



DONNER CROSSINGS

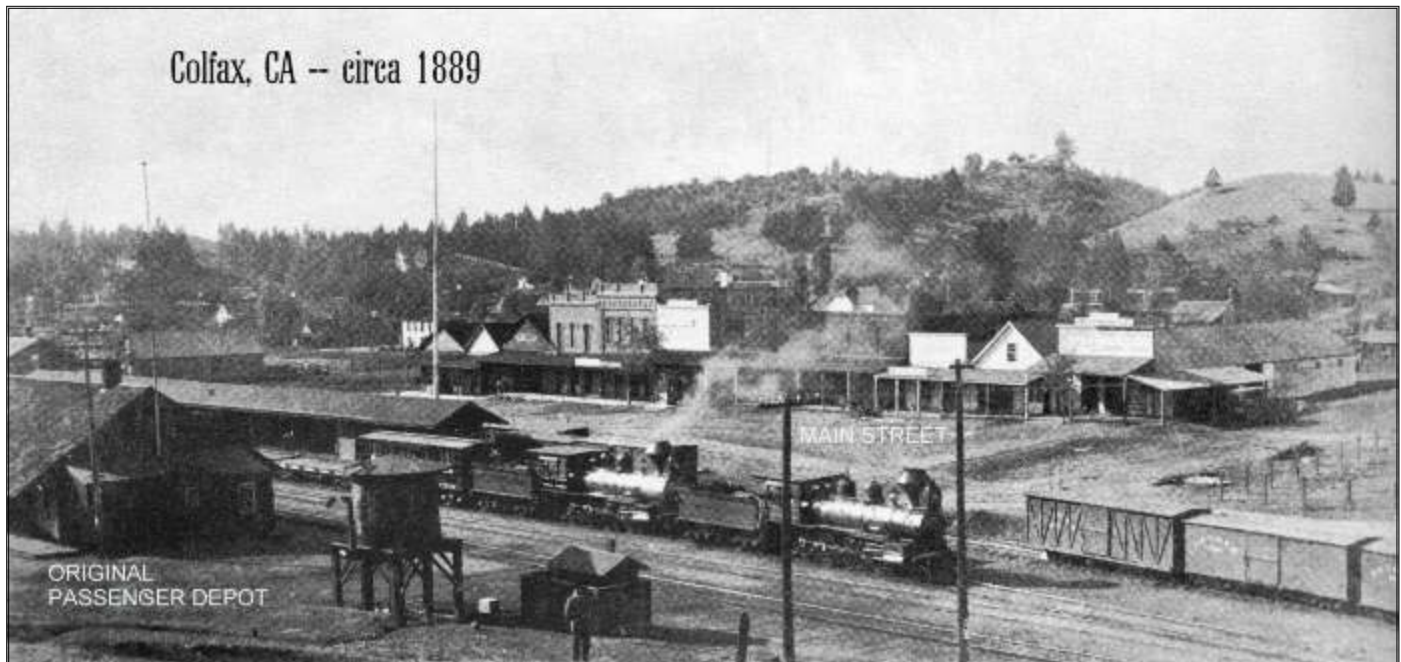
A Publication of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society
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** COLFAX AND ITS RAILROADS **

** A LOOK BACK IN TIME **

Colfax has always been a railroad town, and probably always will be. Running through the heart of town is the original transcontinental rail route, also called the Overland Route, Pacific Railroad, or Donner Route. Colfax was created by the railroad in 1865, but not incorporated until 1910. In this, its centennial year, it seems appropriate to take a look back at Colfax and its railroads. The focus will be on the two railroads that have run through the town, and how their changes over time have helped shape and define Colfax through the years.



- DID YOU KNOW:*
- COLFAX WAS NAMED FOR SCHUYLER COLFAX, SPEAKER OF THE US HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
 - COLFAX HAS SEEN CONTINUOUS DAILY RAIL TRAFFIC SINCE SEPTEMBER 1865
 - COLFAX HAS HAD TWO DIFFERENT PASSENGER DEPOTS
 - COLFAX FREIGHT DEPOT HAS "LIVED IN" THREE SEPARATE LOCATIONS
 - COLFAX WAS SERVED BY TWO RAILROADS FROM 1876-1942
 - COLFAX WAS HOME TO A 9-STALL ENGINE HOUSE FOR HELPER ENGINES
 - COLFAX EXPERIENCED A MAKEOVER IN 1915 WHEN TRACKS WERE REALIGNED THROUGH TOWN
 - COLFAX FRUIT ICING AND PACKING TOOK PLACE OVER SEVERAL DECADES

We begin our look back with the arrival of the transcontinental railroad to the Sierra foothills.



COLFAX CIRCA 1881. LOOKING SOUTHEAST. VISIBLE FROM LEFT TO CENTER ARE THE 1865 PASSENGER DEPOT, NCNG TRANSFER SHED (LONG NARROW BUILDING), AND NEW FREIGHT DEPOT. MAINLINE TRACKS RAN BETWEEN THE PASSENGER DEPOT AND THE FREIGHT DEPOT/TRANSFER SHED. BACK SIDES OF DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS ARE AT LOWER CENTER.
(PSRHS COLLECTION, COURTESY OF STAN KISTLER)

In The Beginning - Pre-Summer 1865: Colfax owes its very existence to the building of the first transcontinental railroad, and the town and railroad remain inseparably linked to the present day.

By the early 1860's, nearby Illinoistown (currently the area along the freeway near Winner Chevrolet) was a bustling settlement and supply point for mining activities along the American and Bear Rivers. Wagon roads reached out from Illinoistown to the many mining claims and settlements in the region, including the communities of Iowa Hill, Grass Valley, and Nevada (City). In the context of our story, Illinoistown is the town that was bypassed by the transcontinental railroad. *For further information on the founding and settlement of Illinoistown, the reader is referred to Pat Jones' excellent account in the book, "the Colfax Connection – A History of Colfax."*

As the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) was being built into the Sierra Nevada Mountains along the ridge separating the Bear River and the north fork of the American River, surveyors found the best route to be about a half-mile to the west of Illinoistown. It is worth noting that the original surveyed route would have taken the railroad to the Bear River side of the ridge through a tunnel about one mile southwest of present Colfax, then continue on the Bear River side until reaching Long Ravine. However; final surveys showed a more advantageous route on the American River side of the ridge into what is now Colfax.

The Central Pacific tracks were completed to Auburn in May 1865, and to Clipper Gap in June of that year.

COVER PHOTO: DOWNTOWN COLFAX, 1889. VISIBLE LEFT TO RIGHT ARE THE ORIGINAL 1865 PASSENGER DEPOT, NEVADA COUNTY NARROW GAUGE TRANSFER SHED, DOUBLE-HEADED CENTRAL PACIFIC ENGINES, MAIN STREET BUILDINGS, AND NEVADA COUNTY NARROW GAUGE BOXCARS. (BEST – NCNG).

Legend:

| | |
|-------|---|
| PSRHS | Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society |
| CPRR | Central Pacific Railroad |
| NCNG | Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad |
| SP | Southern Pacific Company |
| UP | Union Pacific Railroad |

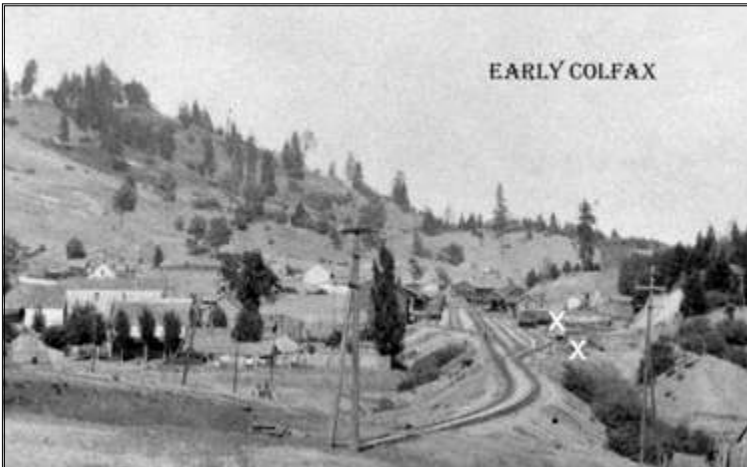
The Early Years – 1865-1900

1865 - Schuyler Colfax visited area July 12
1865 - Tracks reached Colfax September 1
1865 - Freight Shed and Passenger Depot built
1876 - Nevada County Narrow Gauge began service
1880 - Colfax Freight Depot built

The Railroad Arrives and VIPs Visit – 1865-1900: By summer 1865 grading for the railroad reached a relatively flat area near Illinoistown, where a teamster camp was established. To build from there to Dutch Flat, a full year of very costly and extremely difficult work lay ahead. A new town formed around the site of this camp, and building lots were soon being sold.

The Sacramento Union newspaper, July 11, 1865, reported that Schuyler Colfax and his party of dignitaries, on a tour of the West, “will leave .. by special train at 4PM, July 11 for the end of the rail.” *Colfax was then Speaker of the US House of Representatives, and later the 17th Vice-President of the United States.* In a September letter Schuyler Colfax stated that on their way to Oregon “We first took a flying trip across the Sierra Nevada by the route of the Central Pacific Railroad to Donner Lake ... We then visited a town named (later) for me on the railroad”. They were met at Illinoistown July 12 and driven to Grass Valley (Grass Valley Daily Union paper, July 13). The Placer Herald reported July 15 that CPRR had purchased land near Illinoistown and was surveying lots for a new town. A name for the town was proposed in the July 19 Sacramento Union – “a correspondent from Placer County desires us to suggest to (CPRR) the propriety of giving the new town a new ... name – say Colfax”. An ad in the July 24 Sacramento Union announced a sale on July 29 of lots in the new town of Colfax, located on the railroad a half mile above Illinoistown. The July 31 Sacramento Union reported that thirty lots sold at the initial auction at prices ranging from \$100 to \$450.

On April 14, 1865, the day of his assassination, President Lincoln had met with Schuyler Colfax. At that meeting, Lincoln requested that Colfax, on his trip West, take a message from him to the miners regarding the importance of the mines and the wealth and prosperity they were contributing to the nation. Colfax and President Lincoln had been strong advocates of constructing the Pacific Railroad to link the people and riches of the West with the rest of the country. When he returned to the East Coast after his trip, Schuyler Colfax spoke frequently and fervently in support of completing the transcontinental link.



ORIGINAL CPRR TRACKS LOOKING NORTH INTO COLFAX. TRACKS IN THE DISTANCE CURVE TO THE RIGHT HEADING TOWARD CAPE HORN. X'S MARK APPROXIMATE LOCATIONS OF PRESENT DAY PASSENGER DEPOT AND FRUIT SHEDS. TRACKS FROM AUBURN ARE AT BOTTOM OF THE PICTURE. (KECK PHOTO – COLFAX AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION)

The tracks reached Colfax on September 1, 1865; by September 4th trains were moving people and goods between Sacramento and the new railhead. Some Illinoistown businesses soon moved to Colfax; supply wagons were now loaded at the railroad platform before fanning out to nearby mines and communities.

The tracks into Colfax followed a lazy-S pattern through town. Approaching from Auburn, the 1865 mainline cut across what is now part of the Colfax rail yard, then crossed over a 20-foot fill to the area near the present fruit sheds. The tracks then veered north, paralleling Main Street and the front of the present passenger depot (today's passenger depot was aligned with the original mainline tracks when it was built in 1905). The mainline continued north past what is now the Grass Valley Street crossing, then roughly followed the arc of the present-day spur line as the tracks exited Colfax toward Long Ravine and Donner summit.

In 1865 CPRR built a large freight shed, over 500 feet in length, on the downtown side of the tracks. To reduce ongoing construction costs, CPRR granted private parties permission to erect passenger depots at several locations along the line, so long as each depot included space for railroad offices. In Colfax, James Mahon and Thomas Curley built a depot across from the north end of the freight shed on the opposite side of the CPRR tracks. There they operated a saloon and eating house, catering to rail passengers and workers.



CPRR FREIGHT SHED BUILT IN 1865 ON DOWNTOWN SIDE OF THE TRACKS. MAIN STREET BUILDINGS ARE BEYOND THE SHED. (SIERRA HERITAGE MAGAZINE)

The Town Grows, and Schuyler Returns : The Sacramento Union, Sept. 4, 1865: "The town of Colfax consists of some thirty or forty finished and unfinished frame buildings – the most of them of a commodious and substantial class. House building progresses slowly on account of the scarcity of lumber". Three trains daily ran to and from Sacramento.

August 12, 1869, three months after the railroad was completed: "Vice President Colfax and party with special train passed through (Colfax) at 4:20 this P.M. en route West. The whole town turned out en masse to welcome the distinguished visitor, and honored him with a salute of fifteen guns. Appearing on the platform he acknowledged the compliment in a very happy and appropriate speech. After three cheers for (the travelers) the car departed." (Sacramento Union)

Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad

A committee was appointed in January 1874 to make plans to build a railroad from Grass Valley and Nevada City to Colfax. The towns had been campaigning to have the trans-continental railroad pass through their area, but the chosen route through Colfax had bypassed them. Existing wagon roads were troublesome and slow, especially for moving heavy equipment needed for the hard rock gold mines, prompting those communities to create a rail connection to Colfax. In 1874 the route was surveyed, financing secured, and a construction contract awarded in January 1875.

Construction began in Colfax in February 1875. The new narrow gauge tracks were located on the far side of the Central Pacific tracks from downtown Colfax and ran

roughly parallel to the CPRR tracks to Long Ravine trestle and bridge, where NCNG tracks passed under the CPRR tracks. The NCNG then proceeded down Long Ravine to a high wooden trestle over the Bear River on its route toward Grass Valley and Nevada City.

For a more complete description of the planning and construction of the NCNG Railroad, please see Gerald M. Best's book, "Nevada County Narrow Gauge."

Track was laid to the Grass Valley station in 1875, and the first work train from Colfax arrived in January 1876. However, it was not until April that ballasting was completed and regular train service commenced between Colfax and Grass Valley. In May 1876, tracks were completed to Nevada City and the NCNG Railroad was officially in business, providing freight and passenger service between Colfax and Nevada City.

Colfax Freight Depot: A portion of the original freight shed on the downtown side of the CPRR tracks was removed in 1880, and a new Colfax Freight Depot was constructed there. It was located near the present-day caboose and US Bank building, at what is today the Grass Valley Street crossing. This was the first of three locations the freight depot would occupy in the years to come.

NCNG built a transfer shed north of the new freight depot in about 1881. NCNG freight cars were then shuttled across the CPRR mainline tracks on a new spur track to access the Main Street side of the transfer shed. In the photo at right, narrow gauge freight cars can be seen on the near side of the long narrow transfer shed.

This track arrangement was shown on an 1883 map of Colfax in the collection of the Colfax Area Historical Society, and on the 1898 Sanborn map of Colfax. (Partial Sanborn maps are included on page 11 for interested readers).

Also shown on the 1883 and 1898 maps are two turntables. NCNG tracks extended past the 1865 passenger depot to a narrow-gauge turntable that was located on what is now Railroad Avenue south of the present passenger depot. At the north end of town, a CPRR turntable was located just south of the current Hwy 174 overcrossing.



IN THIS CIRCA 1904 VIEW, THE LARGE BUILDING TO THE LEFT IS THE GILLEN (COLFAX) HOTEL, BUILT IN 1903. BELOW IT IS THE 1865 PASSENGER DEPOT, WHICH BURNED IN 1905. TO THE RIGHT OF THE PASSENGER DEPOT ARE THE NCNG TRANSFER SHED AND FREIGHT DEPOT. DOWNTOWN BUILDINGS ARE AT BOTTOM RIGHT. NCNG TRAINS ARRIVED ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE PASSENGER DEPOT. THE FREIGHT DEPOT AND TRANSFER SHED WERE SOON MOVED ACROSS THE MAINLINE TRACKS, AND A NEW PASSENGER DEPOT CONSTRUCTED.
(PSRHS COLLECTION)



NCNG TRAIN AND CENTRAL HOTEL, CIRCA 1898. A CORNER OF THE 1865 PASSENGER DEPOT CAN BE SEEN AT BOTTOM LEFT. THE CENTRAL HOTEL WAS LOCATED ACROSS THE NCNG TRACKS FROM THE PASSENGER DEPOT, AND ON THE FAR SIDE OF BOTH NCNG AND MAINLINE TRACKS FROM DOWNTOWN. THE PASSENGER PLATFORM IN THE FOREGROUND WAS BETWEEN THE VISIBLE NCNG TRACKS AND THE MAINLINE TRACKS THAT ARE JUST OUT OF VIEW AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PICTURE.
(STANLEY BORDEN COLLECTION. BEST – NCNG).

The Railroad Gets a New Name:

- 1869: The owners of Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) purchased the fledgling Southern Pacific Railroad (SPRR) to extend the transcontinental route to San Francisco through San Jose, and to provide a connection to Southern California.
- 1885: CPRR and SPRR were merged under a Holding Company with the new name Southern Pacific Company (SP). SP then executed a lease of CPRR assets and operations.
- 1899: SP Company reorganized CPRR and renamed it Central Pacific Railway (CPRy), fully controlled by SP.

SP’s control of the operations on Central Pacific track after 1885 resulted in the gradual conversion of Colfax railroad operations and equipment to the SP name. By 1900, the Central Pacific name was disappearing in Colfax, replaced by SP, although Central Pacific Railway continued to exist as a corporate name under SP’s umbrella until the 1950’s, when CPRy was finally absorbed by SP.

Clearing the Traffic Jam: By the late 1890’s, increased railroad activity in Colfax was creating dangerous congestion where the NCNG spur crossed the mainline. SP made plans to relocate the freight depot, and by November 1905 the building and transfer shed had been moved across the tracks to their second location, on today’s passenger depot side of the mainline, and north of the new Grass Valley Street crossing. The narrow gauge spur was abandoned, and NCNG trains no longer crossed the mainline.

Depots on the Move – 1900-1910

1905 - Freight Depot moved to east side of tracks
 1905 - First Passenger Depot destroyed by fire
 1905 - New SP Passenger Depot opened
 ca1905 - New 65-foot turntable completed

The existing passenger depot was also in need of replacement, and the 1905 plans called for construction of a new passenger depot to replace the old one. These plans were accelerated when the old passenger depot burned in September 1905. By December 1905, the new passenger depot was completed and opened at its present location.

A 65-foot diameter turntable and adjacent small engine shed were built south of the new passenger depot (near the present RJ Miles building). This turntable replaced the one located north of town, which was then modified to turn NCNG engines. The original NCNG turntable was apparently abandoned at that time. (1907 Sanborn Map)

In 1907, a quartz monument was built near the tracks to promote the gold mines of Grass Valley and Nevada City.

1912 VIEW SHOWING FREIGHT DEPOT AT FAR RIGHT IN ITS SECOND LOCATION. NCNG TRAIN IS IN FOREGROUND, NEXT TO WELLS FARGO BUILDING (RAILWAY EXPRESS AFTER 1916 MERGER), AND NEW PASSENGER DEPOT PLATFORM IS AT LEFT. GRASS VALLEY STREET CROSSED THE TRACKS THIS SIDE OF THE FREIGHT DEPOT BY THE NEVADA COUNTY QUARTZ MONUMENT. (BEST – NCNG)



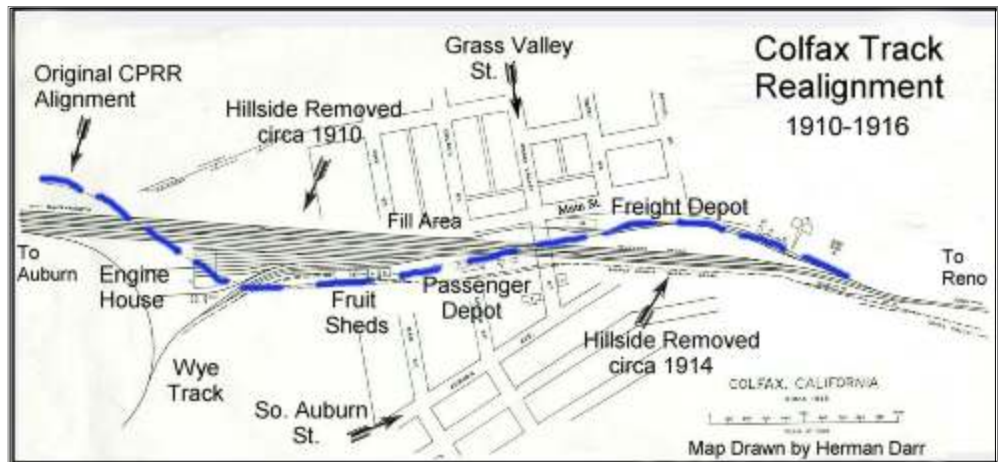
Down Come the Hillside, or Who Moved the Tracks: By the early 1900's longer and heavier trains were creating problems for rail operations over the Donner Pass portion of the transcontinental railroad. A need to provide a second track and also reduce some of the steep grades led to several proposals, including (1) an entirely new alignment which might have bypassed Colfax, (2) a long tunnel under the mountain, and (3) electrification of the entire Donner route. Conversion to oil-burning locomotives and problems with electrification in the snowy climate of Donner led to dismissal of many of the ideas, but grade reduction for uphill trains was badly needed at lower elevations, and in 1909 SP initiated a grade reduction project from Rocklin to Colfax, and double-tracking for the entire route.

Colfax Gets a New Look - 1910-1916

1910 - Hillside removal began
 1912 - Yard tracks and Engine House finished
 1915 - Freight depot moved (again)
 ca1916 - Colfax track realignment completed

The new track alignment deviated from the old alignment at some points above Rocklin. Both old and new tracks converged in Colfax. In order to streamline movement through town, a major realignment of the tracks was undertaken, eliminating the lazy-S curve of the tracks. A large Colfax railyard was created to support train operations for the climb toward Donner Pass.

Two hillsides in the heart of town, one on either side of the tracks, were removed to make room for the new track alignment. Material excavated from the first hillside was used to fill the low region near the south part of Main Street. A major rail yard and nine-stall engine house for helper engines were built on the resulting level area.



The freight depot was in the path of the realigned tracks and had to be moved, as was the quartz monument promoting the gold mines of Grass Valley and Nevada City. The excavation and track realignment took place from 1910-1916. In late May 1915 the freight depot was moved to its third and final location, on the downtown side of the mainline near Main Street, where it sits today. The narrow gauge transfer shed was reassembled in the railyard area south of the present-day fruit packing sheds. A new Wye track was built in the railyard east of the engine house, replacing the 65-foot turntable, which was then abandoned. The quartz monument was moved to the opposite side of the Grass Valley Street crossing and remained there until the 1920's, when it was dismantled.

Both the NCNG tracks and SP tracks were shifted to the new alignment. A new narrow-gauge turntable was built along the NCNG right-of-way beyond the Hwy 174 bridge. The relocated NCNG tracks entered town on present-day Narrow Gauge Road under the Hwy 174 bridge, then ran along the dirt track at the base of the hillside to Grass Valley St. The tracks then continued on Railroad Avenue past the passenger depot to the railyard.



MAY 5, 1915 VIEW FROM HILLSIDE ON SOUTH MAIN STREET. TRACK REALIGNMENT WAS PROGRESSING, WITH NEW TRACKS LAID TO GRASS VALLEY STREET. THE HILLSIDE BEYOND THE FREIGHT DEPOT WAS REMOVED IN 1913-14 TO MAKE ROOM FOR NEW NCNG AND MAINLINE TRACK ALIGNMENT. THE NEVADA COUNTY QUARTZ MONUMENT HAS BEEN RELOCATED, BUT INSTALLATION OF NEW TRACKS THROUGH THE CLEARED AREA WOULD WAIT UNTIL THE FREIGHT DEPOT WAS MOVED LATER IN MAY. (SP COLLECTION, SIGNOR - DONNER PASS)



ABOVE: NCNG TRAIN BY PASSENGER DEPOT AND RAILWAY EXPRESS BUILDING. 1937. SP MAINLINE RUNS DIAGONALLY ACROSS SCENE. FREIGHT DEPOT CAN BE SEEN ABOVE THE RAILWAY EXPRESS BUILDING IN ITS THIRD LOCATION. NOTE THE VINTAGE GREYHOUND BUS NEXT TO MARVIN HOTEL AT TOP RIGHT. (BILL FISHER PHOTO. COURTESY OF JOE HALTON)

BELOW, CIRCA 1913: THE ENGINE HOUSE IS IN THE BACKGROUND AND 65-FOOT TURNABLE IN THE FOREGROUND LOOKING SOUTHWEST FROM PRESENT-DAY INTERSECTION NEAR RJ MILES BUILDING. THE TURNABLE WAS ABANDONED AFTER THE WYE TRACK NEAR THE ENGINE HOUSE WAS COMPLETED. THE TRACKS IN THE FOREGROUND LINED WITH RAILCARS WERE PART OF THE ORIGINAL CPRR ALIGNMENT. (ALAN ASKE, SIGNOR - DONNER PASS)



The Glory Days of Steam: The early 1900's saw larger engines and longer trains making their way through Colfax. In 1909, SP tested a new Mallet compound 2-8-8-2 locomotive and found it had ample power for pulling Donner grades, but it created major problems for the engine crew due to smoke and gas accumulation in Donner's tunnels and snowsheds. Since SP had converted most of its engines to oil-fired boilers, the engine cab did not have to be next to the tender to get fuel to the boiler. Instead, the cab could be placed at the front, ahead of the smoke. Thus, cab-forward engines were born. Soon, cab-forwards (Mallets) were a regular sight in Colfax, on both freight and passenger service.

Glory Days of Steam - 1910-1955

- ca1910 - Cab-Forwards appeared in Colfax
- 1912 - Helper engines based in Colfax
- 1926 - Icing platform built for fruit packing
- 1942 - NCNG shut down operations
- 1949 - Colfax engine house closed
- 1955 - Last scheduled steam through Colfax

After the engine house was completed in 1912, Colfax-based Consolidation helper engines were frequently added to trains heading up the hill. Helpers added at Colfax ran to Emigrant Gap, where they were cut off and turned. The massive Roseville-based Mallet helpers near the rear of the train were cut off and turned at Summit, with its larger turntable. It was later replaced by the Norden turntable.

Train activity in Colfax was booming until the late 1920's economic downturn. In 1930, the Colfax engine house was shut down for a time, although the shutdown was short-lived. By the early 1940's, the engine house was once again a busy place, as a steady stream of troop trains and loads of wartime equipment rolled through town.



COLFAX-BASED CONSOLIDATION HELPER AT THE HEAD END OF A CAB-FORWARD-POWERED FRUIT TRAIN BY THE COLFAX DEPOT IN 1940. NOTE WATER COLUMN AT FAR RIGHT AND TRAIN ORDER SEMAPHORE BY THE DEPOT. (JF. OREM PHOTO. SIGNOR - DONNER PASS)

Helper service remained very active in Colfax until the late 1940's, but when diesels began to replace steam as the preferred mode of power over Donner, the need for Colfax-based helpers was greatly reduced. The Colfax engine house was closed for good in 1949, and the building was razed in 1951.

The last run of a cab forward through Colfax and over Donner occurred in 1957, when Mallet No. 4274 pulled an excursion, the Sierra Express, from Roseville to Sparks and return.

(continued on page 8)

The Glory Days of Steam: (cont'd) The Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad did not fare well during the same period. Better roads, along with improved cars, trucks and buses, led to a gradual loss of business for the railroad. Its fate was sealed with the start of WWII. In 1942 permits for priority purchasing of equipment for gold mining were canceled, as the materials were needed for the war effort. With revenue dropping and scrap-metal value increasing, NCNG ran its last revenue train on July 10, 1942, and the railroad was then sold for its salvage value.



VIEW OF OILVILLE, JUST NORTH OF THE HWY 174 OVERCROSSING. OIL WAS TRANSFERRED FROM SP CARS TO NCNG CARS AND ENGINES ON THE LOWER TRACKS. NOTE THE CAB-FORWARD POWER ON THE SP TRAIN ON THE UPPER TRACK. THE NCNG TURNTABLE WAS TO THE RIGHT OF THIS 1940 SCENE. THE TWILIGHT YEARS OF THE NCNG. (JF OREM PHOTO, SIGNOR – DONNER PASS)



NCNG ENGINE #9 ON RAILROAD AVENUE NEXT TO THE PACIFIC FRUIT EXCHANGE FRUIT SHEDS IN 1939. NARROW GAUGE TRACKS RAN ALONG TODAY'S RAILROAD AVENUE. (AL PHELPS PHOTO)

Colfax Fruit Packing: The Sacramento Union in July 1890 reported that “the new fruit shipping-house at Colfax is completed and ready to open for business.” Fruit shipments on the Overland (transcontinental) Route continued to increase in importance. In 1906 Pacific Fruit Express (PFE) was formed by UP and SP, with responsibility for purchasing and maintaining a fleet of refrigerated cars and operating icing plants along the route.

Earl Fruit Company and later Colfax Fruit Growers occupied buildings in Colfax where the fruit sheds are now located. An icing platform was built in the Colfax yard by PFE in 1926, and it operated until the early 1950's. Fruit was brought by truck (and by NCNG until 1942) from area farms to the fruit sheds, where it was packed and prepared for shipment East. A disease struck area orchards in the 1950's and caused the eventual shut down of Colfax fruit processing, although PFE fruit trains from Roseville rolled through Colfax into the 1970's.

Colfax Passenger Service: From 1865 to 1971, Colfax was a scheduled stop for passenger trains crossing Donner Pass. Powered initially by steam, the trains had names such as Atlantic and Pacific Express, Overland Limited, 49er, Challenger, Fast Mail, and after 1936, the diesel-powered City of San Francisco. The Colfax passenger depot was the heartbeat of the town, with passengers boarding these mainline trains and, until 1942, two or three NCNG trains each day bound for Grass Valley and Nevada City.

Colfax Passenger Service - 1865-Today

- 1865 - First passenger train from Sacramento
- 1909-1933 - McKeen motor car local service
- 1936 - Streamlined City of San Francisco debut
- 1942 - NCNG ran last revenue train
- 1971 - AMTRAK took over SP passenger trains
- 1976 - AMTRAK resumed Colfax stops

During the steam era, passenger train “specials” that might not normally stop in Colfax still paused in town to take on water and receive train orders. President McKinley's train made a brief stop in Colfax in 1901. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt's train made a scheduled stop in Colfax, and a large crowd filled the area around the depot. A special NCNG train brought people from Grass Valley and Nevada City to see the President during his Colfax stop. In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson's train made a brief stop. The train carrying President Warren Harding's body passed through Colfax during the night in 1923. It slowed to receive train orders but did not stop.

(continued on page 9)

Colfax Passenger Service: (cont'd) The 1930's brought many innovations in passenger travel through Colfax and over Donner. In 1931-32, SP initiated Snowball Specials, taking people from Oakland to Truckee for a day of play in the snow. This seasonal service was expanded with development of Sugar Bowl ski area near Norden in 1939. The specials were discontinued as wartime traffic increased.



THE "COLFAX LOCAL" SELF-PROPELLED MCKEEN MOTOR CAR CAN BE SEEN NEXT TO THE PASSENGER DEPOT, CIRCA 1911. LOCAL SERVICE BETWEEN SACRAMENTO AND COLFAX WAS PROVIDED BY STEAM TRAINS UNTIL 1929 OR MCKEEN CARS FROM 1909 TO 1933 WHEN COLFAX LOCAL SERVICE WAS ELIMINATED.
(NCNG MUSEUM COLLECTION)

During the 1950's and 1960's, improved roads, increasing use of cars, and resultant decreasing rail passenger revenue led SP to discontinue many passenger trains. Finally, only the City of San Francisco remained to serve passengers at Colfax and over the Donner Route. In 1968, SP applied to abandon the City of San Francisco service between Oakland and Ogden. Passenger service was eliminated at Colfax in April 1971. AMTRAK took over Donner Route passenger service in May 1971, but with no stop at Colfax. After pressure from locals, AMTRAK resumed stops at Colfax in October 1976, a service that continues to this day.

Diesels and the End of Steam: Improved 4-8-8-2 cab-forward engines kept steam king over Donner for freight and most passenger traffic through the war years, although there were a few exceptions. The City of San Francisco, introduced in 1936, was a diesel-powered streamlined luxury passenger train that ran between the San Francisco Bay Area and Chicago over SP, UP and Chicago & North Western tracks. The gradual but inevitable conversion to diesel locomotives had begun.

In 1948, ALCO PA diesel engines began to appear at the head end on passenger trains, and in 1949, the first diesel "F" units appeared in Colfax, operating as prime power or as helpers on freight trains passing through town. By 1955, SP decided to run no more steam than necessary over Donner, although heavy traffic that year gave the cab-forwards a reprieve. Four or five diesel units at the head end would be augmented by steam-powered cab-forward helpers for the uphill run from Roseville. The last use of steam engines in helper service through Colfax was in October 1955.

Steam power saw limited action for snow clearing in 1956. A last cab-forward excursion ran over Donner in 1957, followed by a steam and diesel excursion in 1958. Except for the American Freedom Train in 1975, steam engines would not again thunder through Colfax until 1999 when UP steam crossed Donner en-route to Sacramento's RailFair.



F7 DIESEL ENGINES IN "BLACK WIDOW" PAINT AT COLFAX DEPOT IN 1962. NOTE ENGINE CREW ABOUT TO SNARE TRAIN ORDERS.
(BOB MORRIS PHOTO. PSRHS COLLECTION)

Colfax and the Railroad Today – The Era of Railroad Consolidation:

SP was bought out by UP in 1996, and UP yellow has replaced SP red and black on trains passing through town. Occasional railroad activity can still be seen in the railyard. AMTRAK stops each way on its daily run from the Bay Area to Chicago, and frequent, lengthy freight trains continue to roll through Colfax on the historic transcontinental Overland Route.

References

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4. John R. Signor, "Donner Pass – Southern Pacific's Sierra Crossing"
5. Bill Yenne, "The History of the Southern Pacific"
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7. Colfax Sentinel Newspaper
8. Placer Herald Newspaper
9. Grass Valley Union Newspaper
10. Sacramento Union Newspaper

CONSOLIDATION HELPER
ENGINES STAND READY FOR
WORK IN FRONT OF THE COLFAX
ENGINE HOUSE IN 1938. THE
ENGINE HOUSE CLOSED IN 1949.
(AL PHELPS PHOTO,
KEN YEO COLLECTION)



WESTBOUND "SIERRA"
PASSENGER TRAIN AT COLFAX
DEPOT, 1941. THE "SIERRA" RAN
FROM THE BAY AREA TO SPARKS.
IT WAS DISCONTINUED IN 1942.
(AL PHELPS PHOTO,
SIGNOR- DONNER PASS)

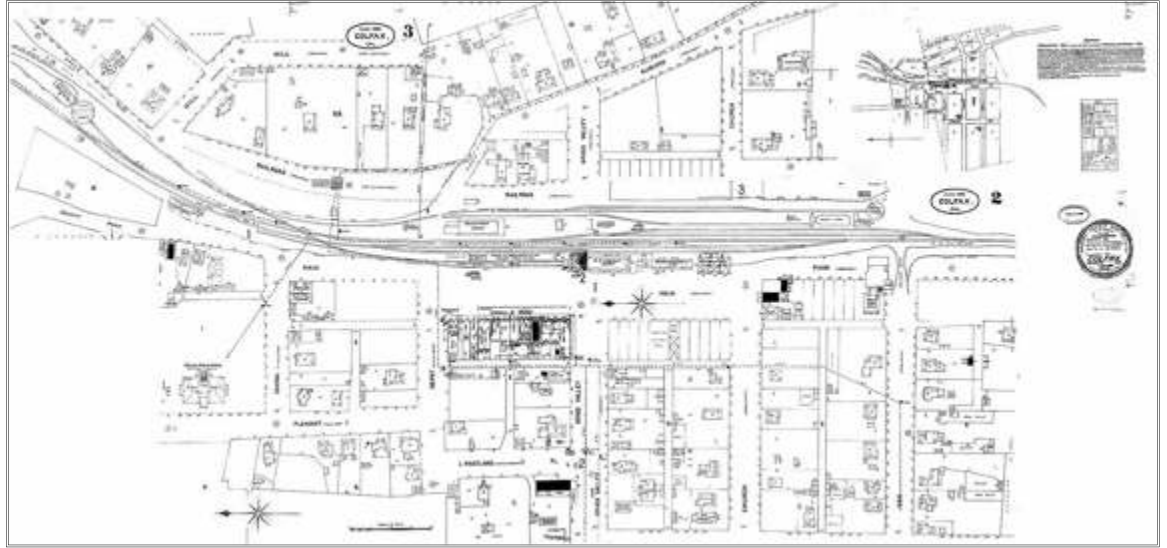
THIS "OVERLAND LIMITED" PASSENGER
TRAIN IS DEPARTING COLFAX POWERED
BY A PAIR OF DIESEL ENGINES WITH A
CAB-FORWARD HELPER ON THE HEAD
END. THIS IS LIKELY AN EARLY 1950'S
SCENE, SINCE USE OF STEAM HELPERS
ON THE DONNER ROUTE ENDED IN 1955.
THE "OVERLAND" CONTINUED TO RUN
UNDER DIESEL POWER UNTIL 1963,
WHEN THE TRAIN WAS DISCONTINUED.
(R. PELOT PHOTO,
PSRHS COLLECTION)



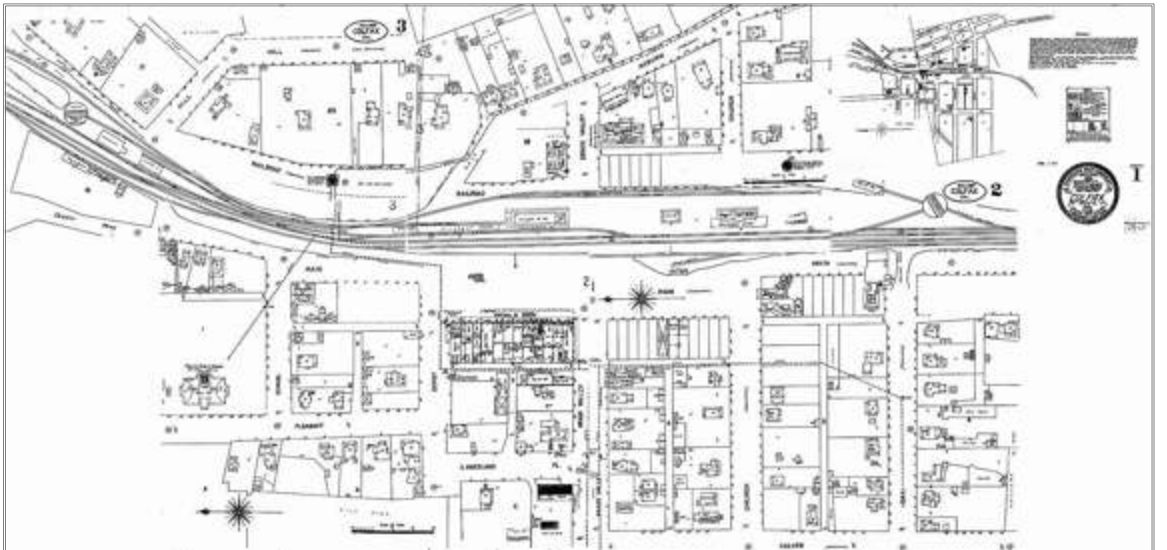
TWO GENERATIONS OF SP DIESEL
ENGINES AT COLFAX IN 1968. LEFT
TO RIGHT ARE FRUIT GROWERS
COLD STORAGE PLANT, SP CRANE,
CIRCA 1967 SD-45, AND 1950'S F7
IN "BLACK WIDOW" PAINT.
(RICK KANG PHOTO,
DILL-SOUTHERN PACIFIC'S
HISTORIC OVERLAND ROUTE)

Sanborn Fire Maps – Colfax, CA

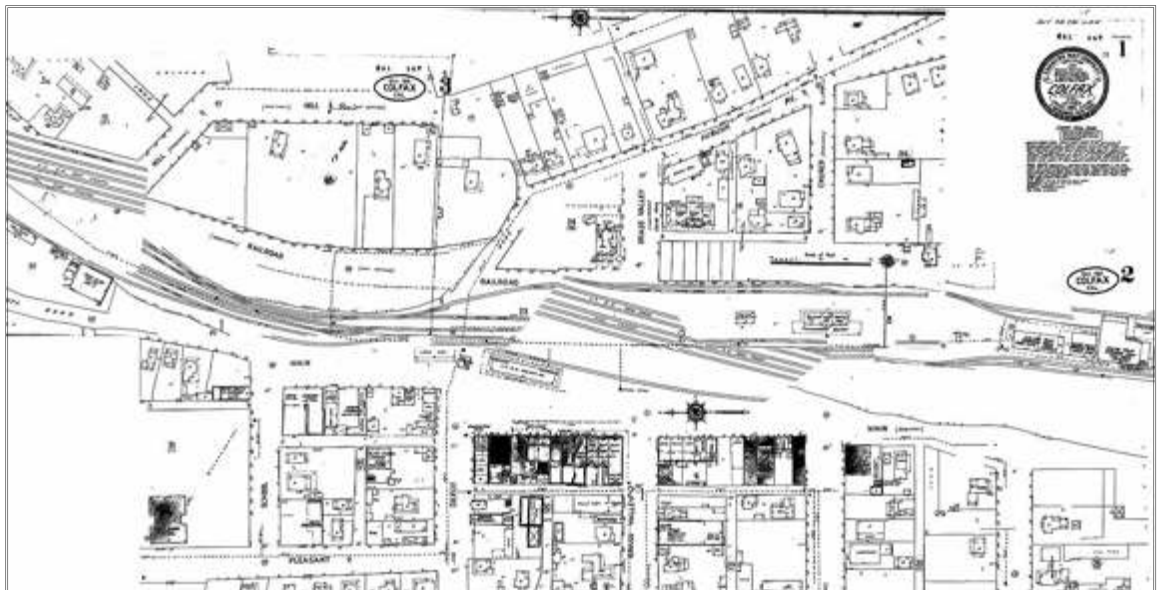
1898



1907



1910
with 1930
Changes





Another Local Railroad Milestone:

On November 19, 2009, the first UP double-stack container train over the Donner Route made its way through Colfax. Several tunnels had been modified to handle the increased load height.

(Roger Staab photo)

You are invited to submit feature articles and/or photos for future issues of Donner Crossings. Please contact Roger Staab, email rsrr@exwire.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.

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



www.psrhs.org

Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route