

History of the Pere Marquette Depot

The Pere Marquette Railroad Company, at the time Michigan's largest railroad company, built the Bay City Pere Marquette Depot in 1904 during a period of expansion following the company's consolidation with several other railroad companies. Bay City was also in a period of expansion which had seen its height in the late nineteenth century when it was the third largest city in Michigan, following Detroit and Grand Rapids.

The Depot was constructed during a transitional period for Bay City. Incorporated as a city in 1865, Bay City quickly became a major lumber hub. Its location on the Saginaw River, close to Saginaw Bay, made it an ideal lumber processing center. The lumber industry boomed from 1870 to 1890, with 1882 representing a landmark year. A combination of factors caused the lumber industry to decline after the 1890s, but timber remained an important element in Bay City; the Aladdin kit home company had its headquarters in Bay City from 1906 to 1981. By the early 1900s, Bay City was shifting to a more industrialized economy, with important industries such as sugar beet processing, shipping and ship building, and various production factories shoring up its economy.

The railroad, meanwhile, had come to Bay City four decades earlier. The Congressional Land Act of June 3, 1856 initiated the distribution of millions of acres of land for railroad construction throughout the United States. The Michigan legislature received three and one half million acres, most of which were transferred to sixteen Michigan railroad companies over a period of thirty-three years. The Flint and Pere Marquette Railroad, later known simply as the Pere Marquette Railroad Company, received a total of 512,775 acres of this land before suspension of the Land Act by Congress in 1889. Established in 1863 with completion of its first rail line connecting Saginaw with Flint, the Flint and Pere Marquette RR used its Land Act property to extend a new line from Saginaw to Ludington in 1872. The Company then worked its way eastward to unite the undeveloped, lumber-rich Saginaw Valley area with other statewide rail systems.

With a solid reputation for its lumber resources and salt deposits, Bay City tried unsuccessfully to convince the Flint and Pere Marquette Railroad to extend its line northward from Flint. Undeterred, three Bay City leaders developed a plan to lay a separate line. The most prominent of the three was James Birney, a political and spiritual leader of early Bay City, who was instrumental in organizing the separation of Bay County from Saginaw County in 1858. His influence extended beyond Bay City, however. An ardent abolitionist, Birney was the presidential candidate of the Liberty Party in 1840 and 1844, and also served as Lieutenant Governor of Michigan. In 1863 Birney joined land speculator and merchant A. S. Munger and James Fraser, manager of the Saginaw Bay Lumber company, to organize the Bay City and East Saginaw Railroad Company.

In January of 1864, Governor Austin Blair supported passage of new legislation that would aid in the financing of local railroad companies such as that in Bay City. By February, the Michigan Legislature used its newly mandated powers to authorize Bay County to loan funds to the fledgling Bay City and East Saginaw Railroad Company. Bay County issued \$75,000 in bonds on September 1, 1867 for construction of a fourteen mile railroad from Bay City to Saginaw.

The Flint and Pere Marquette Railroad, previously uninterested in the spur line, now noted its strong regional potential.

On September 30, 1867, it purchased the Bay City and East Saginaw line, linked it as a branch of its own system, and guaranteed the principal and interest on the Bay County bonds. The first train reached Bay City on November 23, 1867, an event hailed by local historians as “one of the most important events in the city’s history.”

The last few decades of the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century were the heyday of rail transportation, and depot construction likewise boomed. In 1899-1900, the Flint and Pere Marquette consolidated with three other railroad companies to become the largest rail system in Michigan, the Pere Marquette Railroad Company. As the Saginaw Valley converted from a lumber-based economy to a diversified industrial-based economy, the Pere Marquette played a significant role in keeping Bay City’s new products available to its markets.

Beginning in the early 1900s, the first generation of depots was gradually replaced with larger and more technologically advanced buildings. Depot construction became more standardized during the late nineteenth century and certain characteristics, based on practical experience, became common. Depots were generally one story, with the longer side parallel to the tracks. A lack of stairs or raised entryways facilitated freight and baggage movement, and a trackside bay window gave the depot personnel a better view of incoming and outgoing traffic. Passengers were accommodated with large roof overhangs to protect them from the elements, and clock towers were added to help standardize times, as well as to demonstrate the efficiency of the railroad.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the Pere Marquette Company built several new passenger and freight depots. One of those was the Bay City depot. Designed by Saginaw architect William T. Cooper and constructed by local contractors Matthew Lamont and J. H. Tennant, the Bay City depot incorporated many of the typical features of contemporary depots in a style also characteristic of the time period. The design is representative of early twentieth century Arts and Crafts architecture, incorporating the horizontal emphasis and wide overhangs of the Prairie style with typical Mission details such as the tiled roof and watch tower. Not as resplendently high-style as other depots of an earlier time period, the depot’s exterior evidently did not impress the city aldermen or the local press when it opened in March of 1904. The Bay City Evening Times was faintly scornful, writing that “The exterior, with its tile roof, and odd surroundings, presents a quaint appearance and many will probably say upon looking at it from the street, that it is not good enough for this city...”

For the Pere Marquette Company, however, the depot’s exterior reflected its utilitarian function. Measuring 36 by 162 feet, the Depot was a rectangular, two-story red brick building with limestone trim. The exterior featured a random ashlar base made of Bay Port fieldstone from a Thumb-area quarry, rounded arch windows and doors on the first floor, and a hipped tile roof accented by hipped dormers and extended eaves.

The main (west) façade was oriented toward the railroad tracks and sidings and had a

broad passenger platform. A first floor canopy with clay tile roof and decorative ironwork brackets wrapped around the west and south elevations, ending at a Porte cochere at the passenger street entrance on the east elevation. A secondary canopy was located at the north end of the east elevation at the baggage room. The main entry on the track (west) elevation was centered under the 66 foot watch tower which featured decorative brickwork, an open promenade, and a tiled roof with exposed rafter ends. Also on the west façade was a bay window for track personnel to watch for approaching trains. The baggage room had sliding doors on both the east and west elevations for easy access to the interior.

While the exterior design was not impressive to the locals, the interior drew praise for its “comfort, convenience, and accommodation.” On the first floor, a two-story waiting room dominated the south half of the building. Mosaic marble tile covered the floor, while the walls were wainscoted with Italian white marble with contrasting deep-red painted frescoes above. An elongated octagonal ticket office constructed of quarter sawn oak was set into the bay window on the west side. Adjacent to the waiting room were a gentlemen’s smoking room, a ladies’ lounge, and adjacent toilet rooms, all “luxuriously furnished.” Beyond these was the staircase, centered in the tower, and the undecorated baggage room at the northern end of the building. The second floor provided offices and a vault for both the Pere Marquette Railroad and the Detroit and Mackinac Railroad, and featured wood wainscoting and painted plaster walls. The building was heated with steam heat and wired for electric light. The Bay City Evening Times believed it to be “the finest equipped, in these features, of any passenger depot in the state.”

The Pere Marquette Railroad Company (reincorporated as the Pere Marquette Railway in 1917) continued to operate the Bay City depot until 1937, when the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad Company acquired all of the Pere Marquette properties in Bay City. The C&O and Pere Marquette formally merged in 1947, but by this time rail travel was sharply declining with the post World War II boom in road transportation. By 1951, the Bay City Depot was boarded up and unused, and in August of 1951 the second story and attic were damaged by a fire accidentally set by children exploring the abandoned building. In 1953, the depot was “renovated” for use by the Greyhound Bus Company as a “modern” terminal. The tower above the roofline, the canopy, and the Porte cochere were removed, the clay tiles replaced with asphalt shingles, and the rails and sidings removed to make way for a concrete parking lot. Several windows were converted to door openings and vice versa. A second floor was inserted into the two-story waiting room, damaging the decorative frieze.

After the Greyhound Bus Company vacated the building in 1969, the former depot stayed empty and unused for 35 years, victimized by vandalism and a fire that further damaged the original waiting room. Periodically, private and public entities proposed adaptively reusing the depot, but none of the options were implemented. Proposals to demolish the depot, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, met with resistance from local residents, who wanted to see Bay City’s last remaining passenger train station reused.

In 2003, the Great Lakes Center Foundation purchased the depot with the intention of restoring it to house local non-profit tenants. Restoration of the depot is designed to adhere to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitating Historic Structures, and is scheduled to begin in the spring of 2006. The tower, canopy, and porte cochere will be recreated, door and window openings returned to their original configuration, and the two-story waiting room restored, complete with recreated ticket office. The remainder of the interior will be rehabilitated to provide office and support space, including an elevator and barrier-free restrooms.

Photographs:



Historic undated photo, West elevation



Historic undated photo, East elevation,



Historic undated photo, Ticket office interior

West elevation





East elevation

Source: Pere Marquette Depot Historic District Study Committee Report, Historic District Commission, City of Bay City Planning Department, 2006

Project description to restore the Pere Marquette Depot

The proposed project will both restore and rehabilitate the historic Pere Marquette Railroad Depot, restoring the exterior and significant interior spaces to their original appearance, and rehabilitating the balance of the interior to a compatible appearance and function, retaining as many key features of the original depot structure as possible.

Exterior work: The tower on the west elevation will be reconstructed to match the historic tower with a clay tile roof and free-standing columns on the upper level. The only alteration to the tower design from its original configuration will be the installation of mechanical louvers within the two northernmost recessed brick arches on the east elevation. A new clay tile roof will be installed to match the appearance of the historic roof, including general repairs to the flashing and venting dormers, and the installation of new, historically appropriate exterior gutters and downspouts. Damaged areas of the exterior masonry will be repointed using a historically appropriate mortar and the brick cleaned with non-destructive methods. Existing historic windows and doors will be reconditioned, and window and door replacement will be limited to those burned beyond salvage

or missing. Window and door openings that have been previously altered will be returned to their original configuration, with the exception of what is currently the central door on the east elevation (originally a window); this will remain a door. Replacement windows and doors will match the existing historic units in material and profile. The original awnings, canopy and porte-cochere, removed in the 1950's, will be reconstructed on the south, east and west elevations to match their original appearance and function, based on historic drawings, photos, and written descriptions. Reconstruction will include clay tile roofing, copper gutters, ornamental brackets, and slender cast-iron columns.

Interior work: The most significant historic interior spaces, the Waiting Room and Ticket Office, will be restored to match their original materials and appearance, based on historic photos and written descriptions. The central staircase will be restored to function as the only vertical staircase for all access and egress needs. The second floor offices will generally be restored to their original appearance. New plaster will be installed, and the wood floors, doors, transoms, wainscoting, and trim will be reconditioned. A section of the original second floor hallway will be opened up to meet contemporary office needs, but the general plan and delineation of the historic office use will be retained. The original large office at the south end of the second floor will be updated and finished as a Board Room, including contemporary audiovisual equipment, storage and display treatments.

The building's mechanical and utility systems will be entirely new.

Source: Section 106 review prepared by Quinn Evans Architects, Ilene Tyler, FAIA, March 2005