The Depots
Gateways to the Gate City

In 1833, in the north Georgia wilderness, an engineer drove a stake into the ground to mark the location of a railroad terminus. It is a safe bet that the men who fixed the point marking the end of a railroad line that would link Georgia to America's growing western frontier had no idea that they were also fixing the point around which would grow the *City of Atlanta*. Unlike most of the country's major cities fixed as seaports or along major waterways, Atlanta, in the middle of mountain wilderness, would become not a river town but one of America's first railroad towns.

Pre-Civil War Union Depot
Image via Library of Congress

As one of his first duties, the Western & Atlantic Railroad's Chief Engineer constructed a wooden, open-aired platform at the terminus site to receive trains from lines that had yet to be completed. Adjacent to the platform, he built the terminus point's first 2-story building.

That platform and the area around it would become Atlanta's first train depot, *Union Depot*. Affectionately referred to by locals as "The Car Shed," *Union Depot* could accommodate several trains a day. More importantly, the ability to transport large amounts of freight and the capacity to efficiently transport people gave the growing city of Atlanta a significant business advantage over its competitors. There is no doubt that the city's railroad infrastructure contributed significantly to Atlanta being named the capital city of the State of Georgia.

There is also no doubt that Atlanta's system of railroads placed the city directly in the crosshairs of Union troops during the Civil War. And when Sherman's army at last occupied Atlanta, it was the railroads that were marked first for destruction. Under Sherman's watchful eye, aided by a retreating Confederate army, Atlanta's beloved "Car Shed" was reduced to rubble and its iron tracks, torn-up, heated over fires and wrapped around trees. . . Sherman's Neckties.

Union Depot ruins, ca. 1864
Image via Wikimedia Commons

Atlanta's phenomenal, pre-Civil War growth had proven the railroad's value to the city, and, after the war, Atlanta rapidly rebuilt the city's railroad system and oversaw the completion of a larger, more modern train depot with a greater capacity for handling train traffic. The city would christen the new depot. . . *Union Station*.

For the next several decades, Atlanta's *Union Station* would be the focal point for almost every event of any significance in the city's history. From the beginning of parades to the end of funerals, *Union Station* was usually the first or last place Atlanta's visitors passed through.

1871 Union Station
Image via Wikimedia Commons

It was located near what is now Underground Atlanta, along Wall Street, between Pryor Street and Central Avenue.

Atlanta's trains often shared the same spaces with pedestrians and, eventually, motor vehicles. This made reaching a train something of a treacherous experience. By the early twentieth century, *Union Station* was struggling to keep up with the increasing rail traffic in Atlanta, and plans were made for a second station in the city's core.

In 1905, a larger train depot – known as *Terminal Station* – opened. Designed by P. Thornton Marye – who would later design the Fox Theatre – *Terminal Station* was located at Mitchell Street and the current Ted Turner Drive, along the area now known as The Gulch. *Terminal Station* was designed in the Renaissance Revival style, its façade marked by a pair of decorative towers that stood until a 1947 renovation. By the 1920s, this second depot would be serving more than 80 trains per day.

Terminal Station
Image via eBay

In 1930, the *Union Station* that had stood since 1871 was replaced by another train terminal of the same name. This station was located a few blocks from its predecessors, between Forsyth Street and the current-Ted Turner Drive, just across The Gulch from *Terminal Station*. Like its predecessors, this train depot was smaller than Terminal Station, and less ornate.

1930 Union Station
Image via Wikimedia Commons

By the late 1960s, times had changed for Atlanta and its citizens and the writing, as they say, was on the wall. With the growth of America's interstate highway system and an even faster-growing interest in air travel, the days of the Atlanta's grand train depots was coming to an end.

By the end of 1970, both *Union Station* and *Terminal Station* had closed. Terminal Station – which had served rail passengers for more than six decades – would be razed the next year. Today, the Richard B. Russell Federal Building stands on the site. Union Station would be demolished later that decade.

These days, for a city that was built on rail business that accommodated at its peak over 350 trains a day, remnants of the industry are few and far between in downtown Atlanta. The tracks are still there. . . some of them. Only now, they ferry mostly goods and supplies through the city.

One of the last remaining elements of the rail center that once populated downtown Atlanta was called the Interlocking Tower. Constructed in 1905, the small, two-story brick building –

built in a style reflecting that of *Terminal Station* – guided trains through busy junctions for decades. In 2018, it was completely demolished, leaving no sign that it had even existed.

Since the closure of the *Union* and *Terminal Stations*, Atlanta's lone passenger train terminal has been located a little over three miles north of downtown at Peachtree Station. The legions of trains that once passed through the city everyday are down to two. And the memory of Atlanta's train depots, once the center of all city activities, has all but faded into the files of history.

Takeaways: 1. **Atlanta got its start as a railroad center**
2. **Railroad depots were central to downtown life until mid-20th century**
3. **As cars and plane grew popular, rail traffic in Atlanta decreased.**
4. **Gulch-area depots – and associated structures – were razed.**
5. **Little remains of Atlanta's past as a railroad hub.**