



Placer-Sierra  
Railroad Heritage Society  
<https://www.psrhs.org>

---

# Colfax's Much-Traveled Freight Depot

By Roger Staab, PSRHS Historian



*Central Pacific passenger depot and long freight shed parallel to Main St. Businesses, circa 1866.  
Hart 149*

The year 2019 marked the 150th anniversary of the 1869 completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad. Colfax has played a major role in the construction and operation of the railroad since the town was established in 1865. This article is about the much-traveled Colfax Freight Depot, currently located across North Main Street from downtown businesses.

Did you know this is the third location for this historic building?

Our story starts in September 1865, when Central Pacific (CP) tracks reached Colfax on their way to meeting Union Pacific (UP) tracks at Promontory Summit in Utah Territory. Colfax quickly became a major freight distribution point for surrounding mining camps and for railroad construction over Donner Summit. To accommodate the freight deliveries and construction supplies, Central Pacific built a 700-foot-long freight shed parallel to Main Street, extending from Depot Street past Grass Valley Street. The original passenger depot was located across the tracks from the freight shed at Depot Street.

The Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) railroad opened for business between Colfax and Grass Valley/Nevada City in 1876. In 1881 Central Pacific replaced a portion of the freight shed with a new freight depot, the same building that exists in Colfax today, but when built it was located parallel to Main Street where the caboose and U.S. Bank are today and still blocking Grass Valley Street.



The 1881 CP Freight Depot replaced a portion of the old freight shed at Main and Grass Valley Streets.  
*CAHS/DelCarlo collection*

In 1882 a long transfer shed was added at the eastbound end of the freight depot to transfer cargo from standard gauge cars to NCNG cars. The layout worked well for several years, but there was a problem. The NCNG tracks came into town on the far side of the CP tracks and passenger depot. In order to reach the freight depot and transfer shed, NCNG freight cars had to cross the CP mainline tracks. As rail traffic increased, this cross-traffic became a bottleneck.



NCNG freight cars can be seen (center) on the Main Street side of the narrow transfer shed at the near end of the freight depot, circa 1904. *PSRHS Collection*

By around 1900 the railroad was operating under the Southern Pacific (SP) name. In May 1905, the original passenger depot was destroyed by fire. SP already had plans for a new Colfax passenger depot and hastened its construction.

The SP passenger depot opened in November 1905 in its present location on Railroad Avenue. To eliminate the bottleneck mentioned above, SP moved the freight depot and transfer shed to the far side of the tracks, northeast of Grass Valley Street.

Now NCNG cars did not have to cross the SP mainline tracks to transfer cargo, and Grass Valley Street became a railroad crossing.



The freight depot and new passenger depot were on the far side of SP tracks in this 1907 view, and Grass Valley Street crossed the tracks. *Art Sommers Collection*

This arrangement worked well until SP decided to add a second track to and through Colfax. A larger railyard was also to be built, requiring longer straight sections of track. Hillsides were removed at South Main Street and across the tracks from North Main Street, creating long straight tracks and sidings through town. Under the new alignment, the tracks no longer paralleled Main Street as they passed through town. But this created a new problem -- our freight depot was in the path of the new tracks and had to be moved once again. The resulting track alignment is what can be seen in Colfax today.

In May 1915 the freight depot was moved to its present and third location for this durable and well-traveled building. The NCNG transfer shed was separated from the freight depot and relocated to the yard area beyond today's fruit sheds, where it continued to serve the NCNG until the line was dismantled in 1942.

Next time you look at the freight depot in its present location beside Main Street, give it a salute for enduring two major moves in its many years of service to Colfax and the transcontinental railroad.



The freight depot was in the path of the 1915 track realignment and had to be moved again.  
*SP Collection - from Signor - Donner Pass*

The same view in 2004. Note red freight depot at left NW of tracks. *Roger Staab Photo*

