

GREAT NORTHERN DEPOT
100-110 Neill Avenue
Helena
Lewis and Clark County
Montana

HAER No. MT-52

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
GREAT NORTHERN DEPOT

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13-

I. INTRODUCTION

Location: 100-110 Neill Avenue, Helena, Montana

Quad: Helena, Mont., 1950

UTM: Zone 12 - 421025 Easting 515920 Northing

Date of Construction: 1913

Present Owner: Montana Chamber of Commerce
100 - 110 Neill Avenue
Helena, Montana

Present Use: Offices. Building to be demolished to
provide building site for new Federal
Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Helena Branch.

Significance: The building was erected in 1913 as a pas-
senger depot for the Great Northern Railroad.
From the date of its construction the clock
tower represented a prominent Helena landmark
and its location at the base of Last Chance
Gulch tied the structure to the heart of the
city's commercial district. The arrival of
the railroad in the 1880s played an important
role in the settlement and industrialization
of Montana and the city of Helena. The Great
Northern Depot linked the state capitol with
Minneapolis to the east and Seattle and
Portland to the west.

Historian: Brian L. Shovers, GCM Services, November 1987

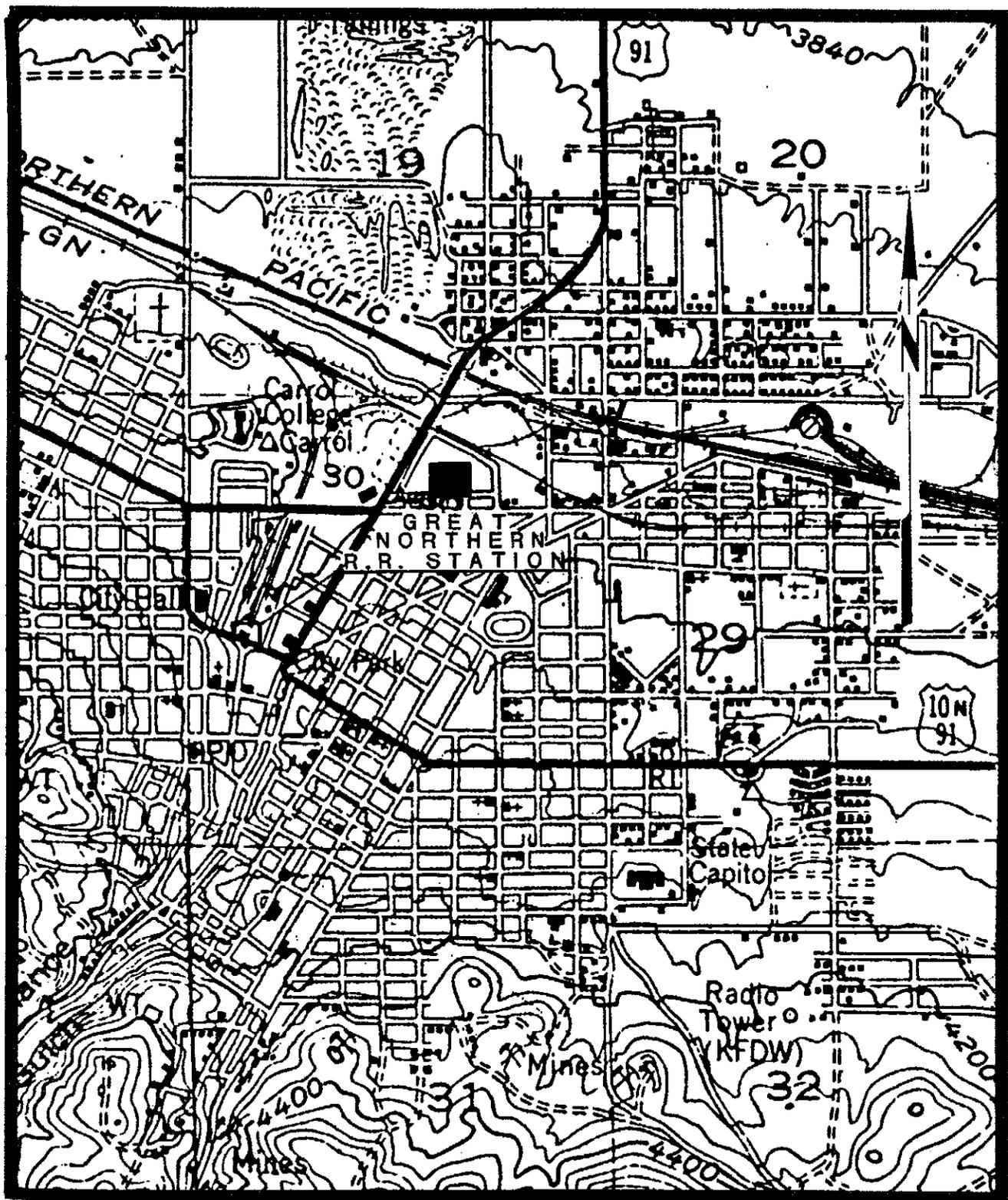


Figure 1. Location of Great Northern Depot on Helena Quad Map.

II. HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

A. BACKGROUND

The Great Northern Depot, designed by the Great Northern architect S. L. Bartlett of St. Paul, was erected and opened in August of 1913 at the intersection of two prominent Helena thoroughfares and at the base of Last Chance Gulch. The new depot constituted a link for passenger traffic between the mainline headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota and a branch line between Great Falls and Butte, Montana. In effect, the completion of the new Great Northern Depot provided residents of Montana's capital with rail access to major metropolitan areas in the Midwest and the Northwest coast. The new brick and terra cotta depot, with its 125-foot clock tower, was symbolic of Montana's emerging status as a prominent producer of mineral and agricultural products.¹

The Great Northern, however, was not the first railroad to arrive in the Montana capital. As of 1887, two major railroads served Helena: the Northern Pacific mainline between St. Paul and Tacoma and the Montana Central between Great Falls and Butte, built by C. A. Broadwater of Helena with financial help from James J. Hill. Helena also provided a departure point for the Helena and Red Mountain Branch as well as the Helena, Jefferson and Butte Branch of the Northern Pacific. The Montana Central connected at Great Falls with Hill's mainline from the east, the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad (which in 1889 became known as the Great Northern Railroad). This railroad network facilitated trade between the mining region of southwest Montana and the agricultural prairie north of the Missouri River.²

James J. Hill's career in railroading initially began in the early 1870s when he worked as an agent for the St. Paul and Pacific. Hill and three other investors purchased the railroad in 1878, which they reorganized as the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba the following year. Hill's railroad reached Montana in 1887. By 1890 the Great Northern Railroad operated over 3200 miles of track and three years later Hill's railroad finally reached the west coast, allowing Helena residents access to the largest cities along the northern tier between St. Paul and Seattle.³

In 1887 the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba shared a terminal with the Montana Central Railroad in Great Falls but in Helena the Montana Central operated its own freight depot and shops and a modest onestory woodframe passenger depot along Front Street. In May of 1911 James Hill took out a \$600 million mortgage on his Northern Securities Trust to make capital improvements on his railroad and by September his son, Louis, announced plans for construction of new passenger depots at Butte, Lewistown and Helena. Plans for Helena included construction of a two-story brick depot along Gilbert Street (Neill Avenue) at an estimated cost of \$200,000. The Helena Daily Independent included a sketch by prominent Helena architect, George Hollis Carsley, of a "suggested location and approach for the new depot." Carsley was the architect responsible for Helena's most prominent structures including the Placer Hotel, Algeria Shrine Temple (Civic Center), the Montana Club and the Metals Bank Building in Butte (designed in association with Cass Gilbert). He proposed a landscaped European style approach to the depot from the south along one of Helena's main thoroughfares (Fuller Avenue). Although Carsley's ideas were not incorporated into the original design by Great Northern architect, Samuel L. Bartlett of St. Paul, a park dedicated by Helena businessman, Norman Holter, now occupies both sides of Fuller Avenue.⁴

Construction of the brick and terra cotta depot began in the fall of 1912 under the supervision of Great Northern architect Samuel L. Bartlett, the engineer, P. S. Hervin, and the carpenter foreman G. F. Cahoon. Bartlett, a Great Northern architect stationed in St. Paul from 1905 to 1914, also designed Great Northern depots for Fargo, Minot and Williston, North Dakota, for Aberdeen, South Dakota, and for Glacier National Park. Bartlett's design reflected contemporary railroad architecture, especially the use of the Italianate clock tower which can be seen in numerous passenger depots erected throughout the Northwest during the early twentieth century. The finished tower stood 125 feet and the clock face itself measured eight feet in diameter. When the station opened on August 2, 1913, the Helena depot was one of only three Great Northern depots with tracks located below the street level and the depot's location at the foot of Last Chance Gulch placed it three-quarters of a mile closer to the main commercial district than the Northern Pacific depot, creating a distinct competitive advantage for the Great Northern.⁵

During its early years of operation four trains arrived daily but by the 1930s daily passenger service had dropped to two arrivals, causing some services to be consolidated in Butte and Great Falls. While the Great Northern felt the tremors of economic depression in reduced public train travel, the depot was rocked by the largest magnitude earthquake ever to strike Helena. The earthquake struck Helena on October 31, 1935, rendering the clock tower structurally unsound and it was taken down soon after. Passenger service continued to decline, culminating in the abandonment of the Neill Avenue depot in 1955. Great Northern passengers now arrived at a much smaller woodframe depot located on the site of the old Montana Central depot on Lyndale Avenue. In 1961 the last Great Northern passenger train departed the platform in Helena bound for Great Falls.⁶

Since the abandonment of the Neill and Fuller Avenue depot by the Great Northern in 1955 there have been a number of tenants in the building. Holter Realty acquired the building in 1955 for use as office space, followed by the Montana Republican State Central Committee. The current owner, the Montana Chamber of Commerce, purchased the building in 1978 and recently leased office space to a group of attorneys.⁷

The settlement and rapid growth of the Montana population between the early 1880s and 1920 was directly related to the arrival of the railroad. James J. Hill and his railroad, the Great Northern, transformed the northern tier of Montana prairie and mountains into a chain of prosperous towns dominated by agricultural and industrial enterprise. By 1900 railroad tracks connected Helena, a prosperous mining and banking community and the seat of state government, with the growing agricultural communities of Great Falls, Havre and Minot and St. Paul to the east. Tens of thousands of settlers flocked to homestead on the Montana "highline" and work in the mines and forests on the Great Northern. The Great Northern Depot in Helena is historically significant for its association with this great migration and as a major factor in Helena's position as a center of finance and government in Montana. The building retains an architectural significance for its association with Great Northern architect, S. L. Bartlett, and its design which reflected depot architecture throughout the Northwest.⁸

B. DESCRIPTION

This two-story glazed brick and terra cotta railroad depot measures approximately 106 x 40 feet with a 90 by 20 foot wing attached to the rear (baggage/express office). The most prominent architectural features include the Roman brick arches in the central pavilion, the use of terra cotta in the neoclassical cornice with frieze and dentils, the coping, the keystones, the sills and the foundation offset, and the contrasting effect of the dark glazed brick throughout the building exterior. The depot roof is flat and the concrete foundation supports an outer wall of brick veneer and an inner hollow clay tile wall. Both doors on the south side of the building (the main entry) are metal and glass and represent alterations that have occurred over time to the depot entry. The main entry, located in the central pavilion, has vertical side lites and pilasters topped by terra cotta capitals bordering the door with a Roman brick arch and plywood covered arched window above the entry. Raised wood panel doors with clear transoms appear at numerous locations on the rear wing of the building. The double-hung wooden sash windows are set in recessed openings throughout the building facade. Other interesting exterior features include decorative cast iron light fixtures on the rear wing and two ornate cast iron lamp posts along the track corridors in the rear. The roof of the rear wing (baggage/express office) contains two roof monitors with skylights and metal ventilators. Three tracks served the depot from the rear.

The only remaining interior feature of significance is a cast iron staircase with an oak handrail leading from track level to the ticket office and lobby at street level. The lower level leading to the loading platform appears to be unaltered. The original ticket office and lobby has been radically altered and divided up into office spaces. We have not included floor plans since we were unable to locate the original floor plans even after a thorough search of the Great Northern Collection at the Minnesota State Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota.

The most significant alteration of the depot occurred in 1936 with the removal of the central clock tower following structural damage to the tower during the October 1935 earthquake in Helena.



Historic view of Great Northern Depot looking north
circa 1913 - 1920

III. FOOTNOTES

1. Helena Daily Independent, May 19, 1913, p. 5; August 3, 1913, p. 1.
2. The Northwest Magazine, September 1887, p. 5.
3. Public Relations Department Great Northern Railroad, Great Northern Railway Condensed History (St. Paul: Great Northern Railway, 1961), p. 2-4.
4. Art Jacobsen, "Helena's Great Northern Railway Passenger Terminal and Offices," Newsletter of the Klepetko Chapter of the Society For Industrial Archeology 2 (September 1987): 3, Helena Daily Independent, October 29, 1911, p. 2. Helena Daily Independent, July 5, 1933, p. 8.
5. Helena Daily Independent, May 19, 1913, p. 5. St. Paul City Directory (St. Paul: R.L. Polk & Co., 1905-1910). Jacobsen, "Helena Depot", p. 3.
6. Jacobsen, "Helena Depot," p. 5.
7. Ibid.
8. David H. Hickcox, "The Impact of the Great Northern Railway on Settlement in Northern Montana, 1880-1920," Railroad History (Bulletin 148): 58-66.

IV. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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