



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour  
Choctaw Route Station  
1200 President Clinton Ave., Little Rock**

June 7, 2024

By Ashley Sides

Special thanks to: Nikolai DiPippa, Bob Gee



*The historic Choctaw Route Station  
(now Sturgis Hall at the Clinton School of Public Service)  
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2023*

## Welcome and Introduction

Hi! I'm Ashley Sides, preservation outreach coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to Sturgis Hall at the Clinton School of Public Service, or, as this building is historically known, the Choctaw Route Station. Today we're going to tell you the story of this former railroad depot.

First, I want to thank the Clinton School of Public Service for graciously allowing us to tour this building. Specifically, I'd like to thank Chief of Staff Nikolai DiPippa for helping me arrange this tour, and Bob Gee, who volunteers here, for familiarizing me with this building and its history as a station so I can share it with you. Both Mr. Gee and Mr. DiPippa are available for Q&A at the end of the tour.

## The Changing Railroad Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Arkansas

If you were a resident of Little Rock in 1898, and you had lived here for the past 40 years, you would have experienced the city's rapid growth and development in the years and decades after the Civil War. One factor that accelerated that development was the expansion of the railroad. The first railroad in Arkansas was the Memphis and Little Rock Railroad, which was begun before the war and completed in 1871. Other routes began to spring up around the state, and many of them connected through Little Rock. The first bridge across the Arkansas River between Little Rock and what is now North Little Rock was the Baring Cross Bridge, which was built for the Cairo and Fulton Railroad in 1873. In 1884 the Junction Bridge was constructed to provide an additional crossing for other railroad companies. By the end of the 19th century, there were railroads all across Arkansas.

Meanwhile, the old Memphis and Little Rock Railroad, whose track connected those two cities, had struggled with financial difficulties for years and had been reorganized several times. As the century drew to a close, that strategic route, now known as the Little Rock and Memphis Railroad, was ripe for a new buyer who could manage it better.

## Enter the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad

The Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad was an ambitious company looking to expand their rail network beyond their base in Indian Territory (now eastern Oklahoma) and open up new markets for the coal they mined there. In 1898, the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad purchased the Little Rock and Memphis at foreclosure. The next step was to connect this Arkansas line to their existing rails in Indian Territory. They created a subsidiary called the Choctaw and Memphis Railroad to operate and improve the old Little Rock and Memphis route, while the parent company constructed the new 166-mile section of track between Little Rock and the town of Howe in eastern Indian Territory. The line was completed in late 1899 and ran directly between Memphis, Tennessee and Weatherford in western Oklahoma Territory, running through the Arkansas Grand Prairie, Little Rock, the Ouachita Mountains, Indian Territory, and Oklahoma City in between.

The existing Little Rock and Memphis station that the Choctaw and Memphis acquired was in Argenta. From there, trains could enter Little Rock via the Baring Cross Bridge to Union Station or across the Junction Bridge. But the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf represented a powerful new rival to the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway, which was dominant in the area. The Iron Mountain controlled both river rail crossings, as well as Union Station, and it attempted to put up a barrier to the Choctaw and Memphis's entry into the market by refusing to allow them to use the Baring Cross or Junction Bridge.

Undeterred, the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf obtained permission to build a new railroad bridge across the Arkansas River on the east side of town, as well as new passenger and freight depots on the south side of the bridge in Little Rock. They would also build their own new belt line around the southern edge of Little Rock to bypass existing Iron Mountain tracks and facilities.

With a lot of work to do, the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf got started right away. They had acquired the Little Rock and Memphis in 1898. By the summer of 1899, they were well underway on their projects. And to support the development work they were doing, they published a monthly magazine during 1899 called *The Choctaw* to promote business along the route from Memphis to Weatherford, with features on towns in Arkansas newly added to the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf route, and lots of local business ads.

*The Choctaw* magazine included regular updates on the work in progress. The Choctaw and Memphis company was making improvements to the old Little Rock and Memphis route to the east, replacing old bridges and shoring up trackage along what had always been a swampy and flood-prone line. Meanwhile, its parent company built the river bridge in Little Rock—called the Choctaw Bridge—and laid new tracks connecting Little Rock to Indian Territory in the west.

## The Choctaw Route

The new tracks and bridges were completed by December 1899, and passenger and freight service began running between Memphis and Weatherford on December 10<sup>th</sup>. In other words, the Choctaw Route, as it was officially known, opened together with dawn of the twentieth century.

Now that the eastern route was joined to the main railroad, the Choctaw and Memphis was absorbed back into its parent company and the entire route was operated by the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad. The company also moved its headquarters and associated personnel from South McAlester, Indian Territory, to Little Rock.

But due to some delays caused by kinks in the construction material supply chain, the Little Rock depots were not ready yet. The freight depot was partially completed, but the passenger depot was still just a hole in the ground, the basement area being excavated at that time. Passengers boarded and disembarked from a temporary wooden depot just south of this station, while freight continued to be handled at the former Little Rock and Memphis yards in North Little Rock.

The new freight station finally opened on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1900, while work on the first floor of this passenger depot was still ongoing. Finally, in August 1900, the new Choctaw Route Station was ready to host travelers.

The freight station was opposite this passenger station just across the tracks to the east. There were 12 tracks in between them, and the freight station stood roughly where the Clinton Center is now.

These weren't just any old depots. The Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad invested in making them special. While more modest structures might have sufficed for a secondary stop along the line, Little Rock, as the new headquarters of this growing railroad company, warranted a grand station that would make a statement befitting its status. This passenger depot was the flagship building of the entire Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad line.

Toward the end of the tour, we'll step outside and look more closely at the architecture of building. But right now I'll briefly mention what made these depots stand out. Strangely, I actually have more information on the builders of the freight depot than I do of the passenger station, but I'm making the assumption that both were built by the same contractors and crew.

Now, the freight depot was less ornate than this passenger depot—as you might expect. But even there, the quality of workmanship that went into the structure was noteworthy. It included true arches with tapered brick voussoirs, precision bricklaying, with thin mortar joints around the bricks and quoins. The passenger depot took the artisanship to a higher level when you look at the ornamentation that we will discuss later.

The construction contractor was Charles W. Clark, president and owner of Clark Pressed Brick Company in Malvern. The plant produced 100,000 bricks per day using a dry press method to convert local clay into a strong, dense, non-porous brick with a smooth outer face. We can assume that's the source of the bricks we see in this building.

The bricklayers and stonemasons were African American craftsmen, the older ones of whom, according to recorded interviews in the 1930s, were freedmen, having been enslaved before the Civil War.

## A Bright Future?

If you thought the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad Company was looking well-positioned for success as the new century dawned, you'd be right. They had just connected two strategic railroad lines to bring access to Oklahoma coal and Arkansas timber, agriculture, and minerals to new markets. Part of their expansion had included a branch line down through Hot Springs and into Texas called the Little Rock and Hot Springs Western Railroad, and this was right as bauxite mining was beginning to take off in that area. They had just invested heavily in developing new infrastructure along the route—not only the new bridge, depots, and belt line trackage at Little Rock, but also the improvements to existing tracks and bridges on the old Little Rock and Memphis route to the east. The Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf was getting attention.

Sometimes that can come back to bite you.

## The Rock Island Line

A railroad out of Chicago but with routes extending into western states had just come under new management and was looking to aggressively expand their network. The Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad—commonly known as the Rock Island—acquired the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf through a hostile takeover in 1902. By 1904, the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad Company had been completely absorbed by the Rock Island Railroad. It had lasted in Arkansas barely five years—a victim of its own success—but in that short time it had made an impact with a long-lasting legacy. The Memphis–Little Rock–Oklahoma City track continued to be called “the Choctaw Route” for the duration of the Rock Island’s long operation. And of course, some of the Choctaw Route infrastructure remains today, most notably this depot and river bridge.

As part of the vast Rock Island Railroad, the Little Rock station thrived. The city now had two major multi-state rail systems running through it—the Iron Mountain (later Missouri Pacific) and the Rock Island. The Rock Island Railroad became one of the most extensive railroads in the country through most of the twentieth century.

The increased traffic meant that the needs of the railroad quickly outgrew the capacity of the freight depot. In 1911, the Rock Island opened a new freight station a couple of blocks away on 4<sup>th</sup> and Rector. The original freight station, only a decade old, was leased out to various companies over the following years. In the 1940s to 1960s, annexes and sheds were built onto it so that it was mostly enclosed and obscured from view. It was mostly forgotten and thus its preservation didn't factor into plans for the Clinton Center's construction in 2001.

Now, the Rock Island Railroad, as a familiar part of life for so many people, became such a cultural icon that it was the subject of a popular folk song. Have you heard the song “Rock Island Line”? It apparently originated in 1929 with the Rock Island Colored Booster Quartet at the Biddle Shops freight yard here in Little Rock. The Biddle Yard was on the belt line in the south of town. The song evolved and was recorded several times in the 1930s by folklorist and musicologist John Lomax on visits he made to Tucker and Cummins State Prison farms. A folk and blues singer named Huddie Ledbetter, AKA Lead Belly, accompanied Lomax at one of these trips, composed his own version of the song, and released several recordings of it in the 1940s. This helped to popularize it, and over the decades since it has been covered by dozens of artists including Johnny Cash (who performed it at Cummins), Woody Guthrie, Johnny Horton, Harry Belafonte, John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr (each separately), and many others, even on up into the twenty-first century. I’ll play a clip of it for you, that I got from the Library of Congress, from Lomax’s 1939 recording at Cummins State Farm, sung by inmates Joe Green, George Jones, C.A. Story, John Denny, Joe Battle, and Willie “Little Life” Johnson.

[Listen to the audio from the Library of Congress here:  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/lomaxbib000336/><sup>1</sup>]

There were several verses, and like a good folk song, different versions evolved.

## After the Rock Island’s Demise

But though generations of singers continued to sing about riding the Rock Island Line, the railroad ended passenger service in 1967. Times were changing, and the era of rail travel had given way to the automobile. The Choctaw Route Station was sold to the Arkansas Gazette. The Rock Island Railroad itself completely shut down in 1980. This part of town was in decline.

This building sat vacant for many years until 1990 when the Spaghetti Warehouse chain bought the old Choctaw Route Station, remodeled it, and opened a restaurant here. One feature of Spaghetti Warehouse restaurants is that they usually have a trolley car in restaurant that diners can choose to eat in. The Choctaw Route Spaghetti Warehouse apparently had an old red 1924 Cotton Belt Pullman train car parked on the tracks out back that you could eat your meal in. Many people still remember the Spaghetti Warehouse fondly, but it struggled to bring in enough customers. It closed in 1996.

The building then became home to the Edge nightclub for about a year. After that, the City of Little Rock bought it and used it briefly for the city’s summer meals program for youth. St. Andrews Church even worshiped here for several months from 1999 to 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> John and Ruby Lomax 1939 southern states recording trip (AFC 1939/001), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress

Meanwhile, the several-acre site on which the depot sits had been selected as the future home of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum, which began construction in 2001. The Clinton Foundation leased the Choctaw Route Station in 2002 and renovated it for the Clinton School of Public Service. Since the Roy and Christine Sturgis Charitable Trust provided the gift that funded the renovation, this building has been named Sturgis Hall. The Clinton School of Public Service opened in 2005, so they will be celebrating their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year.

## Station Tour

I want to walk you around the building and try to rewind the clock to try to imagine what this place was like as a train station. How did passengers experience this station in its railroad heyday? First, I'd like to take a quick poll. Did any of you ride the train from this station back in the day?

The lobby we're standing in was the main waiting room, at least for White people. Because this station's history took place in the first seven decades of the twentieth century, it was segregated.

As you can tell, the interior has been quite extensively remodeled to meet the purposes of its current occupants. But you can see historic details. If you look up, the pressed-tin ceiling is original. And the marble border around the bottom of the walls is also original.

Ahead of you to your left was the ticket office. The ticket counter for White people was here, facing the White lobby. The left wall of the ticket office had a window that opened into the Black waiting room beyond; that was the ticket counter for Black passengers.

Above, on the second floor, were administrative offices. This was the regional office for the railroad.

As we enter the hallway, the office space to your right was the Black waiting room. We'll pass through it in a minute.

The library here to your left used to be the station's restaurant. Yes, there was a restaurant here before the Spaghetti Warehouse. It was open to the public; you could eat here even if you weren't a passenger. In addition to the door off the hallway, it also had an entrance from the outside for people to walk in off the street. However, it didn't allow dining in for Black people. They had to use a take-out window here and eat their food in the waiting room.

The segregated entrance for Black travelers was at this side of the building.

Now, let's make our way through these offices—the space where the Black waiting room used to be—and out to the enclosed porch.

This was the back of the depot. It was not enclosed as it is now. The overhang was in place; in fact, this is the original. But this was an open platform to the trains. The north end was a shed for baggage carts.

Look toward the Clinton Center. Imagine the freight depot occupying the space roughly where the southern edge of the building is. There were twelve tracks between the depots. The two closest to us served the passenger station.

This is your chance to get a closer look at the pressed bricks that this depot was built out of.

Let's go back into the lobby and go to the hallway on our left (the south part of the building).

The classroom you see at the back of the building was another waiting room, this one for VIPs and handicapped passengers. At the back of the hallway, where we now have executive and staff offices, once had been the baggage storage area. And this break room used to be the railway mail service sorting room.

The Choctaw Route Station was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975, due to its significance in the history of transportation and its architecture. You've heard the history. Now let's step out front and take in the building's architectural beauty for a few minutes. Then we'll wrap up the tour.

## Architecture

As you can see, we're looking at a two-story, red pressed-brick building divided into three main bays plus two one-story wings at each end. Crowning the central bay is a brick parapet that says "The Choctaw Route."

You'll notice a historic Rock Island plaque adorning the façade. I don't believe it's the original, but they did hang on Rock Island stations and this depot probably had one like it.

Your eye is probably drawn to the entablature running across the top of the building. I want to read a description of it from the National Register of Historic Places nomination, written in 1974:



The most significant feature of the station is the exterior embellishment. The entire entablature of the upper storey is made of terra cotta. It is exceptionally ornate, exhibiting the influence of Louis Henry Sullivan in its floral and fruit embellishment of the cornice, soffit, and extended frieze. The projecting cornice is decorated at regular intervals with bouquets, and underneath, by muted brackets inlaid with acanthus leaves. The soffit is panelled with a floral ornament centered in each panel. A band of egg-and-dart ornamentation and dentils complete the cornice. The frieze has been widened until it incorporates the pedimented arches of the second storey windows. A continuous cornice band connects all of the window arches of the upper storey windows.

The enlarged frieze is exceptional in the use of terra cotta ribbon and draping fruit band and cartouches. Fruit wreaths with conical fruit filled baskets infill the pedimented arches of each upper storey window, complementing the ornate entablature. ...

Though railroad stations once covered the country, a large percentage of these structures have disappeared. The diminished importance of railroad traffic has resulted in the deterioration and/or destruction of many terminals. As the number of stations diminishes, the significance of those remaining increases. Arkansas still has a number of railroad stations, and the continued preservation of these stations is important to both the architectural and transportation history of the state.

... This turn-of-the-century railroad depot is one of the finest examples of railroad architecture in Arkansas.

I have one more tidbit about the history of this building that I want to share with you in conclusion. But before I do that and let you go, I want to ask if you have any questions for me or for Mr. DiPippa or Mr. Gee about this building.

## Conclusion

Okay, I saved one little historical nugget for last. In the 1990s, after the Spaghetti Warehouse left and this building was being used for all kinds of different purposes, one of the functions it served was as a workshop for the restoration of historic carousel horses. The old Over-the-Jumps Carousel, which had stood for decades at War Memorial Amusement Park, was being rescued and restored, and the Friends of the Carousel rented space in this building to repair and refurbish those old horses.

That carousel now stands at the Little Rock Zoo, restored in all its glory, and people can ride it again. It is 100 years old this year and is one-of-a-kind ... and we will be touring it and hearing

its history for our NEXT TOUR on September 6<sup>th</sup>! Hope you can join us. (The zoo will let you in for the tour for free.)

Thanks for coming! Have a great day.

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