

Texas & Pacific Railway Depot

An African American Experience

National Park Service
U. S. Department of Interior
Cane River Creole
National Historical Park



Texas & Pacific Railway Depot. NPS Photo.

An Overview

The Texas & Pacific Railway Depot, completed in 1927, stands as one of the last remaining segregated buildings in the State of Louisiana. Separate entrances for “White” and “Colored” passengers led to two waiting rooms segregated by race and marked by different building materials. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, passenger rail service ended in Natchitoches, and the depot was never integrated. It was abandoned by 1982 and sat empty until 2023.

Rail Service In Natchitoches

The Natchitoches Railway Company, began operating the first rail service in the region in December 1887. Locally called the “Tap Line,” service was limited to a 12-mile route from Natchitoches to Cypress. By 1901, the Texas and Pacific Railway purchased the Tap Line and connected it to the broader regional rail network. Tracks were laid to Shreveport, leading to an increase in travelers and a need for a new passenger depot in town. City officials chose architect F. G. Shaw of Dallas, Texas as the designer who prepared several plans and presented them to the Texas and Pacific Railway

President J.L. Lancaster. Lancaster selected a Spanish design in which the beams and windows in the main waiting room were influenced from the master’s cabin of Christopher Columbus’s ship, the Santa Maria. In addition, interior chandeliers were designed after the hilt of the sword worn by St. Denis, the French founder of Natchitoches, in honor of his Spanish wife. The construction of the depot took six months to complete and cost \$100,000 to build. The structure was dedicated on June 20, 1927 with a series of events hosted by the Natchitoches Chamber of Commerce.

World War II & The Great Migration

By World War II, the depot was the hub for young soldiers departing the area to serve their country. Families gathered at the depot to send off their relatives and eagerly awaited soldiers’ return from war. However, not everyone returned alive, and remains of loved ones in caskets were shipped via rail to the depot to be claimed by family members prior to burial.

World War II increased the need for factory workers to assist the war effort, fueling the second wave of the Great Migration, the movement of six million African Americans out of the rural South to urban areas to the North and West. As mechanized agriculture displaced day laborers, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers from plantations, hundreds of Black families moved from the cotton fields of Natchitoches Parish seeking new job opportunities elsewhere. One resident recalled, “Our mothers went ahead and got jobs [in San Francisco] and sent for us children - six of us...there were three or four generations of us who got on the train at the Natchitoches depot...”



Edward Ward Jr. in his father's arms outside a Texas air force barracks.
Credit: Edward Ward Jr.



View of "Colored" Waiting Room from the Ticket Booth. NPS Photo.

The Turning Tide

The civil rights movement began in the late 1940s as African American World War II veterans returned home with unique perspectives on life and liberty and heightened expectations on equality in the United States. By the 1960s, the modern civil rights movement was in full swing as people from all walks of life called to end racial discrimination.

A Role Within Civil Rights

Nationwide and in Natchitoches, the civil rights movement consisted of local campaigns assisted by national organizations. Several African American residents recall hand delivering letters to the depot just before midnight, so the mail would be placed directly on the train and delivered to its destination without going "through local hands."

Numerous letters to the the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were delivered this way, urging national Civil Rights leaders to assist efforts in Natchitoches, particularly on efforts to integrate

the Northwestern State College (now Northwestern State University). Repeated correspondence from local leader, Dr. E. A. Johnson resulted in then-NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall visiting the area. Marshall arrived at the depot and stayed at Johnson's house, which was a repeated target for violence. Older Black residents can still recall crosses buning in Johnson's yard at 822 Fifth Street.

Ben D. Johnson was another prominent Natchitoches Civil Rights leader. His campaign for equality brought him to the attention of Nelson Mandela and U.S. President Bill Clinton.

Separate but Unequal

Replica sign hangs over the segregated entrance of the "Colored" waiting room. NPS Photo.



Printed on recycled paper with soybased inks.

The depot was built during the height of the Jim Crow era, where gains made by African Americans after the Civil War were reversed. The era (1870s-1960s) led to racial segregation laws, which allowed the depot to be physically divided into "White" and "Colored" sections with separate entrances. These laws continued to be enforced until 1965, though total desegregation of facilities in the South took many years to be fully realized. Natchitoches Parish did not fully desegregate until the early 1970s.

The building is architecturally significant because it is one of the few buildings in Louisiana in which the architecture of segregation can still be clearly seen. White residents were afforded a highly ornate waiting room with massive carved wood beams and wood corbels, while African American residents had access to a much smaller room with lower ceiling and simpler décor. Instead of wood, cheaper horsehair and plaster corbels were placed in the the "Colored" waiting room.

The two waiting rooms were separated by a brick wall with the ticket booth centrally located to serve both sets of clients. This wall of separation and the disparity between the two waiting rooms are still visible today.

During the National Park Service rehabilitation, the segregated floorplan was retained as an important character-defining feature of the building. Replica "White" and "Colored" signs were also reproduced to hang on the interior doors. The signs are replicas of painted signs that marked each exterior door on the depot through the 1960s. Retaining the original segregated floorplan and rehanging the replica signs were done after much discussion and consultation with the African American community surrounding the depot. Both serve as a vivid reminder of how much progress has been made in the realm of Civil Rights.