

First Passenger Train Arrived in 1873

Clark Countians observed the dawn of a new era when the first train steamed into Arkadelphia. The Cairo & Fulton Railroad's completion to Arkadelphia in 1873 initiated a transportation revolution in the area and all of Arkansas. The railroad created new shipping and travel connections with the rest of the nation, thereby establishing Arkadelphia as a principal transportation hub in southwest Arkansas. The rail line later became a part of the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern line that ran between Missouri and Texas. Then, it became a part of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad, and even later, the Union-Pacific.

On the big day, people came to Arkadelphia from as far away as fifty to sixty miles to be a part of the arrival of the Cairo and Fulton's first passenger train. The special train consisted of a locomotive, tender, baggage car, and two coaches, all lavishly decorated with flags. The engine, named the "E Johnson," weighed about twenty-four tons. Those in attendance witnessed an event they would remember the rest of their lives. Some historians believe it to be one of the most significant local events ever covered by Arkadelphia's *Southern Standard* newspaper. The July 5, 1873, edition described the momentous occasion this way:

"Saturday last was the brightest day in the history of Arkadelphia. On that day the first train on the Cairo and Fulton Railroad crossed the bridge over the Ouachita River at this place, bringing a new era in the growth and prosperity of southwest Arkansas. At precisely 12 o'clock, the train crossed the bridge and was greeted by the boom of cannon and the glad shout of welcome by our overjoyed citizens. When the train came to a halt, the excursion party which came down from Little Rock began to disembark from the cars and we say it in all candor and sincerity, that we have never seen a collection of the same number of people on a similar occasion combining more respectability, intelligence, and solid worth, than came down to rejoice with us over the completion of an enterprise fraught with so much of interest to the future welfare of both places. While viewing this array of talent and respectability, we could but think that if those who have so unmercifully decried our poor, down-trodden state could see and converse with the company there assembled, they would be forced to acknowledge that they had done much injustice to her people and henceforth "Arkansas hoosier" instead of being a term of reproach would be the highest compliment that could be paid to a citizen of Arkansas.

"The dinner was furnished by Messrs. Leibert & Henderson and reflects great credit upon their energy and capacity for such occasions. It was well-cooked and in the most bountiful profusion.

"We were glad to meet many of our friends from the 'City of Roses.' Col. Morley, Chief Engineer, and Maj. Loughborough, Land Commissioner of the road, were also present and were of course the lions of the day. They were both loudly called for, but being men of deeds rather than words, they declined making speeches. While our people would have liked to have hears from them, they readily excused them under the circumstances, as their works are worth all the words they could utter in a lifetime. The energy and enterprise displayed by these gentlemen in the building of their road finds scarcely a parallel in the history of the building of railroads in this country. Less than five months ago work was actively commenced on the southern division of the road and now it is completed nearly seventy miles and cars are running daily to this place. And the work is first class, not being surpassed by any road in the country. We are told by those who have traveled over it that it runs as smooth as any of the older roads. The cars and locomotives are also new and first class. Some of the passenger cars especially, are as fine as we have ever seen on any road."

The Missouri-Pacific eventually constructed Arkadelphia's current railroad depot. Its design reflects the company's campaign to establish a corporate identity through the use of the Italianate/Mediterranean style of architecture for its passenger and freight depots. Because of this, it bears a great resemblance to other historic depots across the state. The structure was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

