

# Looking Back #23

## Charlevoix's Railroad Depot, Part 1

### 1892-1982

by  
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**Museum at Harsha House**



First image of Charlevoix's long-awaited train depot, *Charlevoix Sentinel*, May 11, 1892

The story of a railroad coming to Charlevoix is an epic one, fraught with years of worry, persistent lobbying, blistering newspaper editorial wars, bankruptcy after initial construction, dashed, then revived hopes, and finally jubilation. Building the passenger depot on the easternmost portion of Charlevoix's North Side was one of the last pieces to fit into the big puzzle. The elegant structure was begun two months before the planned arrival of the first train, and even then was unfinished by the time that happened on June 26, 1892. Passenger tickets had to be purchased in the already completed freight depot that sat about fifty yards north in what is today the Depot Beach municipal parking lot. But that situation only lasted a few weeks. The depot finally opened for business in late July. From then on, to the present day, it has remained one of the iconic structures of Charlevoix, passing through various hands until it was placed into the care of the Charlevoix Historical Society. Under the Society's initiative and oversight, in 2007 the depot area received the town's first historic district protection. On May 8, 2025, the Society received the Michigan Governor's Award for Historic Preservation that recognized its determined efforts to save and restore not only the depot, but also the lighthouse and 103 State Street, the Museum at Harsha House.



Just prior to completion, with drainage pipes stacked beside the tracks



All done except for landscaping. The village's horse-drawn street watering wagon appears at far right.



Landscaping flourishes, post-1898. Wide staircase up to 250-room The Inn hotel is seen at right. Sign on corner eaves: Grand Rapids, 209 miles; Petoskey, 15.5 miles



The Chicago & West Michigan Railway, which built the railroad, and depot, said that "The structure is to be an elegant and modern affair." All the materials were provided by the Charlevoix Lumber Company. This colored postcard shows a later paint scheme. At right appears the 50,000-gallon water tank. The landscaping is in full bloom.

The depot was designed by Charles Pelton of Charles Pelton & Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It is basically a one-story, rectangular Shingle style structure covered with clapboarding, seventy-nine feet long by nineteen feet wide at its widest point. The depot is crowned by a hip roof and extended at its north and south ends by one-story covered platforms also covered by hip roofs. The platforms and walkways were originally constructed of wood planks that later were replaced with Saginaw paving bricks, many of which are still there. One of the building's most prominent features is its slant-sided bay window in a round tower under a conical roof on the lakeward side. The panes in the bay provided a long view of the tracks to the north and south.

Three features of the roof are decorative rather than functional, the dormer window on the east, as seen in the preceding photos, and the balconied, tripartite windows and higher oculus above the entrance on the southwest. These windows illuminate nothing more than an empty, never used attic, not the ground floor interior.



The three mullion-paned windows and oculus that illuminate only an unused attic



The main entrance to the depot consisted of an archway open to a recessed vestibule that held two doors to the interior on the inside. After too many winters of snow piling into the west-facing gap, a single outside door flanked by two stained glass windows was installed to enclose the archway and block the vestibule from the elements.



Combination men's waiting room and baggage room. This room originally had its own fireplace, where the mural appears at left.

The interior, seen here before the Charlevoix Historical Society began renovations in the 1990s, was called by the *Charlevoix Sentinel* newspaper “. . . metropolitan in every respect.” It was originally divided into a large baggage room/men's waiting room, above, and the women and children's waiting room, below. Each one had its own restroom facilities, the men's entered from the main entryway, the women and children's in the corner of their room behind the pillar at right. The *Sentinel* also said that both restrooms were “elegantly equipped with the latest approved appliances.” Why the segregation? Men smoked stinky cigars, men chewed on and spit tabacky into spittoons and more often than not missed, men talked rough, men played cards and gambled. Delicate sensibilities and innocence must be respected.



Smaller women and children's waiting room



The room at left, on the corridor between the two waiting rooms, was the nerve center of the whole operation. It housed the ticket office, signal light and flag controls, telegraph office, station master's cubicle, and the U. S. Mail. Later the Railway Express Agency office was added. Today this room is filled with railroad memorabilia, including a restored vintage pot-bellied stove and the station's original regulator pendulum wall clock.

## Scenes from an Era



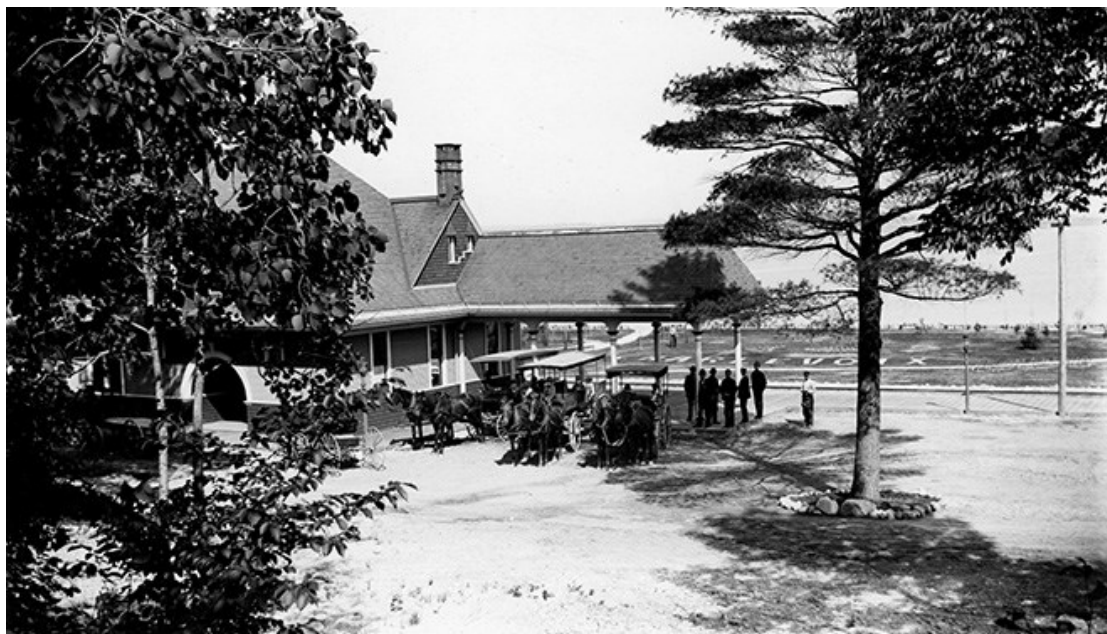
Classic image, 1890s, of train and depot, between which can be seen two coffins ready for loading. Horse-drawn taxis into town appear at left.



Close-up of Williams Livery Service, at left



Uncounted tons of luggage and commercial freight left the depot daily for decades



Waiting for the next train. This area is now the Historical Society's depot parking lot. Note the word "Charlevoix" laid out in whitewashed stones in the beach's lawn area. This didn't last long due to the constant pounding of the elements and vandalism.



Original fancy brick-work and iron banding of the smaller waiting room fireplace chimney



The railroad continued to perform a crucial role in the economic well-being of Charlevoix through the 1920s. But even then, the increasing impact of the automobile was being felt. Train ridership started to decrease seriously in the 1930s. The Inn hotel above the depot, built to accommodate railroad customers and able to offer very limited automobile parking, had to close its doors after the 1940 season. The influence of the interstate highway system, begun in the next decade, plus the advent of the jet passenger plane at the same time, were the final blows. Passenger service to Charlevoix had to cease on Sept. 1, 1962. Freight held on for the next two decades, now handled out of the depot, until it too met its demise on February 18, 1982. The passing of the last train out of Charlevoix that day was not even mentioned in the *Charlevoix Courier*. **Next issue: The Depot Rises from Near Ruin**



A scene from late in the last century with roof shingle replacement obviously needed. This would happen in the year 2000.