



Looking Back #24 Charlevoix's Railroad Depot, Part 2 1982-2025



by

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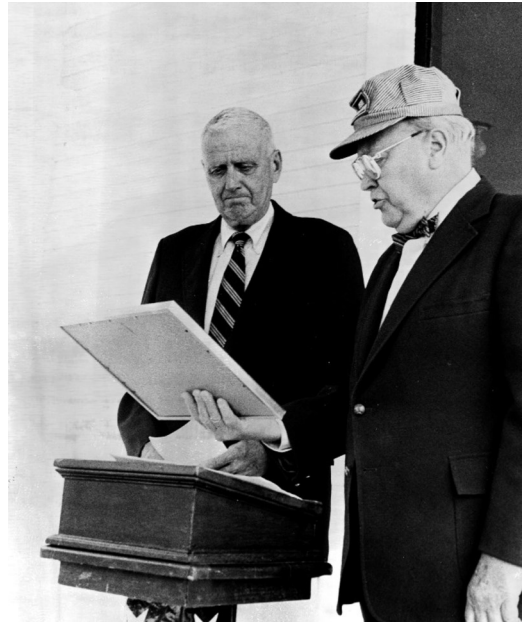


One of the last photographs taken of the working depot, here having received only a few boxes of freight, in 1981. It closed for good early the next year. All freight was handled out of the depot's former main waiting room during its last two decades.

In the previous Looking Back, Charlevoix's iconic train station at Depot Beach was featured during the first nine decades of its existence. The rise and decline of America's railroad industry, both passenger and freight, was echoed in the fortunes of this building, from bustling, vibrant terminal familiar to thousands of people, to deserted and decaying relic.

After the cessation of passenger traffic in 1962, The Chesapeake & Ohio railroad, its final owner, had leased the south part of the depot to a few parties until it came into the hands of the Charlevoix Yacht Club, reportedly in 1975. They, of course, like any healthy outdoor organization, loved to have a good time. After too many years of late into the evening noise, this became too much for Bob Pew, head of Steelcase Furniture in Grand Rapids, who

had built his summer home on the terrace above the building. So he bought the depot property from a company that had bought it from the C & O. Several legal issues with the city, including who really owned what plus right of way details, ensued. Thus, to get rid of all this pesky annoyance, Bob, known for his generosity, donated everything to the non-profit Charlevoix Historical Society at 2:30 p.m. on June 26, 1992, exactly 100 years to the minute from the arrival of the first train. Society President Louis Edwards, at far right, is shown accepting the deed transfer in the south portico.



The Society had not very much money at the time, thus a fund-raising effort for restoration was begun immediately. Unfortunately, Louis passed away the same year, and was recognized for his leadership on the rock (left) near the entry drive.

So in the Society moved, to a stark and not very inviting interior. The first job was to rip up the ghastly carpeting (below, left) to get started from scratch. Anyone who stood on the carpet in the middle of the big room could feel their feet dropping. After it was removed, this central area was found to be almost ready to fall in. The decaying depression was believed to have been caused by all the tons of freight that had stood there during the two decades the room was used for freight storage. The far north end of the room still enjoys the original 1892 flooring. What is seen from wall to wall in the center (below) is new. The rest of the flooring, to the far south wall fireplace, was recycled from the downtown middle school classrooms when that building became the new Charlevoix Public Library in 2006.





Next, the jerry-built barrier doors (above, left) between the former women's/children's waiting room with fireplace at the south end (where the yacht club had met) and the main waiting room came out. Then a new kitchen addition (above, right) was installed. Slowly, bit by bit, the Historical Society transformed the interior into the welcoming social and exhibit center that it is today. The final touch was the long-needed replacement of the aging roof (below) in 2000, a huge job accomplished with many grants and donations.



In the middle of this eight-years-long renovation, in 1995 the depot was placed on both the national and state (below) registers of historic places. After the roof was resingled and a new century had dawned, then came the impressive rest of the exterior story.



In 2001, the Charlevoix Area Garden Club approached the Historical Society with a beautifully thought out, fully illustrated idea. The depot's empty west lawn area had long been looking scruffy (below, left) and had never been utilized for anything significant, so how about installing formal gardens based upon historic principles and using historic plantings and flowers from the town and area? That sounded like a plan, and, as it turned out, became one of the best things that could ever have happened to the depot. The Club finished the basic installations in 2005 with completion of the pergola (below, right).



Construction of the Heritage Gardens brought about the realization that the original Saginaw brick walkways that surrounded the depot were themselves in dire need of updating. Hundreds of weeds had sprouted between them; in places the aging bricks undulated, causing a threat to pedestrians. So a major, separate project was begun to replace many of the bricks (below) and incorporate several of the new ones into designs that meshed with those of the landscaping. Vintage metal gates and fencing that had once graced the entrance to a gambling casino/gourmet restaurant on Meech Street, called the Colonial Club, were utilized also (below, right).

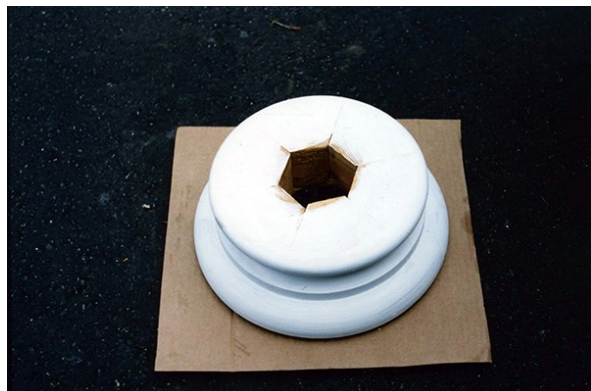




The Charlevoix train depot had become one of the most welcoming venues in town. But all was not perfect in this little eden. As the Garden Club was closing in on finishing their project, the Historical Society became aware that it now had a major problem. The wood por-tico pillars had withstood the ravages of the elements for over a century. However, after all that time, some of the pillars weren't supporting much of anything.



Out they came, one by one. Master wood craftsman Dave Robinson, assisted by the late Jim Lewis and Rudy Scharschmidt, went to work on an eventual seventeen, or virtually all of them. New weather-resistant bases (below) were fabricated to support redone pillars (right, with Dave Robinson).





A Society social event prior to the 2018 repainting

Thus remains this wonderfully preserved singular legacy of Charlevoix's railroad history, protected since 2005 in its own historic district, the first in Charlevoix. In this venue the Historical Society hosts programs, exhibits, and special events, with availability to area non-profit organizations for meetings, receptions, etc. It is also available to those who join the Historical Society at a patronage level for private weddings, rehearsal dinners, post-wedding events, graduation parties, birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, et. al.



A wedding in the depot's Heritage Gardens, said by many to be the perfect, memorable place for such an event



An all-white depot in the 1990s



Repainted to its historically correct original colors, 2018