Monument to Railroad History

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Flanked by two cabooses representing two of the railroads that have serviced St. Charles (the MKT and the Wabash), St. Charles' Katy Depot sits in Frontier Park awaiting its next visitor. For years, the depot has been known as the M.K.T. Depot, so named after the railroad whose tracks used to stretch from the St. Charles County village of Machens to Pettis County's Sedalia and beyond into Kansas and Texas. It once welcomed passengers riding the rails; but now it is a fixture in Frontier Park. In recent winters, the depot has become an ornament to a new main attraction in Frontier Park, a new Christmas tradition: the ice skating rink. During its lifetime, it has welcomed storytellers, artists, Civil War re-enactors, and tourists. The story of the depot has a few surprises and, like the railroad, some unexpected twists and turns. The history of the depot is a tale of the railroad, of urban renewal, and of historic preservation; it features a change of name for the railroad, a change of location, and a change in purpose. As a result of these changes, the depot has become a monument to railroad history.

The advent of the railroad in Missouri began with the North Missouri Railroad Company. They built a railroad bridge across the Missouri at St. Charles in 1871.[1] The North Missouri Railroad later became the St. Louis, Kansas City and Northern in 1872, and eventually the Wabash Railroad in 1879.[2] The second major railroad in St. Charles had its genesis as the Central Missouri Railway Company on 19 February 1885. The Central Missouri began to purchase right-of-way and built a ten-mile track west from St. Charles in 1887.[3] They had plans to apparently build a track between the Missouri River and Main Street.

The Central Missouri Railway Company was succeeded on 28 March 1888 by the Cleveland, St. Louis and Kansas City Railway Company.[4] It was sold to the Missouri, Kansas and Eastern Railway Company on 17 March 1892.[5] By this time, the line

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[1] *St. Charles Cosmos*, 6 March 1873, reprinted in *History of St. Charles County (1765-1885)*, 328-329

[2] http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/encycmo/encycmorr.html#NM; http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~momonroe/wabash_rr.htm

[3] http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/railroads/ch_mkt.html; *Poor's Manual of Railroads* (1888), 1088

[4] *Poor's Manual* (1888), 1088 and *Poor's Manual* (1892), 177; http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/railroads/ch_mkt.html

[5] Deed Book 56, 438, 17 March 1892

westward from St. Charles had been extended another 6.5 miles to Hamburg, thus making for a total of 16.5 miles.[6]

The Missouri, Kansas, and Eastern Railway Company was chartered in February 1892 to build a railroad from the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad at Franklin, Missouri, to the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad at Texas Junction in St. Charles County.[7] Beginning in October 1892, the Missouri, Kansas and Eastern Railway Company began purchasing more right-of-way between St. Charles' Main Street and the Missouri River "for the purposes of a depot and station grounds for said company; such depot to be located on Tompkins Street or between Tompkins Street and Clay Street."[8] The rest of the right of way needed for the depot by the new railroad in St. Charles was purchased in December 1892.

Construction on the new depot was completed during the last week of January 1893. On 1 February 1893, the *St. Charles Cosmos* reported, "The new depot in the First ward is a structure of some architectural pretensions in its way. It will certainly be a great improvement to the upper end of town. Some enterprising man could open a boarding house or restaurant in the vicinity with good prospects."[9] This is the building now known as the Katy Depot, but in May 1893 it is labeled on the Sanborn Map as the M.K. & E. Passenger Depot.[10] On 1 June 1896, the Missouri, Kansas and Eastern Railroad was sold to the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad. With this transaction, the M.K. & E. changed names to the M.K. & T.[11], an unexpected twist for a building that to younger St. Charlesans had always been known as the "Katy" Depot. The M.K.T. was a new name for the railroad, but the original name was not expected.

The depot hosted the usual sights and sounds for a railroad station in the early twentieth century. It "handled over $2 million worth of business during its heyday at the turn of the century. It serviced two grain elevators and handled lumber and fuel to meet the needs of St. Charles and Weldon Spring."[12] There were crowds of passengers waiting for their loved ones to arrive home or sending off family members to war or to their respective homes. The noise of the engines roaring off into the distance to the east or the west added to the cacophony one might experience here. Sometimes, the depot would be completely silent and surrounded by the waters of the flooded Missouri River, such as on 9 June 1903, when a picture was taken of such an occurrence.[13] There were times when

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[6] *Poor's Manual* (1892), 177

[7] *Poor's Manual* (1894), 523

[8] Deed Book 52, 172, 18 October 1892

[9] *St. Charles Cosmos*, 1 February 1893

[10] Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, May 1893

[11] http://tacnet.missouri.org/history/railroads/ch_mkt.html; Masterson, 249

[12] "Katy Depot Readies for New Lease on Life,' *St. Charles Journal*, 23 August 1976

[13] Tommy Robertson, "Depot, Flood are Discussed,' *St. Charles Post*, 19 October 1993

no one was waiting for trains, when the only person anticipating the arrival of a train was a solitary United States mail messenger.

The trip from the post office at 119 South Main Street to the Katy Depot was a routine one for United States Mail Messenger Willis Thornhill. On 4 February 1921, Thornhill, an African-American, found himself the target of an organized crime ring based in St. Louis. Thornhill left the post office at 6:30 p.m. and was on his way to the depot, when he was confronted by two men, who stopped his horse in the alley between Main Street and the depot. The two men were joined by three others, one of whom had an automobile parked at Second and Jackson streets. There the men commanded Thornhill to lie down in the rear of the car. He was warned not to make a sound. They threatened to shoot him if a noise came out of his mouth. They also threw the mail bag, containing an unknown amount in Liberty bonds from five St. Charles banks, into the car. The Hudson automobile, with the six occupants, whizzed across the Highway 115 Bridge and quickly made its way to St. Louis. The mail messenger was covered with a blanket by the thieves until the car had crossed into St. Louis County. Thornhill was dropped off by the bandits at the corner of Florissant and Calvary avenues in St. Louis. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* initially estimated that Thornhill's mail pouch contained $100,000, but the newspaper was unable to confirm that amount when it went to press on 5 February.[14] This was one of a string of railroad-related thefts in the early part of 1921. Four men robbed the Wabash Depot at Gilmore in January.[15] Two weeks after the Thornhill incident in St. Charles, five men robbed a moving Wabash train near Anglum in St. Louis County, opposite St. Charles.[16] Another robbery in St. Charles occurred a week later. This time, the target was a Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad train.[17]

While Thornhill was being transported to St. Louis by his captors, William Pallardy was waiting for Thornhill to return to the post office from the depot. Pallardy was in charge of the post office. At 7:45 p.m., he called the agent at the depot and asked when the train was going to arrive. The agent replied that the train had already arrived and was only five minutes late. Pallardy left with Joseph Mahan, a parcel postman, fifteen minutes later. They found Thornhill's horse and wagon, but there was no sign of Thornhill or the mail sack Pallardy had given to Thornhill. Pallardy then contacted the police, who then searched throughout St. Charles for the missing mail messenger. After Thornhill was dropped off in St. Louis, he notified Post Office Inspector M. B. Lunney and the local police via telephone about what happened and then returned to St. Charles. Concerning the reports in several St. Louis newspapers, the *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor* retorted that the amounts reported were greatly exaggerated. "The St. Louis newspapers stated that the robbers got about $100,000 in the haul, but this appears to be exaggerated, and from the best information at hand the Cosmos-Monitor thinks that they did not get

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[14] "Mail Pouch Said to Contain $100,000 is Stolen," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 5 February 1921

[15] "Gilmore Depot Robbed Thursday Morning," *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 19 January 1921

[16] "Box Car Thieves Working on Wabash," *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 16 February 1921

[17] "M. K. and T. Train Robbed," *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 23 February 1921

more than $30,000, mostly liberty bonds and securities all of which was insured."[18] So much for it being the largest heist in United States history. Several men were arrested in relation to the robbery, but Thornhill stated that they were not among the men involved. The *Banner-News* said the robbery was about $25,000 in bonds in their 10 February 1921 report. They called it "the boldest depredation accomplished in St. Charles for many months."[19] The police continued to investigate the robbery over the next two months, when a break came in April 1921. By this time, the *Post-Dispatch* was reporting that the amount in Thornhill's mail bag was $26,100. St. Louis police now had information linking the robbery in St. Charles with another holdup in Jefferson City on 1 March, when $34,000 in Liberty bonds was stolen there. Police detectives received information from Michael McNamara, one of the members of the ring involved with the bond theft. McNamara gave them a lot of information, but eventually the ring figured out he was snitching on them and killed him on 11 April 1921. St. Louis police arrested Allen Morris (but released him on bond), David Schwartz, Ben Grabinsky, and Charles Marks in relation to the bond thefts.[20] Morris was also later killed in 1921.[21] It is not known if all of the stolen bonds were recovered.

St. Charles' Katy Depot continued to welcome steam trains until 1951. The depot averaged six freight trains and two passenger trains in the mid-1950s. The last passenger train came through in May 1958. There was also a telegraph office at the depot that also closed in 1958.[22] On 17 November 1960, a train wreck occurred near the depot. "Twenty-eight cars piled up about two blocks south of the depot. Seven other cars were derailed but were apparently undamaged. No one was injured." There were a total of 129 cars in the train that derailed.[23] The rest of the day and evening were spent cleaning up the wreckage. The next day, the track was reopened for business.[24] In 1973, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad levee was topped by the Missouri River at St. Charles. The river crested at 36.4 feet, which was eleven feet above flood stage.[25] There were no reports of damage to the depot.

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[18] "Bold Robbery in St. Charles," *St. Charles Cosmos-Monitor*, 9 February 1921

[19] "Suspect Captured in St. Charles $25,000 Holdup," *St. Charles Banner-News*, 10 February 1921

[20] "Police Rounding Up Gangsters in Murder Inquiry," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 April 1921; "$5,000 in Stolen Bonds Found on McNamara's Tips," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 14 April 1921

[21] "Man, Wanted in $36,000 Robbery of Mail, Taken," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 21 July 1921

[22] "Katy Depot Readies for New Lease on Life," *St. Charles Journal*, 23 August 1976

[23] "Train Wreck Closes Down M. K. T. Railroad Main Line," *St. Charles Daily Banner-News*, 17 November 1960

[24] "Katy Tracks Reopened Here Early Today," *St. Charles Daily Banner-News*, 18 November 1960

[25] *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 27 April 1973; "Missouri Tops 1785 Record," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 27 April 1973

The depot became a critical issue in the proposed construction of a new road between Main Street and the Missouri River. The road was planned to go through an area in which the depot sat. Initially, the depot was slated for demolition, but the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority expressed willingness "to pay for moving the ancient terminal." In 1974, James Quackenbush, executive director of LCRA, considered the depot worth saving. He had talked to Jim Golden, chairman of the St. Charles Board of Architectural Review, about moving the building. A house mover had given Golden the estimate of $2,500 to move the depot in 1973. St. Charles Mayor Frank Brockgreitens estimated that it would cost $25,000 "to move and renovate the station."[26] Unfortunately, this conversation came to nothing and the LCRA scheduled a March 1975 demolition date for the Katy Depot. In October 1974, Archie Scott, president of the South Main Preservation Society, became involved in preserving the depot. For three months, the society conducted historical research and oral history interviews concerning the Katy Depot. Scott announced to the *St. Charles Banner-News*, "We've just completed a 15-minute film on the Katy depot showing how the depot was the center of railroad activity in St. Charles in the early 1900s." Scott considered having the depot moved to a proposed city park in the 100 block of South Main Street or to the city garage property in the 800 block of South Main Street. He estimated $1,500 to move the depot and $44,000 to restore the building.[27] As a result of Scott's presentation before the St. Charles City Council, several council members expressed support for moving the depot to another location.[28] The city council later approved $56,500 "to dismantle, relocate and restore the station," thus saving the depot from its scheduled March 1975 demolition.[29] The drive by the South Main Preservation Society resulted in the Katy Depot becoming St. Charles' Bicentennial Project in the summer of 1975.[30] The Missouri Public Service Commission closed the Katy Depot in St. Charles, which received its last freight train on 1 April 1976. Archie Scott rejoiced in the decision to discontinue MKT service to the depot. "I'm very happy; it's been a long time coming. We're looking forward to beginning plans for its restoration."[31] Relocation and restoration of the depot overcame one more hurdle in May 1976, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and James Wilson, state historic preservation officer, approved Scott's plan. Community Development Coordinator Victoria Kern announced that the LCRA would attempt to get title to the depot and that the depot would need to be removed before 1 August to make

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[26] Steve Wade, "Save the Depot,' *St. Charles Journal*, 12 August 1974

[27] Sue Kurtz, "Historical Data Collected on Katy Depot,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 6 January 1975

[28] Judy Bocklage, "Members Enthusiastic About Preservation,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 8 January 1975; "Council Favors Saving of Rail Station,' *St. Charles Journal*, 8 January 1975

[29] Kurtz, " 'Lone Rambler÷Recalls Days of Riding the Old M-K-T Line,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 5 February 1975

[30] "Restoration with a Bicentennial Theme,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 7 July 1975

[31] Joan Ebzery, "Old 'Katy÷Depot Will Discontinue Operations Here,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 1 April 1976

way for the new Riverside Drive.[32] St. Charles purchased the depot for $1 and other considerations in July 1976.[33] However, the August 1 goal was not met and the construction date for the new road was pushed back to October. Initially, the city council agreed to have the depot moved across the tracks, but remain at the foot of Tompkins Street.[34] The plans eventually changed, however, to a new site at the foot of Pike Street. In October, the city council entered into a contract with Kozeny-Wagner, Inc. to move the depot to Frontier Park for $39,889, which was the lowest bid received by the council.[35] On 12 November 1976, the Katy Depot was moved to a new location in Frontier Park, at the foot of Pike Street.[36]

On 1 June 1977, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad Company quit claim to its property on the riverfront to the Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority of the City of St. Charles for $1 and other valuable considerations.[37] Restoration on the Katy Depot began in July 1977 and was scheduled to be completed by Christmas. The estimated cost of restoration was $145,000.[38] The M.K.T. Depot in St. Charles was dedicated on 13 August 1978.[39] The St. Charles Tourism Bureau (now the St. Charles Convention and Visitors' Bureau) moved into the depot on 7 September 1978.[40] In 1979, one local reporter proclaimed, "The KATY is an example of the pride and sentiment St. Charles residents feel about their heritage. They did not allow this heritage to be lost to modern contingencies, but actively worked to restore to the city and to its residents, its architectural and cultural legacy."[41] The Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad abandoned its Sedalia, Missouri to Machens, Missouri route on 4 October 1986 due to the 1986 Missouri River flood.[42] The St. Charles Tourism Department moved out of the Katy Depot to 230 South Main Street in St. Charles in 1986. This left the building vacant and

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[32] "Depot Project Gets Go-Ahead,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 11 May 1976

[33] Bocklage, "M-K-T Station to Get New Life on Riverfront,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 1 July 1976; "Katy Depot Readies for New Lease on Life,' *St. Charles Journal*, 23 August 1976

[34] *St. Charles Banner-News*, 14 September 1976; Bocklage, "Council, Park Board Agree to Put Depot at Foot of Tompkins Street,' 15 September 1976

[35] Bocklage, "Moving Cost of Depot Will Be $39,889,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 13 October 1976

[36] *St. Charles Journal*, 11 November 1976; Mark Hagan, "Onlookers Reminisce as They Watch 'Katy÷Change Homes,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 12 November 1976

[37] Deed Book 764, 160, 1 June 1977

[38] "A New Look for Katy,' *St. Charles Banner-News*, 13 June 1977

[39] *St. Charles Post*, 14 August 1978

[40] *St. Charles Daily News*, 7 September 1978

[41] Chris Magafas, "Katy Depot: Its Past, Present, and Future,' *St. Charles Community News*, 29 August 1979

[42] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katy_Trail_State_Park

the St. Charles City Parks Board began looking for a new tenant. One possibility concerned a proposal for a tourist train from Frontier Park to Jungs Station Road. City Administrator John Vinson suggested that "it would be possible to combine the ticket office for the train with a park office and concession stand."[43] However, Sverdrup Corporation, a consulting engineering firm, rejected Vinson's idea and proposed that the depot should be turned into a railroad museum.[44] The recommendations from the consulting firm were rejected by the city because the city could not afford to build a new railroad station for a planned tourist railroad.[45] The plan for the tourist railroad was discussed over the next two years, but the plans for such a railroad were never implemented.

In 1990, Archie Scott once again became president of the South Main Preservation Society and focused on the project he had been involved in eleven years earlier: the Katy Depot. The depot experienced several years of deterioration, which Scott pointed out to the local newspapers. City officials pointed out that "workers failed to properly ventilate the crawl space beneath the floor" and that "moisture has caused wooden supports to rot." Archie Scott exclaimed, "I can't believe I'm back having to deal with this railroad station. This time we're going to get it right." Otherwise, the building would continue to be considered unsafe for occupancy.[46] Scott stated that $18,000 in repairs needed to be done to retard deterioration and another $93,000 was needed to renovate the structure.[47] In 1992, a proposed museum in the Katy Depot was rejected by the St. Charles Parks Board, 3-2.[48] Led by Archie Scott, the South Main Preservation Society supported the idea of turning the depot into a railroad museum.[49]

The vacant depot was turned into an island in the midst of the Missouri River deluge of 1993. The flood heavily damaged the Katy Depot and the city received an estimate of $75,000 from contractors for the municipality's insurance company "to restore the depot to its pre-flood condition."[50] The city council approved a resolution creating a depot maintenance fund, 6-4, and continued to negotiate with the Transport

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[43] Dennis Miller, "Panel to consider proposals for former depot," *St. Charles Journal*, 28 October 1987

[44] Miller, "Consultants suggest new use for Katy Depot," *St. Charles Journal*, 13 May 1988; Miller, "City considers converting depot into museum," *St. Charles Journal*, 25 May 1988; Bob Wehling, "St. Charles÷ Popular Frontier Park," *St. Charles Post*, 2 June 1988

[45] Miller, "Katy Depot may be used as tourist railway station," *St. Charles Journal*, 3 July 1988

[46] Lisha Gayle, "Something÷s Rottin÷," *St. Charles Post*, 11 May 1990

[47] M. J. Trask, "Depot in Decay," *St. Peters Journal*, 3 June 1990

[48] Cathy Thomas, "Museum in Depot Rejected," *St. Charles Post*, 21 August 1992

[49] M. J. Trask, "No agreement reached on use of Katy Depot," *St. Charles Journal*, 16 October 1992

[50] Tommy Robertson, "Depot, Flood are Discussed," *St. Charles Post*, 19 October 1993

Museum Association, which wanted to operate a train museum and gift shop in the depot.[51] The train museum and gift shop opened in June 1994 and closed the following month.[52] In 1996, Archie Scott wrote concerning the depot, "The Katy Depot in St. Charles has much history to tell and waits being open to the public. The depot is an historic site and represents the classic Victorian railroad era. More than 25,000 depots have become extinct and victims of vandals, bulldozers and demolitionists. We are fortunate to have the last wooden pre-1900 restored depot left in Missouri on the former Katy lines. Thousands of depots have been rendered obsolete by the declining railroads."[53] In 2005, the Lewis and Clark Heritage Days held an ecumenical service at the depot.[54] The Katy Depot was also home to the Missouri River Storytelling Festival that year, which was organized by local storyteller Karen Potts.[55] In 2010, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* announced the twentieth anniversary of the opening of the Katy Trail to the public.[56]

Whether on a warm spring day or during the cold days which accompany Christmas Traditions on Main Street, the Katy Depot welcomes visitors to Frontier Park. Archie Scott was right. The depot has a rich history. It is a symbol of the railroad, of days gone by when the roar of the locomotive and the noise of each car's wheels were common place. Today, it sits in Frontier Park with the other two symbols of St. Charles' railroads as a monument, St. Charles' monument to railroad history.

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[51] Robertson, "After Letting Off Steam, Council OKs Depot Fund," *St. Charles Post*, 21 October 1993

[52] Robertson, "Officials, Museum Group to Confer Over Train Depot," *St. Charles Post*, 10 October 1994

[53] Archie Scott, "Future of Katy Depot rests in city's hands," *St. Charles Journal*, 13 September 1996

[54] Esther Talbot Fenning, "Heritage Days celebrate Lewis and Clark ties," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 19 May 2005

[55] Fenning, "Conjurers of imagination will tell tales this weekend," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 October 2005

[56] Susan Weich, "Katy Trail turns 20, celebrates success," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 May 2010