

Mobile & Ohio Railroad Depot
Trenton, Gibson County, TN
Historic Preservation Assessment



Dr. Carroll Van West
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation
August 14, 2024



Background

In March 2024, Eric Egbert of the Gibson County Historical Society contacted the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, due to a recommendation from Steve McDaniel of Parkers Crossroads, Tennessee. Mr. Egbert wanted to schedule a site visit and the development of a historic preservation plan for the Mobile & Ohion Railroad Depot in Trenton. The society does not presently own the property but has entered into discussions with the West Tennessee Railroad about its acquisition. Mr. Egbert and Dr. Carroll Van West discussed the possibilities of such a project and Egbert took the news to his fellow historical society members. In July, Dr. West briefly joined a meeting of the Gibson County Historical Society and discussed the possible project and the need for owner permission to visit the property. Everyone was in agreement and a site visit took place on August 12, 2024, which involved members of the Gibson County Historical Society, Gibson County Commissioner John Blankenship, Mayor Tony Burris of Trenton, and representatives of the West Tennessee Railroad. This report is based on material provided by the Gibson County Historical Society, the author's own research, and comments and observations made during the site visit.


Why the Trenton Depot Matters


The Mobile & Ohio Depot in Trenton is the town's most important building from its 150 years as a railroad town in central West Tennessee. Making this place the location of the West Tennessee Civil War and Railway Museum is a logical next step in the property's history. The 1850s construction of the Mobile & Ohio Railroad opened up the interior of West Tennessee to new town development and a boom in its agricultural markets. The presence of the tracks and depot made the town a strategic location in the American Civil War and the site of the Battle of Trenton in December 1862.

FIGHTING FOR TRENTON

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Raid on the Depot






FOREST'S FIRST WEST TENNESSEE RAID


Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest led his cavalry brigade on a raid through West Tennessee, Dec. 15, 1862-Jan. 1, 1863. Anticipating Johnson and moving Gen. Hiram S. Critch's route line between Columbus, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, Forrest crossed the Tennessee River at Clarksville, crossed the Ohio River at Shiloh, and moved on to Memphis, capturing Trenton and Union City, and caught his supply line at Nashville. He raided back through Tennessee, crossed the Ohio River at Clarksville, and crossed the Tennessee River at Clarksville, and crossed the Ohio River at Clarksville.

As Confederate Gen. Nathan B. Forrest's cavalry brigade approached Trenton in December 1862, Union Col. Jacob Fry prepared to meet the attack. Although Fry had fortified the high ground overlooking the town, he received orders to transfer his 500 men to Jackson. This left him with 250 "convalescents, stragglers, fugitives, and other soldiers"—only enough to defend the Mobile and Ohio Railroad depot, which he barricaded with cotton bales. On December 20, he stationed 25




Forrest's First West Tennessee Raid, Dec. 15, 1862-Jan. 1, 1863

sharpshooters in a brick building across the street behind a parapet on the roof, and 6 more in the windows of another brick building. Others were posted in a nearby "stockade." When Forrest's men rode into town at 3:00 that afternoon, the Federals opened fire from the buildings and other positions. The Confederates then moved out of range and surrounded the Union position, shelling it from the earthworks that Fry had constructed. Fry decided to surrender, as Forrest "could have leveled the stockade, depot, and all in thirty minutes, and probably killed and wounded a large portion of our men, while we could have done them no damage, being armed only with old guns, without bayonets, and therefore unable to make a charge."



original



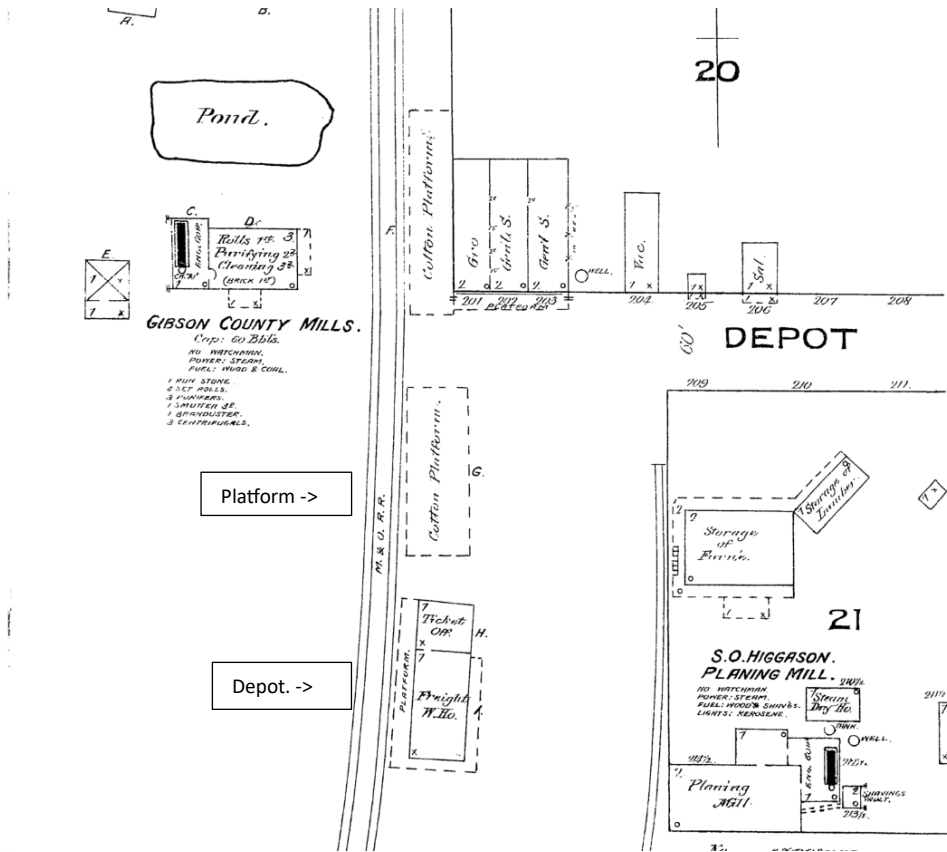
"Rail-Road Station at Trenton, Tenn." Harper's Weekly, September 13, 1862

Forrest reported only two men killed and seven wounded. He claimed that the Federals lost two killed and seven hundred prisoners. The Confederates captured military stores, which they destroyed, as well as several hundred cavalry horses. Forrest took those that were in good condition and gave the rest to the town's residents. The next morning, he paroled all the prisoners and rode on toward Union City.

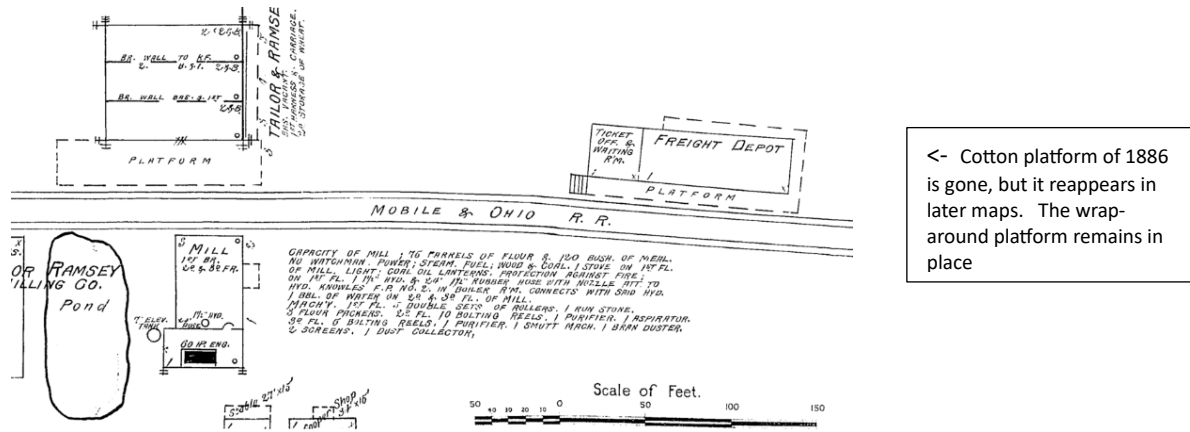
The railroad rebuilt after the Civil War and played an important role in the town's recovery for the next two generations, especially as cotton gin companies and cotton seed oil companies began to build facilities along the line. In 1911, the Mobile & Ohio decided to build a new combination passenger station in Trenton, a building that would combine both passenger and freight activities in a single building. The railroad began preparatory work in September 1911. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported: "This depot is to be one of the most modern designs and add greatly to the general appearance of approaches to the city. The house track will be run to the east of the buildings, thereby giving passengers free access to trains. This is an improvement that Trenton has been looking forward to for some time."¹ By mid-February 1912, the Memphis newspaper reported that work on the depot had begun "in earnest this week. The Mobile and Ohio Company have a large crew of hands at work clearing away the old cotton and freight platforms and lowering the old building, which will be used as a freight house."

¹ "New Depot at Trenton," September 20, 1911.

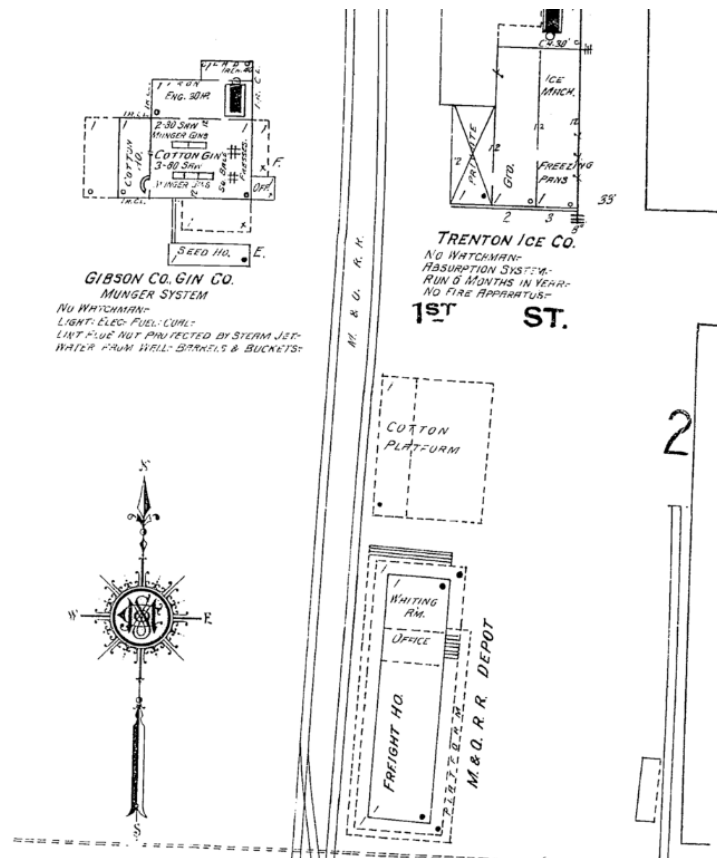
The Sanborn fire insurance maps from Trenton shed light on that newspaper account. The 1886 map shows the cotton platform and platforms surrounding a small building with a ticket office and freight section. The building and platforms remain in place through the 1909 Sanborn map. The “lowering” of the “old building” **may** refer to fact that the post-Civil War freight section was kept as part of the new construction.



Source: July 1886 Sanborn Map, Trenton, TN



Source: September 1891 Sanborn Map

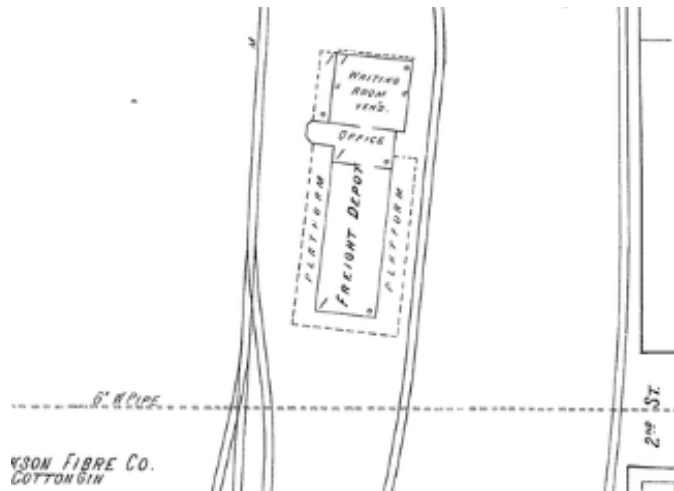


Source: December 1909 Sanborn map

The February 15, 1912 account in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* goes on to report that “The plans contemplate a new and large pressed brick passenger department and offices. The trackage has been completely changed to suit the location of the new depot, which, when finished, will probably be better than that of an yother [sic] town of similar size along this [rail]road.”² An early April 1912 *Commercial Appeal* report has two important pieces of information: the work is almost and done and should be completed “in about three weeks,” or late April, and, “The public minded citizens of the town contributed quite liberally in order to have the depot made thoroughly modern in all its appointments.” In other words, local residents contributed money so that the new station could be built.³ The February 2015 Sanborn map shows the 1912 depot and the new track alignment, which had passenger trains arriving and leaving from the east side of the depot, another goal for local officials and residents since people would approach the depot from the east. The “lowering” of the freight section appears to mean lowering the entrance from a platform level to ground level. Is that interpretation correct, it may mean that the freight section is older, dating at least to 1886, if not earlier.

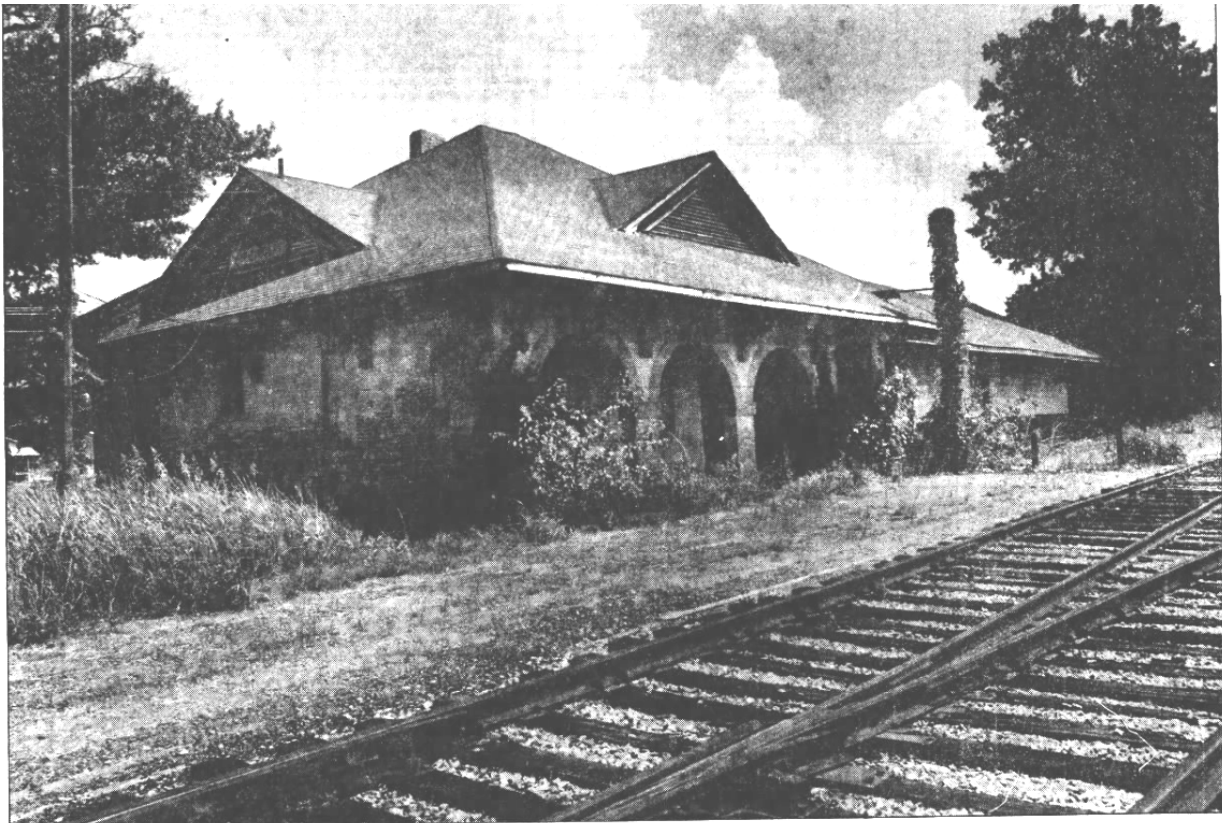
² “Build the Trenton Depot,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 15, 1912.

³ “Trenton Builds Depot,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1912.



Source: February 1915 Sanborn Map

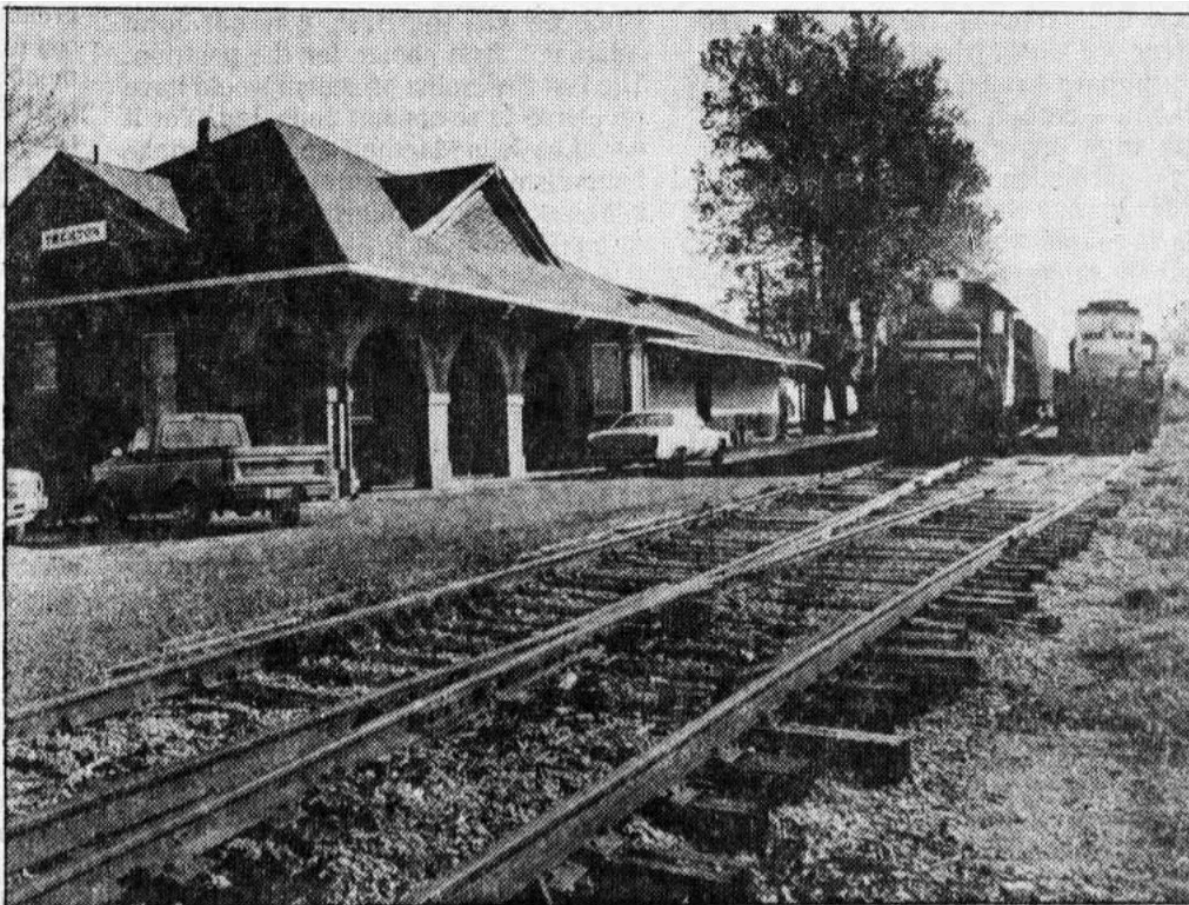
The Trenton depot served passenger traffic for the next 40 years, into the 1950s; an exact date for when passenger service ended at Trenton has not been identified. Once passenger service ended, and the railroad itself closed in 1972, the depot went into a period of decline. On September 1, 1980, the *Jackson Sun* featured photos of the shuttered depot in a story about the end of the railroad era in the region, showing how foliage had grown around the building and how windows had been broken.



Once buzzing with activity, the old railroad depot in Trenton lies silently next to the tracks.

Source: *Jackson Sun*, September 1, 1980

Within four years, however, the fortunes of the Trenton depot changed drastically when the Illinois Central Railroad (which by that time owned the tracks) sold a 26-mile-long section, from Kenton to Humboldt, to the newly formed Gibson County Rail Authority to keep the trains moving. The authority contracted with a New Jersey-based short line train operator to refurbish the line and its facilities over the next two years. Part of those improvements took place at the Trenton depot, which served as an office and repair station for the West Tennessee Railroad (see image below). The West Tennessee Railroad ended operations at the depot c. 2002 but still owns the property at the time of this report.⁴



Source: Jackson Sun, November 22, 1984

⁴ Bob Lewis, "Back on track," *Jackson Sun*, November 22, 1984.

Preservation Priorities



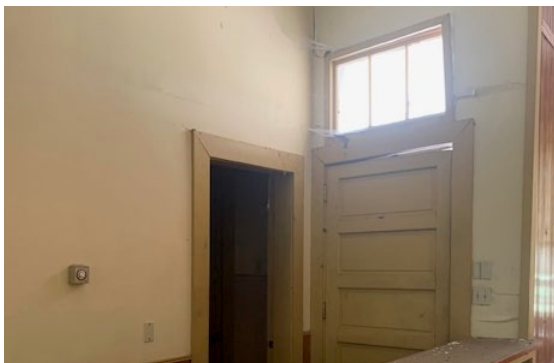
Considering its lack of use over the last 20 years, the depot is in fairly good condition. Once you secure control of the building, we recommend that you **first** take steps to tarp or temporarily repair holes in the roof.



Water damage has not only undermined the ceiling but has poured into the floor causing extensive damage to the under-flooring and perhaps the foundation.



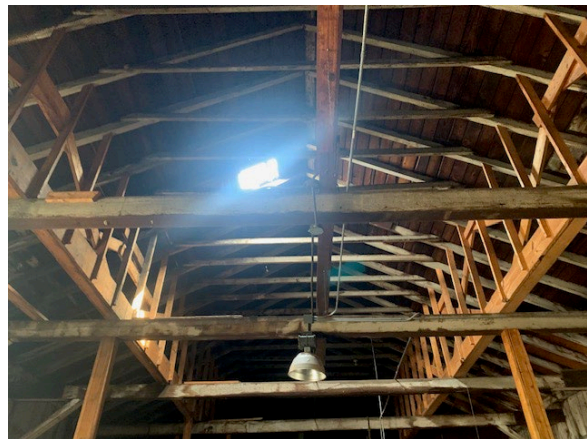
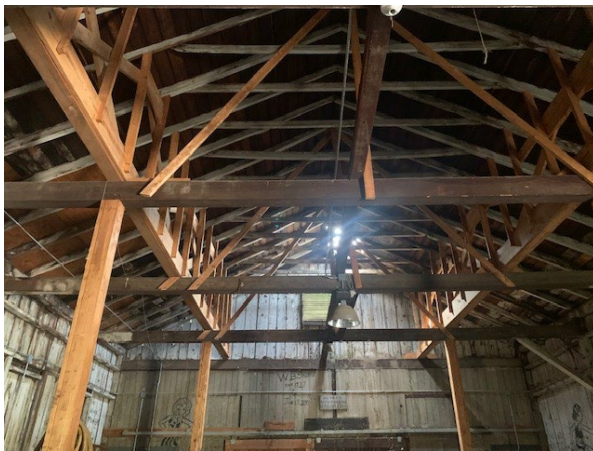
<- Note the tilting of the floor.



<- Note how the door frame and transom are out of line, creating a gap in the door. The floor is failing here, and there may be a significant foundation issue. This is near where the new brick section of 1912 was added to the earlier freight building, so it could be a foundation issue linked to the original construction of 1911-1912.



<- Water damaged area,
flooring is unstable.



Holes in the roof and gable-end of the freight section are particularly problematic due to the all wood interior. Note also where the West Tennessee Railroad inserted the newer wood beams to buttress the existing historic fabric. A structural engineer can help you with load-bearing assessment of the flooring, which is probably a newer flooring laid during the 1911-1912 construction of the depot. As in the brick passenger and office section, the foundation needs to be evaluated and added support may be needed.

You will want to retain as much of the historic flooring as possible, and many floorboards appeared to be in fair to good condition. The freight section should be designed to carry heavy weight; a logical conversion for this large open space would be a room for performances, lectures, and public meetings, and could possibly generate rental income for the historical society.

Considerable thought and care should occur as you plan to treat the walls. The artwork from the 1920s and 1930s will be of considerable interest to a wide audience, and of particular interests to those who study southern folk art. I will return to this theme later in the report.

After addressing the holes in the roof, your **second** step is to effectively close wall openings and broken windows. Placing plywood over broken windows will keep

vandals from destroying the actual window frames and keep broken glass to a minimum. Currently the broken glass both on the exterior and interior is a safety hazard.



There is a broken pane in the window underneath the arch, but the window frame is intact. You will want to protect that.



<- Here the window frame has been broken so a person could access the interior. To guard against vandalism, windows and doors may need to be covered with plywood to keep people out of the building.

The **third** step is to clear foliage away from the north and east elevations of the building. The thick growth of bushes may encourage people to break-in, but my major concern is how the foliage taps moisture against brick and wood, which can encourage the development of mold since the exterior surfaces stay damp.



Keeping the large evergreen bushes since they were part of the depot's historic landscaping makes sense, but they need to be at least heavily trimmed to keep them off of the building.



Note roof damage below

Remove the vines from the wall.

Interior Observations

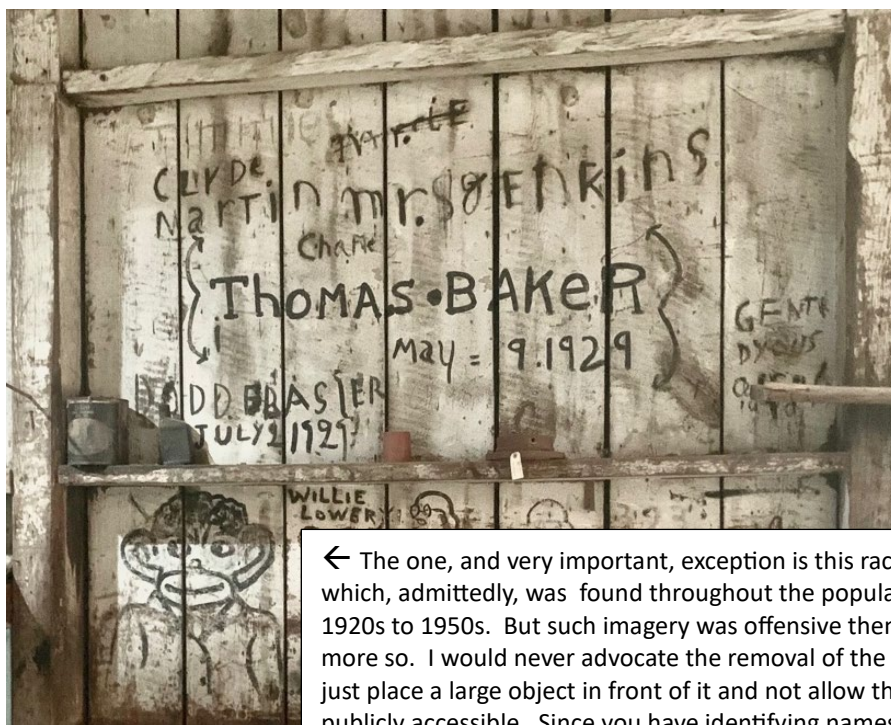
The freight room may be the oldest section of the building, since the newspaper accounts speak of “lowering” and using the existing freight room from the late 19th century. If West Tennessee Railroad transfers the building to you, I would assume that they will remove the machinery and junk in the building. If not that would be the first task, to clean up the space so that the extent of damage is apparent.

Clearly the interior painting is very much worth keeping, and keeping as much of it as possible. The quality and personal character of the drawings are unique—I really have never seen anything like it before in a train depot, and then many are dated, so you know when the work happened. Most of the wall boards appear to be in fair to good condition. If some must be replaced, you will want to photo document what the walls looked like before repair.





In talking with art conservators, they emphasized that in the future, you will want to control the amount of light on the drawings, limiting it as much as possible. Next, you will want to mount plexiglass panels that will protect the drawings from touching, rubbing, or someone adding to them. But everyone agreed. Keep the drawings available for the public to see—many visitors will come just to see these images.



The scales are another restored at an approx

← The one, and very important, exception is this racial stereotype, which, admittedly, was found throughout the popular culture of the 1920s to 1950s. But such imagery was offensive then, and now even more so. I would never advocate the removal of the drawing. I would just place a large object in front of it and not allow the drawing to be publicly accessible. Since you have identifying names around it, what if descendants came to the building and encountered that?

id

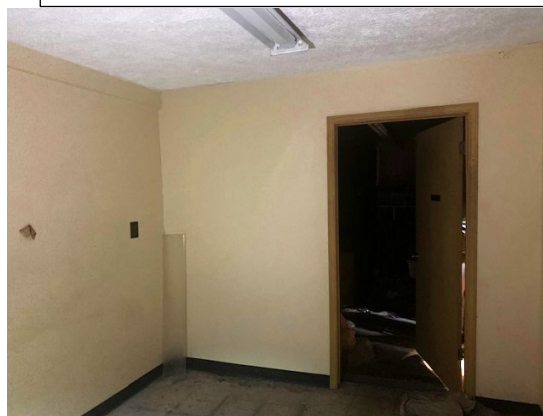


Between the freight section and the ticket office are several small spaces, used for restrooms, storage, and perhaps even mail sorting. The restrooms for the freight area will need to be upgraded and made handicap-accessible. The other rooms can be used for storage—I see no interpretive needs for those rooms.

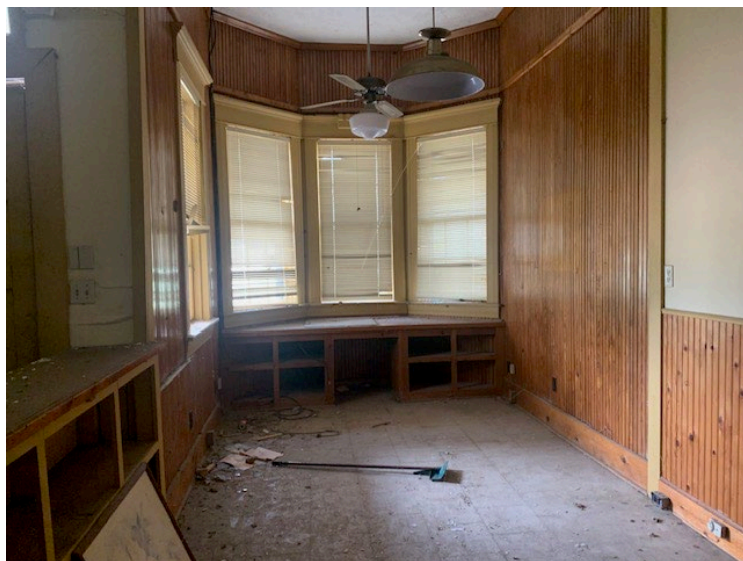


← This sorting area has its intact beaded-board walls

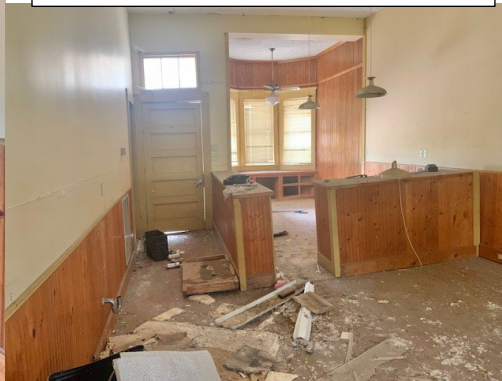
This room was refinished into an office space, and could stay that way.



The ticket office, as discussed earlier, appears to need substantial repairs, even though the room was partially renovated during the late 20th century. This room, with its direct connections train travel, may be the best location for exhibits on the history of the depot, people who worked there, and the general history of the Mobile & Ohio, the Gulf, Mobile, & Ohio, and the West Tennessee Railroad.



If the door below is your primary entrance for the museum, telling the history of the building and railroad here makes sense.



The interconnected white waiting rooms—remember the train depot would have had separate white and black sections due to legal segregation in 1912—are in solid condition, and contain such architectural defining fetures as the five-panel double doors and transoms. Also you see where wood wainscoting once existed, as the West Tennessee Railroad replaced the wainscoting in central waiting room. This two-room section is perfect for general history of railroads in West Tennessee. There also are restrooms in each room, probably one for men and one for women initially.





A vinyl floor was placed over the wooden floor and the original beaded board walls were replaced by drywall, c. 1984.



The north waiting room is in good condition, with water damage noted in the upper corner by the restroom. The wainscoting was removed and a vinyl floor laid, c. 1984.



This view from the north waiting room into the central waiting room show the historic five-paneled double doors, a feature you should retain in your museum planning.



The restroom in the central waiting area would need an assessment of handicap accessibility and may need alterations before placed into public use.

The northeast room, at the “back” of the building, was the segregated black waiting room. It is one large space, with two small restrooms installed together in the center of the interior wall. It has a separate entrance from the exterior. This large room is in good condition and few changes have occurred since its original construction. The installation of vinyl flooring came c. 1984. This large open space may be ideal for the story of the West Tennessee Raid of 1862 and the Battle of Trenton. It also could be used to discuss emancipation and the establishing of black institutions such as churches and schools in the years after the Civil War. The railroads meant many things to the people of the region.





Your preliminary plan for the West Tennessee Civil War and Railway Museum discusses the need for a multi-media approach and a strong education focus. The four major spaces of the passenger station (the ticket office, the two white waiting rooms, and the black waiting room) gives you space and flexibility to meet those goals. The freight section would allow you the opportunity to meet the community center functions that you outline in the planning document.

Funding Sources

Once you have obtained ownership of the building, you will want to consider listing the depot in the National Register of Historic Places. The Tennessee Historical Commission administers the program. <https://www.tn.gov/historicalcommission/federal-programs/national-register>

You do not have to have the depot listed in the National Register to receive grant monies—it just makes you more competitive, especially for certain state and federal programs.

Tennessee Department of Tourism

- **Tourism Enhancement Grant** – Tourism is one of Tennessee’s most important economic drivers. The Tourism Enhancement Grant is designed to help Tennessee communities strengthen their tourism assets with the goal of increasing the economic impact of tourism in a particular place. Repair to historic buildings, such as the ones needed at the Trenton Depot, is an eligible project. Up to \$75,000 is available but the requested amount must be matched.

This Tourism Enhancement Grant is one of the few available for “bricks and mortar” repair on an historic building.

For more information on this grant, visit <https://www.tn.gov/tourism/statewide-partners/grants-initiatives.html>

Contact person: Melanie Beauchamp
Email: Melanie.beauchamp@tn.gov
Phone: 615-741-9009

United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development

- Community Facilities Grant Program – These USDA grants are available to rural areas for the development or improvement of “essential community facilities” which can include museums. Rural areas include towns with less than 20,000 people, making projects in Trenton eligible. Funding priorities are based on communities of 5,500 or less, providing Trenton an edge in the application process. Priority is also based on the community’s median household income. Grant funds are allocated on a scale, with the least populated area with the lowest median household income eligible for up to 75% of the cost of the proposed project.
- Rural Community Development Initiative Grants – These funds are potentially available to help low income rural communities develop community facilities and community and economic development projects. The minimum award is \$50,000 and matching funds equal to the amount of the grant is required.

To discuss these grants, contact your regional Rural Development office.

Tennessee Historical Commission

The Tennessee Historical Commission (THC) administers several different types of grant programs. I highly recommend that you contact the Commission for potential grant and support opportunities. The 2024 grant applications for historic preservation grants will open in late 2024 and are made through the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation online grant systems. Don’t wait until then to begin working on a grant proposal. Contact the THC, tell them your needs, and ask to see a comparable, successful grant proposal to use as a prototype.

Contact: Patrick McIntyre, Executive Director, patrick.mcintyre@tn.gov, or Holly Barnett, Holly.M.Barnett@tn.gov, Assistant Director for Federal Programs.

Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area Project Partnership Grants

As I explained at our meeting, you will want to use the services of the heritage area once you have acquired and restored/renovated the building. Administered by the

MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, the National Heritage Area awards grants for exhibit development on the chronological period of 1850 to 1875, covering the coming of the Civil War, the conflict itself, the wartime home front, wartime occupation, emancipation, and the Reconstruction period. These grants require 1 to 1 match, but in-kind and volunteer hours may be used to calculate your match. Heritage Area staff may also be interested in working with you to develop exhibit panels on the Civil War era. Contact: Laura Holder at laura.holder@mtsu.edu.

Your initial planning document lists railroad and Civil War heritage groups. I would add the Discovery Center at Union City, the Parkers Crossroads Battlefield, Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area and Tennessee Department of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. I remember that latter group being involved in the Salem Cemetery dedication of Dr. Cox's monument a few years ago.