

Union Depot

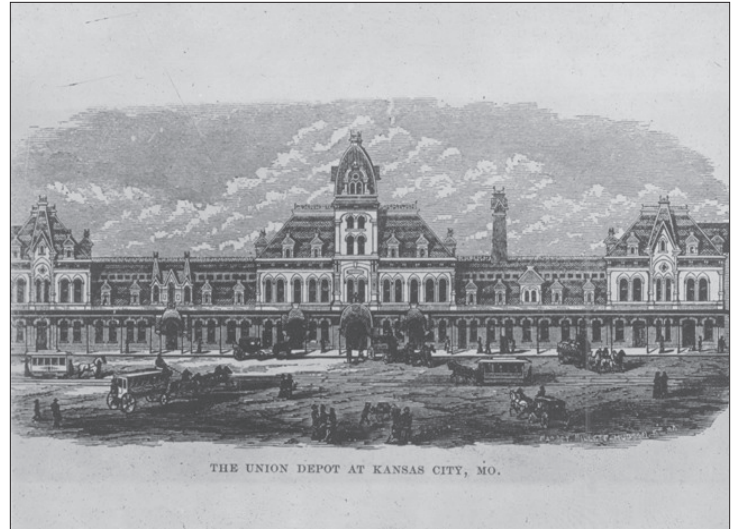
Union Avenue
completed 1878, demolished 1915

by Susan Jezak Ford

When Union Depot was built in Kansas City's West Bottoms, it was frequently called the "Jackson County Insane Asylum" by those who believed that the city would never have a need for such a large train station. It did not take long, however, for the city to outgrow the immense, new showplace.

Kansas City was home to 60,000 citizens when the depot was built in 1878. The fashionable, elegant building replaced a two-room structure designed by Octave Chanute. The site for Union Depot was acquired from early Kansas City leaders Kersey Coates and William H. Hopkins. In 1869 the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad, the first railroad to reach Kansas City, purchased part of the site for railroad tracks from the two property owners. The Missouri River and Gulf Railroad bought more land from the men in 1870 for Kansas City's first train station. The city condemned 6.5 additional acres for the new Union Depot in 1878. Altogether, the depot building—and the adjoining land cost the city \$300,000. (St. Louis was the first city where the various railroad companies decided to locate their terminal facilities in one location.)

The ornate Union Depot was built parallel to the bluffs of the West Bottoms and stood between the railroad tracks and Union Avenue. As one approached the station from the upper elevation of downtown Kansas City, the towers of the depot recalled the faraway skylines of Paris, Vienna, or Berlin. "It is one of the most picturesque and attractive buildings in the United States," *The Kansas City Star* reporter wrote. The writer went on to describe the building as designed in the Renaissance style and "somewhat Frenchy" with its mansard roof and Parisian towers. "The architect has given us the handsomest and most pleasing union of two of the most pleasing styles in modern architecture," he concluded. The depot opened for business on April 8, 1878.



The design of the building was actually a combination of the Second Empire style, popular from about 1855 to 1890, and Gothic Revival, recalling the castles and cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Noted architect Asa Beebe Cross and his junior partner William M. Taylor adorned the exterior of the building with intricate towers of varying heights, arched windows framed in stone and rows of dormers projecting from the steeply pitched mansard roof. The central tower above the main entrance measured 125 feet tall and had clocks on all four sides. The entire creation was topped with intricate metalwork cresting.

Although Kansas City had other train stations, nearly all passenger traffic came and went from Union Depot. As the city grew, the building and its location no longer seemed so huge. By 1880, an express and baggage annex nearly as large as the depot itself was built. The station was further renovated by the architectural firm of Van Brunt & Howe in 1898. The possibility of any future renovation was obstructed by the topography of the depot's site—the station was located on a narrow triangle of land squeezed between the bluffs and Union Avenue. By 1900, the number of residents in the area had soared to more than 200,000 and Kansas City's role as the second most important railroad center in the country further increased the congestion of the station. By 1903, 187 trains a day passed through the station and, due to the heavy traffic, 75 percent of them arrived late. Passengers were often unloaded across the train yards, far from the depot.

The traffic in and out of Union Depot fostered commercial development in Kansas City's West Bottoms. Rural travelers knew that they had reached the big city when they viewed the electric lights of Union Avenue across the street from the train station. The Blossom House Hotel provided meals and lodging for railroad passengers, barbers clipped and trimmed clientele, George Eyssel's drugstore offered snake-bite precautions to those heading west, and the Pendergast Brothers' saloon sold libations a few blocks away. Legitimate businesses were interspersed with gambling, con-games, and many shady characters offering the newcomer a chance to make quick money or sample the delights of the big city. By 1913, the street boasted 23 saloons. "Sin never had a more flourishing thoroughfare of its length than Union Avenue. You could get robbed there almost any way you wanted, without even going uptown," a writer for *The Kansas City Times* later reminisced.

Making one's way uptown—up the bluffs from the Union Depot to Kansas City's business center—gave travelers another thrilling

adventure. In the earliest days, a cable car plunged up and down the hill from 9th and Pennsylvania streets. The cable car was later replaced by trolleys that journeyed through the 8th Street tunnel. Railroad patrons connected with the trolleys via a "cattle chute," a wooden pedestrian passageway that led to the trains through various twists and turns. Newcomers to the city ascending the system of ramps were often unexpectedly met by a late passenger rushing downward to make an on-time departure.

Union Depot survived a flood in 1881 that shut down all rail service for 40 days, but the massive 1903 flood drove home the realization that Kansas City desperately needed a new station. Water stood ten feet deep in the depot and when it receded, left a thick coat of mud and sand on the floors, tracks, and walls. The lack of room for further station expansion and the risk of future flooding prompted city leaders to look for a better site for a new train station. In 1906, a decision was made to build Kansas City's new Union Station in a valley at 25th Street and Grand Avenue used by the Kansas City Belt Railway. The magnificent new station, the third largest in the country at the time, was completed in 1914.

The last train left Union Depot on October 31, 1914. The closing celebration took place on that Halloween night and, as the final train pulled away, the windows and doors of the station were nailed shut. The closing of the station was matched by the rapid demise of Union Avenue. For a short time, trains traveled past the abandoned station, but did not stop. Union Depot was demolished in 1915, the site converted to trackage and, one by one, the commercial buildings of Union Avenue were also torn down.

The heirs of Kersey Coates and William Hopkins approached the city in 1915, claiming ownership of the 6.5 acres that had been condemned in 1878 for the construction of Union Depot. The families brought suit against the city on the grounds that the land had been purchased specifically for the station and when it ceased to be use for that purpose, should revert to the heirs. In 1931 the courts found that the Coates and Hopkins families were not entitled to the property, worth more than \$1 million.

The stylish and enormous Union Depot of 1878 was considered hopelessly old-fashioned and inadequate by 1914. The new towers and ornaments that made this city proud upon first viewing were soot-covered and fussy when the station was abandoned. Few lamented the demolition of the outdated station and the adjacent swarm of commercial buildings as Kansas City's railroad travelers

moved south to a classic, modern fixture rooted in the new-sprung City Beautiful movement.

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