

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. Depot (1925) is a large masonry building in the Neo-Classical style. Composed of a two-story main block flanked by one-story wings, it stands between the River Road and the Mississippi River levee, directly across from the Old State Capitol building in downtown Baton Rouge. Although it has undergone alteration due to its adaptive reuse as a museum, the East Baton Rouge Parish building remains eligible for National Register listing.

The depot is constructed of red brick with limestone decorative elements. Its Classical features include:

- 1) rectangular massing. Although the main block contains two slightly projecting surfaces flanking a colonnade and suggesting pavilions, the overall appearance of the entire structure is that of a rectangular mass.
- 2) the above mentioned central colonnade, which is composed of single, engaged colossal stone Tuscan columns. Colossal brick pilasters are found on the original rear elevation (now an interior wall--see below).
- 3) an entablature encircling the main block. The entablature's banded architrave and cornice are composed of stone. Its brick frieze features stone plaques decorated by teas relief wreaths.
- 4) entablatures on the facades of both wings,
- 5) segmental arches with keystones above breezeways which connect the wings to the main block,
- 6) parapets on both the main block and the north wing. That on the main block is solid and features a large plaque inscribed with the railroad's name. The north wing's parapet is also solid, but its projecting and receding surfaces make it resemble a balustrade. Both parapets are surmounted by copings of limestone.
- 7) two sets of window surrounds which distinguish the openings in the slightly projecting pavilions. The surround of the upper window features shoulder molding. The highlight of each lower surround is a pair of scrolled brackets supporting a hood. The two surrounds are connected by a stone plaque. Stone sills distinguish all the other windows in the main block.
- 8) arched windows (now bricked in) creating arcades on the front and rear elevations of both wings, and
- 9) a stone watertable.

Other features of interest on the exterior include brick paneling between the windows of the upper and lower floors and decorative wheel-like metal devices located just below the stone capitals of the rear pilasters. These wheels mark the location of tie rods which help to hold the structure together.

The main block's original first floor plan contained separate waiting rooms and lounge facilities for white and black travelers. These spaces flanked a central ticket office which served both groups. A small newsstand was located adjacent to the ticket office. The north wing contained a kitchen and dining rooms for both races. The south wing housed freight and railway express offices. The main block's second floor contained a large general office on the south end of the building and a series of smaller single offices lining each side of a central corridor on the north end. Surviving

visible interior features include simple colossal pilasters in the waiting rooms and one set of grilled windows in the ticket office.

Changes to the floorplan, as well as some alterations on the exterior, were the result of a 1974-1976 renovation which converted the building into an art and science museum. The changes included:

- 1) the loss of all but one of the depot's accompanying sheds. An eighteen foot wide canopy which served as a train shed paralleled the west (rear) elevation of the depot. It was replaced by a small walled sculpture garden and a large, two story brick addition of modern design. A more narrow canopy standing north of the building and a freight shed on the south side were also demolished.
- 2) the alteration of many of the building's windows and doors. First, several doors on the main block's facade were converted into windows. Next, all of the arched windows on both the north and south wings were filled with brick, as previously mentioned. All of the surviving original and altered exterior openings on the building were then glazed with large panes of tinted glass. Unneeded doors and windows on the main block's rear elevation were filled with wooden inserts and at least one window was converted into a door.
- 3) the conversion of much of the building for use as exhibit and laboratory space. To accomplish this change, the first floor was reconfigured, with some rooms being subdivided and others having walls removed. In addition, some ceilings were lowered, the terrazzo floors were covered by carpet, and carpet-covered plywood panels were installed approximately two-thirds of the way up the walls to provide a mechanism for attaching exhibit materials. These panels cover terrazzo wainscots and the bottom portions of the pilasters lining the waiting room walls. On the second floor, some of the north-end offices were gutted to create gallery space, and those remaining were reconfigured and modernized to serve as offices for the museum staff.
- 4) the alteration of the wings and arched breezeways connecting them to the main block in order to make these spaces conform to the museum's needs. The north (restaurant) wing's interior was gutted to provide space for collections storage, while the interior of the south wing was gutted for conversion into an auditorium. A large glazed room serving as a river overlook was constructed above the south wing and was connected to the second story of the main block by a glazed barrel vault above the breezeway. As part of this wing's conversion, its brick parapet was removed. Both breezeways were glazed. That on the north serves as exhibit space while that on the south serves as the museum entrance. Attached to the south wing is an elevated walkway providing access to the river.

Although the alterations to the depot may seem extensive at first glance, the structure retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic role as a railroad depot and its status as a Neo-Classical landmark in downtown Baton Rouge. Except for the re-glazing of the windows and the conversion of some doors into windows, the facade of the main block looks just as it did in 1925. Because limestone lintels identical to those on the rest of the building were installed below the newly created windows, this change does not disrupt the rhythm of the main block's facade. Furthermore, the wings' arcades are still clearly visible despite their brick infill. Although the rear addition completely covers the original rear elevation, that wall was always secondary to the highly articulated facade. Furthermore, the original rear wall does survive and is visible from inside the addition. Although most of the train sheds are gone, one does survive to illustrate how these ancillary structures related to the depot. As a rare example of the once important railroad industry and the

phenomenon of the urban depot, and as a landmark example of the Neo-Classical style within downtown Baton Rouge, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. Depot is a prime candidate for National Register listing.

Non-contributing Elements:

Located within the train shed are five historic railroad cars brought to the site and restored in 1976. In consultation with the National Park Service, these are being counted as non-contributing elements for the purpose of this nomination. Future research in reference to their rarity and integrity may reveal that they independently meet the Register criteria as a collection of objects in an appropriate setting.

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| Significant dates | 1925 |
| Architect/Builder | Unknown |
| Criterion A & C | |

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. Depot is significant at the state level in the area of transportation history, both as a rare railroad resource and as an even more rare example of the phenomenon of the urban depot. The period of significance spans from 1925, the date of construction, to 1944, the fifty year cutoff for significance. The railroad continued to be a major force in Louisiana until at least the 1950s, and passenger service continued at this depot until 1971. The building is also being nominated at the local level in the area of architecture because of its status as a superior example of the Neo-Classical style within the Baton Rouge Central Business District.

State Significance--Transportation History

From the late-nineteenth century until the 1950s, the major means of transportation in the nation was by train. Three or four times faster than the steamboat which had previously been the workhorse of Louisiana's transportation industry, the railroad was also able to reach areas not served by navigable waterways. Some 5,000 miles of mainline trackage were built in Louisiana between about 1880 and 1910, opening sparsely populated areas to settlement and, in many cases, literally creating new towns. Besides being the link between individual towns and the outside world, the railroad was integral to the very economic existence of communities. Therefore, besides the seat of the government and the churches, the train depot was probably the most important building in any town through which the railroad passed.

Although the railroads were once served by numerous facilities such as depots, roundhouses, warehouses, and hotels, only a limited number of railroad resources survive in Louisiana today. Many of these are small, modest board and batten structures which are only locally important as reminders of the importance of the railroad in a particular town's history. However, the surviving urban depots of the period tell a broader story. They reflect the pride of the railroad company, the significant role which it played in the development of the state as a whole, and the status of certain cities as important railway centers. Recognizing these associations, the railroad companies took extra measures to ensure that their urban depots were among the grandest buildings in any community. Thus, these depots were large, multi-story, sophisticated buildings which were consistently articulated with the vocabulary of a recognized historical style of architecture. For example, New Orleans once had several railroad stations, among which were two monumental depots exhibiting classical styling. However, all have been demolished. Shreveport, another important railroad center, lost its grand, towered Romanesque station to fire in 1972. The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. Depot is one of only four urban depots (as defined above) extant in Louisiana. In addition, its Neo-Classical styling and monumental appearance make it the

grandest of the survivors. Thus, it is a rare and important symbol of the transportation industry, and of the importance of the urban depot, in Louisiana.

Local Significance--Architecture

The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Company Depot is locally significant in the area of architecture because it is a superior example of the Neo-Classical style within the Central Business District of Baton Rouge.

Although the official founding date of the community is recognized as 1719, downtown Baton Rouge has retained only a relatively small number of historic buildings with their integrity intact. This situation is due largely to the fact that the city remained prosperous after the Depression and into the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, it suffered considerable alteration and demolition. The extent of this loss is documented in old photographs, oral accounts, and Sanborn maps. The Architectural and Historical Survey of Downtown Baton Rouge, completed in 1984, also confirms these losses. It identifies only 124 surviving buildings 50 years of age or older within the commercial district, and almost half of this number are residences. Of the historic commercial and institutional buildings which remain, most are unstyled c. 1890 - c. 1940 vernacular buildings, many of which have been significantly altered. In addition, the Central Business District also contains a number of new buildings, parking lots, and vacant lots where older buildings once stood.

Against this background, the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad Co. Depot is clearly a significant landmark. Consummate classical style articulation is relatively rare in downtown Baton Rouge. Although buildings with vestiges of the Neo-Classical taste can be found, these examples tend to have only sparingly applied details such as pilasters used for accent. Only four buildings are fully articulated examples of the style. With its monumental size, its grand central colonnade, and its full entablature with surmounting parapet, the depot ranks as one of the city's two finest Neo-Classical structures. The other, the Old Louisiana Governor's Mansion, has previously been listed on the National Register.

Historical Note

As is the case in many communities, the railroads serving Baton Rouge have undergone a series of name changes over the years. The first line, the New Orleans & Mississippi Valley, reached the city in 1883. The next year its name changed to the Louisville, New Orleans & Texas. This company was acquired by the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad in 1893. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps show that the building under consideration was the third depot to be constructed within the railroad reservation situated on the levee at the foot of North Blvd., and was the second to be erected on this exact site. The Yazoo & Mississippi Valley was eventually acquired by the Illinois Central Railroad system. The depot is now owned by the city and houses the Louisiana Arts and Science Center.

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