety of motive power bringing passengers to and from the surrounding communities. There were diesel F unit "covered wagons", also called black widows for their distinctive paint scheme, which powered both freight and passenger trains. Diesel-powered passenger trains of the era included the streamlined City of San Francisco.

Despite efforts to enhance the rail travel experience, the advent of improved roads and increased use of automobiles caused railroad passenger travel to begin a steady decline in the 1950's. By 1970, most railroads, including SP, wanted to cease passenger operations and focus on the more lucrative freight business. In 1971, AMTRAK assumed passenger train operations in most of the country, including SP's Donner Pass route. Colfax was not initially a stop on the AMTRAK-operated Zephyr between Chicago and Sacramento, but was added to the schedule in 1976.

While Trans-continental passenger trains once again stopped in Colfax, AMTRAK did not provide a staffed station, and passengers boarded from an asphalt platform and small shelter adjacent to the depot. From the 1970's until the 1990's, the depot was used by SP maintenance-of-way crews for office space and storage.



Condition of the depot when transferred to the City of Colfax in the 1990's. *Tom Homer photo.*

### **Resurrecting the Colfax Passenger Depot**

In the 1990's, Capitol Corridor commuter service was being expanded between Sacramento and the Bay Area, and there was interest in having a Corridor train make an overnight turnaround in Colfax. New owner



Capitol Corridor trains overnigheted in Colfax for a brief time in the late 1990's. *Tom Homer photo.*

Union Pacific agreed to deed the Colfax depot to the City of Colfax, to be used as a transportation center. In the mid-1990's, Placer County Transportation & Planning Agency (PCTPA) began designing a multi-

modal transportation facility centered around the Colfax Depot. The design was completed and advertised in 1999, but bids came in higher than available funds. Due to the lack of adequate funds to complete the original design, the project was down-sized by the City of Colfax and Phase I of the revised design was awarded in 2000 to complete the AMTRAK platform, sidewalks, and roof and foundation for the depot building.

To accomplish the Phase I work on the depot, the building was physically lifted off its old foundation and moved to what is now the grassy area north of the building while the new slab foundation was poured. The building was then set back on the new foundation. During this phase, old roofing was removed, and a portion of the roof structure opened so that a large glue-laminate beam and supporting posts could be added to the structure in order to meet California earthquake construction codes. A new roof consisting of green asphalt shingles was then added to the building.



Depot being prepared to be moved aside to pour new slab foundation. *City of Colfax photo.*

As there were no further funds available to continue work on the building, the Colfax Depot Management Committee, made up of local volunteers, was formed to explore alternatives to complete the project. City parks funds and volunteer labor were used to complete a grassy landscape area north of

the depot. A local businessman donated labor and materials to repair and paint the exterior of the building. Colfax-based Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society helped research and select the appropriate historic SP colors for the building's exterior. In 2003, repairs to the exterior were completed, and the depot was painted in SP's Colonial Yellow, with Samoa Brown trim and green window sashes. Samples of previous paint layers by P.S. Preservation Services of Sacramento had shown that the Colfax Depot was unique in the original use of green for window sashes instead of creamy white used in most other depots.



Depot with new foundation, new roof, historic signs, landscaping and new paint. *Roger Staab photo.*

### **Interior Renovation**

Once the exterior was repainted, fund raising began in earnest to renovate the depot interior. In a series of public meetings, community sentiment strongly favored using the building as an area museum, visitor center and passenger waiting area. In 2004, the City of Colfax agreed to dedicate \$75K of City parks funds for the renovation and reopening of the depot. Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society members agreed to provide overall project management and coordination for the renovation project, and work began on the interior in the fall of 2004.



Condition of tongue-and-groove walls and ceiling in baggage room prior to renovation. *Roger Staab*

Through a primarily volunteer effort, the museum portion (the former baggage room) was renovated during 2005. Original tongue-and-groove walls and ceilings were damaged but still in place. Since plywood shear walls were required to satisfy earthquake construction standards, tongue-and-groove was carefully removed from the north wall, new wiring, insulation and plywood shear added, and the tongue-and-groove reinstalled. Replacement boards milled to match were used to replace damaged boards or to fill holes cut when the building was moved. The repaired walls and ceiling were then painted in original colors.

The freight door on the track side was made fully operational, and simulated distressed oak laminate flooring and period lighting and fixtures were installed (see photo next page). A grand opening for the museum portion was held in November 2005.

Through 2006, work progressed on the remainder of the interior renovation. Interior walls in the rest of the depot had been stripped of old plaster when the building was moved for its new foundation. New walls had to be framed in, including new mens and womens restrooms. Original wood-framed double-hung windows were preserved and made fully operational.



Waiting room and bathroom area prior to renovation. *Roger Staab*

Interior walls were finished in sheetrock with a simulated plaster look. Wainscot and chair rails were installed along all walls in the visitor center (former telegrapher's office) and waiting room, and the hallway to the bathrooms. Period ceramic tile was donated and installed in the bathrooms. A custom cabinet was fabricated to provide functional storage under the bay windows, while simulating the telegrapher's station. The window between the visitor center and waiting room was constructed to look like a ticket window. Period light fixtures provide the lighting, controlled by push-button switches (see photos next page).

The depot interior renovation has been funded by City of Colfax parks funds, a \$50K grant from United Auburn Indian Community, \$49K from a National Park Service Save America's Treasures Grant, and private donations. These contributions have been multiplied by the efforts of a small but dedicated group of volunteers.

With remaining renovation tasks, exterior site work and paving complete, the depot reopened to the public in spring 2007.



*Tony Hesch, PSRHS, Project Manager*  
*Roger Staab, PSRHS, Project Administrator*



Baggage room south wall with renovated tongue-and-groove wall covering and ceiling, new opening for doorway to visitor center, oak laminate flooring, and light fixtures consistent with the period. The sliding freight door facing the tracks remains operational with original track and rollers. This room now houses the Colfax area museum. Track lights are included to illuminate historic displays.

Bay window in former telegrapher's office (now visitor center) after repairs, new cabinet, trim and paint. Wainscot is painted in period dark green, and windows, doors and trim a lighter gray-green. The custom cabinet under the windows is designed to display a simulated telegrapher's station. New transom windows were fabricated to match the one old transom that remained.



View from visitor center toward waiting room, hall and bathrooms. Note one of the two original brick chimneys that were incorporated into the interior finish. Displays include historic photos, original artwork and railroad memorabilia. Period lighting has been installed throughout the building, along with brass push-button switches.  
*Photos by Roger Staab*



Eastbound AMTRAK Zephyr arriving in Colfax, 2007. Roger Staab photo.

## PSRHS Mission Statement

- ◆ To research, document, and preserve the history of railroading and current operations in the Placer-Sierra area.
- ◆ To interpret the relationship and effect of railroad commerce and activities with the cultural and economic development of local communities and the region.
- ◆ To collect, curate, restore, and interpret – by way of display and operation for public view – memorabilia of local railroads.
- ◆ To work with other civic, historical, and public organizations to accomplish these goals.

**Area of Focus: The Transcontinental Route over Donner Pass,  
from Roseville to Truckee**

- ◆ Monthly Presentations, 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday, 7PM, DeWitt Senior Center,  
Corner of 1<sup>st</sup> & D Ave., off Bell Rd., N. Auburn
- ◆ Field Trips to nearby points of interest
- ◆ Restoration Projects
- ◆ Photo Displays

[www.psrhs.org](http://www.psrhs.org)

