

Moffat Station  
2101 15th Street  
Denver  
Denver County  
Colorado

HABS No. CO-83

HABS  
COLO,  
16-DENV,  
61-

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Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MOFFAT STATION

HABS  
COLO,  
16-DENV,  
61-

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: 2101 15th Street, Denver, City and County of  
Denver, Colorado

Quad: Arvada, Colorado

UTM: Zone 13; 499540 Easting; 4400290 Northing

Date of Construction: 1906

Present Owner: Burlington Northern Railroad, P.O. Box 17150,  
Denver, Colorado

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Moffat Station was the Denver terminus of the  
Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad. David  
Moffat, an early Denver pioneer and businessman,  
formed the railroad in 1902, vowing to build the  
first railroad directly west from Denver to Salt  
Lake City, Utah. Although Moffat never achieved  
that goal, his railroad did link much of  
northwestern Colorado to Denver.

Moffat Station is one of only two railroad  
stations remaining in Denver. It represents the  
work of Denver architect Edwin Moorman and  
provides an example of predominantly Georgian  
Revival architecture, combining other styles  
popular at the turn of the century.

Historian: Jeffrey S. Hickey, University of Colorado,  
December 1987

## II. HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

### A. BACKGROUND

The Moffat Station at the corner of 15th and Bassett Streets stands quiet and unused today, nearly overwhelmed by the 15th Street viaduct passing above it. Most people drive by, taking a second to glance at the old station but probably never thinking very long about its history. Formerly a hub for the Denver, Northeastern and Pacific Railroad of David Moffat, this brick and stone building, designed by architect Edwin Moorman of Denver and erected in 1906, once saw busier days. At the turn of the century, many passengers boarded the trains of the Denver, Northeastern and Pacific Railroad (the Moffat Road) and rode west from Denver across the Rocky Mountains and on to Hot Sulphur Springs, Kremmling, and Craig, Colorado.

A summer trip on the Moffat Road thrilled Denverites, as the trains quickly took them out of the plains of Denver and into the nearby foothills and mountains west of the city. For many years, long before the advent of automobile transportation, the Moffat Road provided one of the very few ways for Coloradans and their visitors to journey into the Front Range of Colorado. For residents on the other side of the Continental Divide in northwestern Colorado, the Moffat Road was the first major rail line to connect them with Denver.

David Moffat vowed to build his railroad all the way to Salt Lake City, Utah. But he fell short of his goal, and his death in 1911 caused the Moffat Road to falter and stop at Craig, Colorado, in 1913.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the story behind the construction of the Moffat Station and its role as one of only two remaining train stations in Denver enriches the history of the city. The Moffat Station also documents David Moffat's feat of building a locally-owned railroad that crossed the Rocky Mountains directly from Denver. Such a railroad connection had long been dreamed of by many in Denver. Moffat's success in building this vital transportation link spurred others in Colorado to further improve the transportation network in the state. The construction of the Moffat Tunnel under the Continental Divide between 1923 and 1927 replaced portions of the 11,000-foot route of Moffat's railroad, linking eastern and western Colorado year-round and memorializing the name of Moffat forever.

The construction of the distinctive railroad station can be traced to the career of David Moffat. He arrived in Denver in March 1860. Born in Washingtonville, New York, in 1839, he moved west gradually. He settled in the then frontier town of Des Moines, Iowa, in 1854, moving on to Omaha, Nebraska Territory, in 1856. While still in his teens, Moffat began trading in Omaha real estate, earning substantial profits.<sup>2</sup>

After 1858 Moffat and other Nebraskans heard daily of the spectacular gold rush at the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains near the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek. By 1860 the small town of Denver flourished as the supply point for the residents of the mining region. Moffat, certain of the economic rewards that the new town would provide him, became junior partner in the Omaha firm of Woolworth and Moffat and brought three wagonloads of books and stationery to Denver. In 1860 he opened a store at the corner of 15th and Larimer Streets.<sup>3</sup>

Moffat worked diligently in the following years to make both Denver and himself an economic success. He helped open up the isolated frontier town by providing telegraph service in his store in 1863. Moffat also aided in the establishment of a municipal gas works in 1869 (which as become Colorado's Public Service electrical utility), as well as helping form the Denver City Water Company in 1870 and the Denver Electric and Cable Railway in 1885.<sup>4</sup>

Telegraphs and public utilities were just two early foundations upon which Moffat built his empire. For many years, Moffat was Colorado's most prominent and powerful banker. With Jerome Chaffee, Eben Smith, and others he chartered the First National Bank of Denver in 1865. As the unchallenged leader of the state's largest financial institution, Moffat freely invested much of the bank's holdings in Colorado mines. His banking and mining empires produced a fortune of \$25 million for Moffat by 1902.<sup>5</sup>

By then, Moffat's wealth was secure, his power over state economic affairs recognized, and his place in Colorado history assured. He could easily have withdrawn from public life to bask in the glow of his substantial success. But Moffat's ambition, driven by a yet unrealized goal, would not allow him to rest. Long a booster of the state's railroads, Moffat yearned to build the first major railroad that would head directly west from Denver over the Rocky Mountains and into northwestern Colorado and Utah. Several railroad builders, as well as Moffat himself, had faced this mighty engineering challenge before and faltered before the daunting topographical and climatic barriers of the Rocky Mountains. By 1902, however, armed with his fortune and a wealth of previous railroad experience, Moffat tackled one of the most ambitious business projects of his storied life. He and his railroad promised to sow the seeds of industrial and economic growth for Denver and

much of Northwestern Colorado -- if Moffat could overcome the persistent obstacles that men and nature had placed before the construction of a trans-Rocky Mountain railroad from Denver.

The big business of the previous century, railroads had an especially influential role in the success of small western American towns like Denver. A favorable location along a major train line could mean lower freight rates, assured access to distant markets, and a consistent flow of supplies. A town selected to be a terminal could expect rapid growth of railroad related service industries. Consequently, Moffat and others in Denver courted the Union Pacific in the mid-1860s, hoping the railroad would choose Denver as its western terminus. The Union Pacific, however, feared the cost of crossing the Front Range and the Continental Divide just west of the city. It spurned Denver for the low passes and wide valleys of southeastern Wyoming, choosing Cheyenne for the terminal in 1866.

Moffat vowed not to let the decision destroy Denver, and so he and other Denverites built a 106-mile branch railroad line to the Union Pacific, reaching Cheyenne in 1870. He went on to found or direct several other Colorado railroads between 1872 and 1891, including the Denver, Central and Georgetown, the Denver, South Park and Pacific, and the Denver and Rio Grande. Despite earnest effort and the investment of millions by both the railroads and Moffat himself, no railroad linked Denver directly with its neighbors in western Colorado or Utah. Denverites paid a substantial cost in money and time to head west through Cheyenne via the Union Pacific or south through Pueblo (112 miles south of Denver) via the Denver and Rio Grande. Meanwhile, northwestern Colorado, rich in coal and timber resources, shone like a rough diamond, waiting for a capitalist like Moffat to polish its edges.

Consequently, the economic imperative of building a trans-mountain railroad met the ambition of David Moffat in 1902. That year, Denver and Colorado buzzed with the news of Moffat's incorporation of the Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad. No other name fit the new railroad except one: the "Moffat Road." The latter two destinations of the corporate title proclaimed Moffat's long range goal; for 1902, Salt Lake City was the immediate goal.

If the Rocky Mountains were the only barrier Moffat faced, building his new railroad would have been a difficult enough task. But Moffat also confronted competing corporate barons, railroad builders such as himself who were already established in Colorado and the West and who saw no merit in Moffat's grand plans. In the wide-open business arena of Moffat's day, where capitalists fought each other like Roman gladiators, presidents George Gould of the Denver and Rio Grande and E.H. Harriman of the Union Pacific viewed the Moffat Road with alarm. Their railroads thrived on trade between the two largest cities in the Rocky Mountain West, Denver and Salt Lake City, Utah. Gould's trains crossed 745 miles to reach the Utah capitol; Harriman's trains traveled 628 miles. The Moffat Road promised to reach Salt Lake City in only 578 miles, eliminating the laborious travel to terminals north and south of Denver. Furthermore, Moffat threatened to challenge the autocratic power of the corporate barons, neither of whom were interested in sharing their grip over Western transportation.<sup>6</sup> Harriman, who had consolidated holdings in several railroads to become the most powerful railroad magnate of his day, used his "tremendous financial power" in 1902 "to close all eastern financial gates to the Denver millionaire."<sup>7</sup> The Union Pacific had usually bought up and swallowed competing railroads heading west; Moffat "believed that he could retain independent control of the Denver, Northwestern and Pacific and

Moffat incorporated the railroad in July 1902. From Utah Junction, a railyard north of Denver, the tracks began heading west through Ralston (Arvada), Plainview, Gato (Pinecliff), Rollinsville, and Arrow. In June 1904, with the railroad progressing rapidly and the good weather of summer ahead, Moffat prepared to offer passenger service on his fledgling railroad. Searching in Denver for some way to provide depot service, Moffat ran into the predictable opposition from his corporate foes.

In 1879, when major railroads and local branch lines were reaching into Denver for all directions, four of the largest railroads -- the Union Pacific, the Denver and Rio Grande, the Colorado Central, and the Denver, South Park and Pacific -- formed the Union Depot and Railway Company. The company that year built the first of several Union Stations along Wynkoop Street at 17th Street. The Union Pacific dominated the Union Depot and Railway Company, holding from three-fifths to four-fifths of company stock between 1879 and 1904.<sup>9</sup>

During 1904 Moffat requested that the company board grant him a lease for use of Union Depot. On June 18, 1904, just days before the first Moffat Road train would leave Denver, Moffat received his lease offer. The Union Depot and Railway Company agreed to grant Moffat's railroad a 1-year lease at "\$18,000 per annum, payable in monthly installments of \$1,500."<sup>10</sup>

Moffat immediately objected to the lease terms. He claimed that the relatively small passenger and freight business of his new railroad would not allow him to meet the lease costs. The lease offer of the Union Depot Company was probably not a proposal made in good faith. The other major railroads paid the same rental fee, yet ran many more trains through Union



Depot.<sup>11</sup> And the established railroad companies may have been able to pay their rental fees through a simple transfer of funds in depot accounts. In addition, Moffat may have been required to pay cash up front, according to his most recent biographer.<sup>12</sup>

Moffat, however, refused to accept the lease. By June 20, 1904, he had arranged to lease land from the Burlington Northern Railroad for a right-of-way into Denver. In the next few days, crews laid track from the Moffat yards at Utah Junction to the corner of 15th and Delgany Streets, where workmen were building a platform 200 feet long and 40 feet wide. The first Moffat Road passengers, 300 in all led by Moffat himself and the Denver Chamber of Commerce, stepped up to the platform and boarded trains for Mammoth, Colorado, on June 23, 1904.<sup>13</sup>

With the air of Denver as the walls and sky above as a roof, Moffat's train "station" was no showplace. But at least for Moffat, it was not the Union Depot of the hated Gould and Harriman. Vowing to run a completely independent railroad, Moffat announced his intent to build a permanent station at 15th and Delgany. Work began during the month of June 1904. The contracting firm of Miles McGrath and John Stewart built a brick and stone depot that was 170 feet long and roofed with Spanish tile. The depot was divided into three rooms: a ticket and telegraph office, a waiting room, and a baggage room. A stairway from the 16th Street viaduct led onto the original platform at 15th Street.<sup>14</sup>

A month after the inauguration of the Moffat Road, the railroad outgrew its station at 15th and Delgany. "The little depot planned for usual and ordinary travel will be lost in the crowds that come to the . . . big excursions," lamented one newspaper.<sup>15</sup> The depot also did not have the capacity to ship

freight, and it is probable that Moffat always viewed the 15th and Delgany station as temporary. One newspaper said as much when the depot was arising, noting that it would be a "temporary one and will be replaced by a much more modern and magnificent structure."<sup>16</sup> Sixteen months later, in January 1906, Moffat began building the Moffat Station, two blocks west at the corner of 15th and Bassett Streets.

#### B. CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

On July 30, 1904, Moffat incorporated the Northwestern Terminal Railway, a subsidiary company of the Moffat Road. This independent company was charged with building all of the terminals of the railroad.<sup>17</sup> The company was also responsible for locating and purchasing a right-of-way and Denver property for a main terminal.

In September 1905, Northwestern Terminal announced the purchase of the right-of-way leading to the eventual site of the Moffat Station. In January 1906, Northwestern Terminal secured a building permit for a brick and steel depot measuring 50 by 176 feet (final original building length was 130 feet), with a value of \$17,000. The contractor was Miles McGrath, the builder of the 15th and Delgany station. The architect was Edwin Moorman.<sup>18</sup>

Architect Edwin Moorman came to Denver approximately in 1900. He designed many Denver homes, especially in North Denver, Capitol Hill, Cheesman Park, and other locations. Probably his most well-known project is the Cody Memorial on Lookout Mountain in Golden, Colorado. He died in 1926.<sup>19</sup>

Moorman designed the square depot with symmetrical sides and an 80-foot warehouse and loading dock extending north of the building. The building reflected the Georgian Revival style of architecture popular during the early 20th century. Each side of the building displays the same oversized arches and windows, while an elaborate quoining motif and round metal finials or pommels decorate the brick walls and the roofline. This distinctive roof statuary makes the Moffat Station instantly recognizable even from afar.

During the spring of 1906, work proceeded quickly on the depot. In April 1906, the Moffat Road's chief engineer predicted a May 1 opening date. He responded to a query about station operations by saying that "while the building may not be completed on May 1st, it will be in such condition that we can arrange to do business from [the station]." On May 2, Sumner arranged for workers to tear up the old 15th and Delgany Street platform and use the material in the new depot.<sup>20</sup> At a later date, the 15th and Delgany station was disassembled and rebuilt at Tolland, above Rollinsville on the Moffat Road.<sup>21</sup>

By the summer of 1906, the Moffat Station handled all the passenger and freight service of the Moffat Road. The railroad used the station in this fashion until 1947. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad bought the Moffat Road that year and closed the station. Between 1908 and 1917, a second railroad utilized the Moffat Station. The Denver, Laramie and Northwestern Railway incorporated in 1906. Like the Moffat Road, it had great ambitions to head west, eventually to the Pacific Ocean. But the Denver, Laramie and Northwestern only reached Greeley, Colorado, and in 1917 it folded.

Ironically, the lease agreement for the use of Moffat Station and other Moffat Road facilities was a factor in the failure of the railroad, as the lease's "high fixed payments [aided] the railroad's downfall."<sup>22</sup>

Between 1947 and 1948, the Service Transfer and Storage Company established a distributing warehouse in the Moffat Station, utilizing the loading dock north of the depot. In 1949, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad constructed a 50-foot, \$9,000 addition to the warehouse in order to provide more space for the transfer company. In 1950, the railroad constructed a second addition, a 120-foot, \$30,000 extension to the warehouse for another tenant, the Central Vegetable Sales Company.

The Service Transfer and Storage Company leased the Moffat Station until 1971. The Central Vegetable Sales Company occupied the station for an unknown period of time. Other recent tenants have included Thomas and Son Transfer Line, Armstrong Acoustical Products, and Lawrence J. Lewandowski.<sup>23</sup>

In 1987, Denver City officials have considered utilizing Moffat Station for passenger service again. The 500-acre central Platte River Valley, home of the Moffat Station, is considered by urban planners to be the largest parcel of undeveloped land near a major American urban area. If development of the valley is to proceed, passenger service at Union Station (Union Depot) must be relocated. The City of Denver has suggested that the Moffat Station can be renovated to service the trains and passengers of Amtrak, opening up the land behind Union Station for development.<sup>24</sup> The Moffat Station of the Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad is at present one of only two train stations remaining in Denver; it may someday return to life as the city's primary train station.

C. DESCRIPTION

The Moffat Station is constructed of brick, stone, and galvanized iron. With an attached warehouse/loading dock, the building measures 50 by 300 feet. It is located in the Platte River Valley, directly west of downtown Denver. The station is surrounded by railroad tracks, one- and two-story office buildings, and small industrial operations. The 15th Street and 16th Street viaducts bracket the station on the north and south. From the west entrance, one looks upon the remains of the four main rail lines that once brought trains into Moffat Station. From the east entrance, Denver's skyline fills the view. While trains no longer use the Moffat Station, the surrounding area remains the site of railroad operations, and Denver's Union Station is clearly visible. The industrial character of the Platte River Valley remains little changed since Moffat Station was built in 1906.

The dominant architectural style of Moffat Station is Georgian Revival, with some distinctive stylistic features added by the architect Edwin Moorman. The east, west, and south red brick exterior walls of the main building are all approximately 50 feet in width, each divided into three equal-sized bays. The left and right bays on each of the exterior walls display large single-hung windows surrounded by a cream-colored quoining motif. Rectangular stone triglyphs are above the windows. Each exterior wall displays an equal number of modillions below the cornice. The center bays all display a large circular arch surrounded by cream brick quoining. The original doorways held oak double doors, 4 feet 2 inches by 7 feet 6 inches, with full lights. Sidelights with iron grille were to the left and right of the doors, and transoms of luxfer prism glass were above the door. Three stone steps lead up to the doorways. The historic door and transoms were removed in 1950.

The archways have been filled in with concrete blocks and 8- by 8-inch blocks of opaque glass. The first stone steps on each side of the depot have become submerged under gathered dirt and debris.

Architect Edwin Moorman created two architectural elements: the brick station, measuring 50 by 50 feet; and an attached warehouse/loading dock of wood and metal, measuring 50 by 80 feet. Two additions to the warehouse/loading dock were built in 1947 and 1950, establishing its present length of 300 feet.

The exterior brickwork is running bond, displaying a smooth surface with thin buttered joints of 1/8-inch thickness.

The station is one-and-one-half stories; the warehouse/loading dock is one story. An upper floor was added to the north end of the station circa 1942, providing bathrooms, and enginemen's room, and records storage.

The roofline of Moffat Station is dominated by ten round finials or pommels of galvanized metal spaced along the roof parapet wall. A small brick chimney and a small skylight are located at the north end of the roof. The parapet is of capped crenellated stone construction.

A stone water table measuring 18 inches high is laid on top of concrete footings of 48 by 12 inches. A small basement lies under the two north interior bays. The basement originally held a boiler, a coal bin, and ash storage but is now empty and partially inaccessible. The basement floor is constructed of concrete.

The interior of the station is dominated by four large Doric columns. The ceiling is coffered with plaster over wood beams. Historic floor plans show that a freestanding ticket office was designed for the southeast corner of the station, with remaining physical evidence supporting these plans. Men's and women's rooms were in the northeast corner with the general waiting room occupying the west third of the station. At present, the interior is divided into several office spaces with temporary freestanding partition walls of 2-by-4 construction and Celotex.

The original warehouse extends 80 feet north of the depot. It features a rolled asphalt gabled roof with overhanging eaves and six loading bays. The eaves overhanging the east bays have been removed.

Both the station building and the warehouse/loading dock have been modified by additions. The half-floor addition of 1942 above the waiting room was tied into the existing columns at the north end of the station. The second-floor construction lowered the ceiling height in the station waiting room by 6 feet. A shower, a toilet, a urinal, and a washroom were added. A stairway was constructed between the warehouse/loading docks and the upper story.

The warehouse/loading dock has been extended twice, in 1947 and 1950. The new foundations and walls were constructed of 8- by 12-inch concrete blocks. The roof of the warehouse/loading dock is supported by steel trusses.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The expense of running a railroad over a major mountain range and the effort of removing large amounts of snow from the tracks cost the Moffat Road dearly during its early years. After David Moffat died in 1911, while searching in New York for new funding for his railroad, the Moffat Road lurched along for another year before going into receivership. Reorganized and revitalized by Moffat associate William Gray Evans, the Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad became the Denver and Salt Lake Railroad in 1913. Another period of receivership occurred between 1917 and 1926, but thereafter the Moffat Road continued as an independent and operating railroad until 1947, when the Denver and Rio Grande absorbed the Denver and Salt Lake.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Frederick Mehls, "David Moffat, Jr.: Early Colorado Business Leader." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Colorado, 1982, pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup>Harold Boner, The Giant's Ladder (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Kalmbach Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 14-18; Edward T. Bollinger, Rails that Climb: A Narrative History of the Moffat Road. Reprint Edition. (Golden, Colorado: Colorado Railroad Museum, 1979), pp. 2-4.

<sup>4</sup>Mehls, "David A. Moffat, Jr.," pp. 27, 157-8, 166.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., passim.

<sup>6</sup>Robert G. Athearn, Rebel of the Rockies: A History of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 258.

<sup>7</sup>Edgar Carlisle McMechen, The Moffat Tunnel of Colorado: An Epic of Empire. 2 Vols. (Denver, Colorado: Wahlgreen Publishing Company, 1977), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Kenton Forrest and Charles Albi, Denver's Railroads: The Story of Union Station and the Railroads of Denver (Golden, Colorado: Colorado Railroad Museum, 1986), pp. 15-34.

<sup>10</sup>Minutes of the Board of Directors, Colorado-Utah Construction Company, Vol. 2, October 17, 1904. Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad Collection, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>11</sup>The Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad utilized a clipping service that compiled newspaper articles about the railroad in several large scrapbooks, now part of the railroad manuscript collection preserved at the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado. Due to the irregular recording of the newspaper names and dates, citations are made to one scrapbook dated June 1904 to August 1905 ("Clippings, 1904-05, p. \_\_\_") and one scrapbook dated August 1905 to August 1906 ("Clippings, 1905-06, p. \_\_\_"). This reference is from Clippings, 1904-05, p. 29.



- <sup>12</sup>Stephen F. Mehls, personal conversation, November 22, 1987.
- <sup>13</sup>Boner, The Giant's Ladder, p. 87.
- <sup>14</sup>Clippings, 1904-05, pp. 30, 32, 33.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 53.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>17</sup>Wilbur Fisk Stone, History of Colorado. 2 Vols. (Chicago, Illinois: S.S. Clarke Publishing Company, 1918), p. 376.
- <sup>18</sup>Clippings, 1905-06, p. 23.
- <sup>19</sup>Thomas J. Noel and Barbara S. Norgren, Denver, the City Beautiful (Denver, Colorado: Historic Denver, Inc., 1986), p. 212.
- <sup>20</sup>Both references are to correspondence of the Chief Engineer, Denver, Northwestern and Pacific Railroad Collection, Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado.
- <sup>21</sup>Edward T. Bollinger and Frederick Bauer, The Moffat Road (Chicago, Illinois: The Swallow Press, 1962), p. 97.
- <sup>22</sup>Forrest, Denver's Railroads, p. 9 for dates; Kenneth Jessen, Railroads of Northern Colorado (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1982), p. 135 for quote.
- <sup>23</sup>All information on the post-1947 use of Moffat Station is drawn from lease records of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, specifically lease numbers 13299, 15783, 17349, 17749, and 17969.
- <sup>24</sup>Rocky Mountain News, September 21, 1987.

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City and County of Denver. Records of the County Clerk. Denver, Colorado.

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D. THESES

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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