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# BOISE

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# Perfectly Proportioned



## THE BOISE DEPOT



Perhaps it's because Boise has so few architectural gems that we value those few so highly. Over the years, of course, we've lost some in natural disasters (the Natatorium) and others in man-made ones. Yet some survive, and the Boise Depot, standing as it does in classic simplicity at the top of Capital Boulevard, takes pride of place.

written by Grove Koger





*The new depot—and a grand one it was—opened in 1925. Thousands of Boiseans turned out on April 16 to admire the structure and watch the city’s first transcontinental train roll into town.*



There have actually been three train depots in Boise. Today’s structure has undergone several incarnations, and even now, many Boiseans argue, it awaits a more meaningful role in the life of the city.

In 1883 a subsidiary of Union Pacific, the Oregon Short Line, laid its first tracks through the territory to provide a vital link between Ogden and Portland. The only problem, as Boiseans saw it, was that *the route lay some 10 miles south of town*. They were disgusted, and took to denigrating everything connected with the railroad, even after a branch line was constructed between Nampa and the capital city in 1887. In a moment of near-apoplexy, the *Idaho Daily Statesman* noted that a particular train was “hours and hours late. . . . The density of the ignorance

concerning [it] or its whereabouts at the Union Pacific Office was so intense that it might have been cut in chunks and used as paper weights.”

Well! At least a branch line meant a depot, even if it was an unassuming wood affair—more like a shack, really—standing east of today’s location. A far more attractive stone structure with wide eaves was erected by the Short Line at 10th and Front streets in 1893.

By 1922, however, it was time for something . . . grander. That year the Short Line and the Boise Chamber of Commerce signed an agreement for “through” train service to the city with the proviso that the chamber raise the money for construction and convey a right of way. Two years later the New York architectural firm of Carrere,

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Hastings, Shreve and Lando presented ambitious plans for a new building, and a contract was let to Salt Lake City's Cherdon Construction Company.

The new depot—and a grand one it was—opened in 1925. Thousands of Boiseans turned out on April 16 to admire the structure and watch the city's first transcontinental train roll into town. Lifelong Boise resident Kenneth Seaman later recalled that the crowd "about went crazy" at the sound of the train's whistle. Now thoroughly mollified, the *Statesman* announced that "Boise's great day has come." The new depot was built in a graceful mission style then in vogue. Its roof was supported by decorated wood trusses and covered with terra cotta tiles, and it boasted a striking 110-foot tower that the paper described as "calm in its white beauty." Several improvements followed. Friends of railroad man Edward Henry Harriman donated four bells for the tower in 1926, and Spanish landscape architect Ricardo Espino designed adjoining gardens (named for Short Line general manager Howard Platt) in 1927.

A decade later Union Pacific completely absorbed the Short Line, and a decade after that six trains a day were passing through Boise. Yet even then the era of the railroad was ending, and with it the role of the depot as a part of life in Boise. The future would be dominated by planes and automobiles. The Barkalow Bros. Newsstand closed in 1962 for lack of business, and the Portland Rose paid its last visit in 1971. Thanks to Amtrak, train service was restored in 1977, but in 1997 Boise was dropped from the system.

Over the years the grand depot had fallen into disrepair, but generous help was on the way. In 1990 the Morrison Knudsen Corporation bought the structure from the city, planning to share it with Amtrak. After spending more \$3.5 million on painstaking renovations supervised by Notter & Associates of the District of Columbia, the corporation reopened it—as the Morrison-Knudsen Depot—on February 5, 1993.

The city bought back the depot in 1996, but since then the question of what exactly to do with it has been a vexing one. In mid-2008 the Boise Depot Vision Committee developed a comprehensive statement



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regarding the building's future, observing that it "serves as a desirable venue for special events, a showcase for the art and culture of the community and for Boise's transportation history, and a valuable component of the City's developing transit system."

Along with the bell tower and an outdoor brick plaza, the Great Hall can indeed be rented for special events. In addition, the city is striving to develop a transit system. However, the depot hasn't quite become the showcase the committee envisioned. And at the time of writing, it's open to the public only two days a week—Sunday and Monday.

But if you're not familiar with the depot, don't let the less-than-ideal schedule stop you. You have a treat in store. The depot's waiting room has been remodeled as the Great Hall, and at least some of its massive benches are still there. The beautiful wooden newsstand has been spiffed up to display Union Pacific memorabilia, and other alcoves house the George Jensen Family Railroad Collection. Small groups can even ride an elevator up the bell tower for spectacular views over the city. (The largest bell still works, by the way, and rings the hour at 8:00 AM, noon, and 5:00 PM.) An added attraction is "Big Mike," a donation of Union Pacific. Once located in Julia Davis Park, this massive Mikado steam locomotive now rests on the east side of the depot along with an interactive interpretive display.

Over the years, the structure has won its share of accolades. In 1974 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places as the Union Pacific Mainline Depot, and in 1988 Jeffrey Richards and John M. MacKenzie paid what may be the ultimate compliment. Writing in *The Railway Station: A Social History*, they described the depot as "perfectly proportioned and almost impossible to identify as a station rather than as a church." In it, they asserted, the "mission style achieved its most simplified and exalted form."

Amen **B**

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