



DONNER CROSSINGS



A Publication of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society
Issue No. 10, Spring 2015

Colfax, CA - 150 Years of Railroading 1865-2015



An early view of the current Colfax passenger depot that was built in 1905. The location of the freight depot in the distance beyond the McKean motor car and the water tank above the motor car indicate the photo was taken prior to 1915. The Gillen (Colfax) Hotel is behind the depot at right. McKean cars were used for several years for local service between Sacramento and Colfax. Today the Colfax depot sits at a slight angle to the tracks, but the tracks were parallel to the depot building prior to track realignment in 1911-1915. *Postcard Photo from PSRHS Collection.*

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Preserving Railroad History along the Donner Pass Route



From the Editor:

The year 2015 marks a significant milestone for the town of Colfax. It was 150 years ago in September 1865 that tracks for the first transcontinental railroad reached the new town and regular rail service began between Colfax and Sacramento. The first article in this issue of Donner Crossings takes a brief look at the railroad-related changes in the town of Colfax over the past 150 years.

Old newspapers are an excellent source of interesting stories about operations along the transcontinental route. These mini-stories almost scream to be told, so as to not be lost in the bowels of history. Some require further research to fully tell the story, while others stand on their own. This special issue of Donner Crossings contains two such accounts.

First we look at a largely forgotten high quality marble quarry along the Bear River at Colfax. The marble was shipped by CPRR rail from Colfax to the grand buildings in San Francisco including the San Francisco Mint. Early operations of this quarry are described in vintage newspaper accounts, along with further research results posted on-line by PSRHS member Jim Wood.

Following the quarry articles is an informative treatise on correct meanings of the terms Station, Depot and Terminal, submitted by member Chuck Spinks.

The final story consists of two accounts of travel in 1873 from San Francisco to Colfax and beyond, using two different means of getting from San Francisco to Sacramento. Ride along with the newspaper reporters on these early rail journeys.

Roger Staab, editor

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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 roger.staab@psrhs.org, 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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Colfax, CA – 150 Years of Railroading 1865-2015

The year 2015 marks 150 years of continuous railroading in Colfax, a station on the first transcontinental railroad built to connect the riches of California with the rest of the nation. The transcontinental railroad was not completed until 1869, but Central Pacific began passenger service between Sacramento and Colfax in September 1865 when tracks reached the new town.

In its early days Colfax served several major railroad-related functions. It replaced Illinoistown as a freight delivery terminal, with wagons and mule teams departing the Central Pacific freight shed with supplies for area miners. It also served as staging area for railroad construction as tracks extended further into the Sierra Nevada mountains. For many years after construction was complete, Colfax was a meal stop for transcontinental trains.

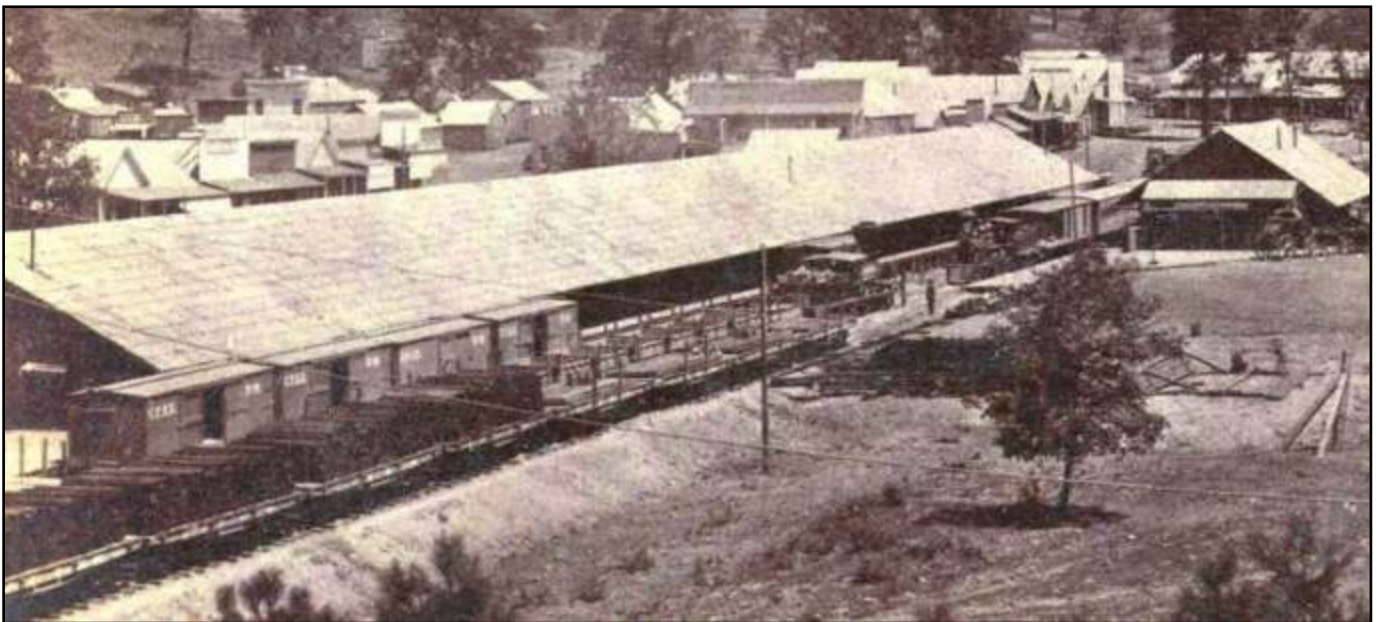
The freight shed was built by Central Pacific, but the original passenger depot was built by Mahon and Curley and operated as a combined depot and eatery. The quality of the meals was widely known. Mahon and Curley's depot survived until 1905 when it was

destroyed by fire, and replaced later that year with the Southern Pacific depot that stands to this day.

The Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad began service from Colfax to Grass Valley and Nevada City in 1876. That line operated until 1942, when it became a victim of wartime controls and drop in revenue.

In 1880 a freight depot was built next to Main St. to replace the original freight shed. The freight depot eventually "lived" in three separate locations. It was moved to the east side of the tracks in 1905 to ease congestion and better serve the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad, then moved back to the west side of the tracks to its present location in 1915 when double tracking was completed through town.

As part of double-tracking, a 9-stall engine house was built in the new yard to house helper engines for the arduous climb over Donner Summit. The engine house saw extensive activity until the late 1940's when diesels began replacing steam locomotives. The engine house was closed in 1949 and razed in 1951. →



View of the 1865 Colfax CPRR freight shed (left) and passenger depot (right), taken before the Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad arrived in 1875-6. Colfax Main St. Buildings can be seen beyond the freight shed. *Print from Alfred Hart stereograph, PSRHS collection.*

Colfax – 150 Years – continued

Colfax has witnessed many changes in the railroads that have operated through it. Names have changed as Central Pacific was absorbed by Southern Pacific in the 1880's, AMTRAK assumed passenger service in the 1970's, and Southern Pacific merged with Union Pacific in the 1990's.

Small steam locomotives gave way to larger ones, then diesel replaced steam, but the heartbeat of the town has

remained tied to the sound of the trains as they have rolled through continuously for 150 years.

The centerpiece of **Colfax Railroad Days Sept 12-13, 2015** will be the sesquicentennial celebration of 150 years of railroading in the town which is still defined by the railroad that has run through it since its inception. Below is a timeline of key railroad events and changes that have taken place in Colfax over the past 150 years.



Colfax, CA – 150 Years a Railroad Town Timeline

Sept. 1, 1865	Central Pacific tracks reached Colfax. Large freight shed was located between tracks and Front (Main) St.
Sept. 4, 1865	Train service to Sacramento began. Passenger depot built and operated by Curley and Mahon was located on east side of tracks at Depot St.
May 1876	Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad began service from Colfax to the mining communities of Grass Valley and Nevada City. Its tracks came into town on the east side of passenger depot.
1880	Colfax freight depot was built near present caboose location
1885	Central Pacific became a leased operation under Southern Pacific Railroad. Rolling stock gradually assumed SP markings
1905	Original Central Pacific depot burned
Sept. 1905	New Colfax Southern Pacific passenger depot opened in its present location. New 65 ft. turntable was built beyond the depot near present RJ Miles bldg at the corner of Railroad Ave. and Oak St. Freight depot was moved to passenger depot side of tracks, north of Grass Valley St.
1911-1913	Double tracking completed from Rocklin to Grass Valley St. in Colfax. Hillside removed south of Oak St., and railroad yard created on cut and fill. Colfax engine house was built in yard area. New wye track replaced the turntable. Land was set aside in yard for fruit sheds.
1914-1915	Double tracking above Grass Valley St. continued. Tracks through town were straightened by cutting away hillside north of Grass Valley St. Freight depot was moved to its present location to make way for new track alignment.
1942	Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad ceased operations and track was removed.
1940's	Business for Colfax engine house diminished as diesels began to replace steam locomotives. The engine house was closed in 1949, and razed in 1951.
1971	AMTRAK assumed passenger operations, but Colfax was not an AMTRAK stop until 1976.
1996	Southern Pacific merged with Union Pacific Railroad

Colfax Marble Quarry – Early CPRR Business along the Route

One of the objectives of Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society is to study the businesses along the Donner Route that helped support the operation of the mainline railroad. These ranged from small companies to large operations. Some of these supporting businesses may have been quite prominent at one time but are now largely forgotten.

PSRHS member Jim Wood has been quite interested in what appears to be the remains of an old quarry near the banks of the Bear River near his home. He has created a web page with further details he has unearthed on the quarry and photos of the remains.

<http://sierrageology.org/>



Your Donner Crossings editor decided to see what could be found in the archives about this facility. Knowing it dated to the late 1860's or early 1870's narrowed the search a bit. What was found turned out to be news of a marble quarry on the Bear River near Colfax, and shipment of this highly prized marble by railroad to construction sites of major buildings in San Francisco including the San Francisco Mint.

Here is the early history of this quarry as told in several newspaper accounts.

The Sacramento Union reported on January 13, 1866:

“MARBLE QUARRY: — An extensive marble ledge, says the Folsom *Telegraph*, has lately been discovered on Bear river, Placer county, near the Colfax and Nevada [City] road. The

marble is of the best quality and of the black-veined and watered variety, and is said to be equal, if not superior, to the Italian marble of the same variety. A quarry has just been opened by a San Francisco firm, who are making extensive arrangements to work the same and bring the marble into market.”

On April 18, 1867, the San Francisco Call reported on area marble works including the quarry at Colfax that were feeding the city's needs:

MARBLE WORKS IN SAN FRANCISCO

“The principal source from which marble in blocks and slabs is obtained for this market is Italy. We have several quarries in California. The principal — Indian Diggings, El Dorado County — furnishes a very superior article, which is employed for all the purposes that imported marble is used. Marble is also obtained from Drytown, Amador County; Columbia, Tuolumne County; and Colfax, near Sacramento. ... Mr. Pritchard, one of the owners of the Pioneer Steam Works, is also the owner of the quarry at Colfax; and Mr. John Grant manufactures monuments from material drawn from his property at Columbia.... Mr. Pritchard is the owner of a valuable quarry of black marble at Colfax. It will supply a want long felt in this branch of business. It is susceptible of a high polish, and can be used for general purposes. The quarry will be more fully developed at an early day, and it is well adapted for mantels, table tops, mosaic work, tiles, etc. The Colfax is the first and only quarry of black, variegated marble in California. Nine mantels of this beautiful marble, made at the Steam Works, are in progress of manufacture for the new Bank of California....”

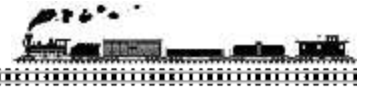
Finally, the Sacramento Daily Union reported on May 7, 1874:

“MARBLE QUARRY.— The marble quarry, situated in Placer county, one mile below Taylor's lower bridge, on the Colfax road, and

Colfax Marble Quarry – continued

owned by a San Francisco company, quarried and worked into merchantable shape 300 tons of marble, which was shipped to San Francisco from the Colfax depot. The largest portion of this marble was used in the new Mint, the balance went toward the adornment of private residences and business houses. The marble is

black in color, variegated with fine grey streaks. It takes a beautiful polish, and is of superior quality as to durability. Work has been suspended on the quarry (which to appearance is almost of unlimited extent) during the winter, but the foreman of the works is anticipating instructions for an early resumption of labor.”



Is it a STATION, a DEPOT, or a TERMINAL?

By Chuck Spinks – CSRM Docent & PSRHS Member

There has been confusion in discussions, and errors in presentations, on the correct use of the identifiers for buildings at locations where passengers get on and off of passenger trains. This article helps to explain the differences and the overlap in the use of these terms.

STATION – The term STATION derives from civil engineering, where linear projects such as roads, pipelines, power lines, and railroads are “stationed” in feet from a starting point along the alignment. The starting point is usually 0+00, and then stationed in feet, with, for example, 5,280 feet being station number 52+80. Railroad construction stationing is in feet, but for identifying locations on an operating railroad, they use miles. Station 0+00 for the Southern Pacific is the hinge in the ramp at San Francisco's Ferry Building that is lowered to the deck of ferry boats to allow vehicles and pedestrians to exit.

The definition of STATION from the railroad's General Code of Operating Rules (GCOR) is: “*Station: A place designated by name in the timetable station column*”. Locations on a passenger timetable almost always have a building. STATIONS on a freight timetable, include sidings, control points, junctions, etc., seldom have a structure, so technically, a STATION is not a building; it is a location. But, of course, common usage has expanded the meaning to include the building.

DEPOT – DEPOT is a French word meaning a deposit. In the U.S., the word became associated with locations where material was stored, such as a warehouse, storehouse, or Army DEPOT. It may have originally been

applied more to freight facilities than to passenger facilities. In current usage, the DEPOT is the building at a STATION. It can be a passenger DEPOT, a freight DEPOT, or a combination. The terms STATION and DEPOT are frequently used interchangeably.

TERMINAL – In railroad terms, a TERMINAL is a place where a train begins or ends its route. For freight trains, a TERMINAL is most often a freight yard. The UPRR Roseville yard is referred to as a TERMINAL by the UP. The Portland TERMINAL includes all sidings, yards, industrial leads, and mainlines in the Portland area.

For passenger TERMINALS, it is not as strictly defined, and depends more on what the common usage is in referring to the location. Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal (LAUPT) was completed in 1939 with that name, but is usually referred to as Union Station by the locals. The Grand Central Terminal (GCT) [*in New York City*] has changed its name through time. The “Grand by Design” presentation prepared for the 2013 centennial celebration of GCT states about the use of STATION, DEPOT, and TERMINAL: “*All three are correct....depending on the year. The original building was Grand Central DEPOT. It became Grand Central STATION after renovation and expansion in 1901. The new building unveiled in 1913...is Grand Central TERMINAL.*” For the LAUPT and the GCT, both are technically all three: STATIONS, DEPOTS and TERMINALS. What they are actually called is defined by the names given them and by common usage, not by the definitions of the terms.



By Steamship, Ferry and Rail from San Francisco to Colfax, 1873

In May 1869 the first Transcontinental Railroad was completed by Central Pacific and Union Pacific to much fanfare. Travelers could now board the train in Sacramento for Omaha and points East, but the rails did not extend to San Francisco. Those starting their overland trip from that city went by steamship across the Bay and up the Sacramento River to Sacramento. In late 1869 CPRR completed a rail connection from Oakland to Sacramento via Niles Canyon and Stockton.

First-hand accounts describing these two routes from San Francisco to Sacramento, and the transcontinental rail line as far as Colfax, were found in two 1873 newspaper reports. The second also described the stage ride from Colfax to Grass Valley and Nevada (City).

On March 22, 1873, the Elevator newspaper from San Francisco described travel from San Francisco to Sacramento via Oakland and Stockton, then on to Colfax. Here are excerpts from that article:

The Central Pacific Railroad – No. 1

“However much some people may complain about the brutality of “bloated monopolies” and the heartlessness of their projectors and directors, the traveling public cannot but agree that the building and completion, followed by the success full [*sic*] and satisfactory manner in which the Central and Union Pacific Railroads are run for the accommodation of the public, have justly marked them as a feature of the country and as an era in the history of these United States....

Persons having business in the East leave San Francisco by *El Capitan*, (a fine, spacious and commodious ferry-boat, fitted for any and all purposes of short and quick transit), at 7:00 a.m. for Oakland wharf, at which point the company’s fine and elegant sleeping and passenger cars are set to receive the patrons. Intelligent, polite and experienced employees are attached to every train, who, while attending to their several duties give the traveller every information necessary to business or pleasure.

As the train winds its course through the hills on its way to the wide and fertile plains of the San Joaquin Valley, until it reaches the city of Stockton the interest of the traveller is ever alive. At Lathrop Station and junction, the first meal of the trip is taken.... [*Soon*] the caravan of live freight find themselves on the way to Sacramento City, the Capital of the State. ... Situated on the bank of the Sacramento River, the head of navigation and the residence of the majority of the directors of the road, the place where the largest yard the company runs is situated, [*one*] looks out for objects of interest. Those that most command his attention are the levees north and south, the county hospital, the State Capitol together with other public buildings and local improvements and surroundings.

.... After a stay of proceedings for twenty minutes the journey is resumed. From the north levee the city is again seen to advantage and with care and precaution the train feels its way over the American River bridge, and the long line of tressell [*sic*] work beyond. This is a fine structure erected under the supervision of Arthur Brown, to replace the first which was maliciously burned down by some miscreant in 1869 or 1870. It has a peculiar property of being more strongly braced during the passage of trains than when not so used; the spans being, or having the property of being compressed and more firmly set as the amount of pressure makes strong the bow.

...The junction of Roseville is the next place where meals are obtained and a first view of the prolific foot hills is obtained. And here commences the ascent or up grade as it is called of the Sierras. Rocklin at which the company has a yard, round house and repair shop, is quite a town, and is also noted for having the finest granite quarry in the State. ... At Colfax 8 p.m. [*where*] the last meal for the day is served. Though miles from San Francisco one find but little difference in the viands set before him.”



By Steamship, Ferry and Rail – continued

On April 26, 1873, this same newspaper described a trip from San Francisco via steamboat to Vallejo and on to Sacramento, then by train to Colfax and stage to Grass Valley/Nevada City. (Note – in 1873 a traveler could either stay on the steamboat all the way to Sacramento, or transfer to the California Pacific Railroad at Vallejo for transport to Sacramento).

Nevada City, April 21, 1873

“The journey from San Francisco to this place was very pleasant. I left at 7-1/2 o’clock by steamboat New World for Sacramento, via Vallejo, arriving at the former place at 12-1/2 o’clock, giving me an hour and a half before the leaving of the eastern bound train. I had an opportunity to see some friends in the Capitol City and refreshing the inner man.

At two o’clock the signal of departure was given, and I again mounted the cars for Colfax at which place I arrived at 5-1/2 o’clock, passing nearly a dozen stations on our route. At Colfax we took stage for our point of destination, and here I must speak in favor of the travelling accommodations on the line of the Central Pacific Railroad. Whatever may be the privations suffered by colored persons elsewhere, here there are none – our civil rights are fully acknowledged, and we can obtain whatever we require, and have money to pay for. [*The*

writer was apparently a minority]. On board the New World, at Sacramento and at Colfax, when the bell rings we can take a meal and call for what we want without hinderance or molestation. The same is observed on the Stockton route.

Our ride from Colfax was very pleasant but tedious. The long anticipated and dreaded horse disease, the Epizootic, interferes greatly with stage travel in this section of the country; nearly all the horses being afflicted. Leaving Colfax at 6 o’clock we did not arrive at Grass Valley until 9-1/2 o’clock, a distance of only twelve miles.

... Our ride from Colfax to this point was over a good road, but by a circuitous route, winding around mountains and by zig-zag paths; now along a precipice and then skirting a river which seems to be running up hill, which it crosses by a bridge which looks at a distance like a pigeon coop.

From Grass Valley I could not observe the road, nor did I ask any questions being considerably out of humor at our delay. ...

My friend D.D. Carter was waiting for me when the stage arrived at Nevada City at 10-1/2 o’clock...”

The reporter’s experience in 1873 made a strong case for an improved mode of transportation between Colfax and Grass Valley/Nevada City. The Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad opened for business on this route in 1876.



This circa 1880 view shows a Nevada County Narrow Gauge train at the 1865 Colfax CPRR depot and platform. A corner of the Depot can be seen at far left and the Central Hotel is beyond the train. Today this photo location is the parking lot behind the freight depot. In 1915 the hillside beyond the NCNG tracks was cut back to realign tracks through town, and the main-line tracks now pass through the former site of the Central Hotel. *Art Sommers collection.*

