Planning, Construction and Opening

Cincinnati Union Terminal officially opened on March 31, 1933, with a crowd estimated at 50,000 attending the dedication ceremony. The last great railroad station built in the United States, Union Terminal is an Art Deco masterpiece.

In 1926 George Dent Crabbs completed negotiations with the seven railroad companies that served Cincinnati from five stations scattered around the city. The seven companies then signed an agreement in 1927 to construct one terminal to serve all their railroads: Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, Louisville & Nashville Railroad, Cincinnati Southern Railway Company, New York Central Railroad, Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, Norfolk & Western Railroad and the Pennsylvania Railroad.
Crabbs chose the New York architectural firm of Fellheimer and Wagner to design the building but French architect Paul Cret provided the Art Deco elements that made Union Terminal such a signature building. Construction began in August 1929 and the cornerstone was laid on November 20, 1931, in an elaborate ceremony. Trains began using Union Terminal on March 19, 1933, twelve days before the official dedication because flood waters once again closed four of the five existing train stations. The original construction schedule called for the Terminal to open in December 1933 but the project was completed nine months ahead of schedule.
The Cincinnati Union Terminal Company
requests your presence
at the cornerstone-laying ceremonies of
The Union Terminal Station
at four o'clock
November the twentieth
One thousand nine hundred and thirty-one

Between Hopkins St. and Kenner St.
west of Freeway Ave.
German-born artist Winold Reiss designed the mosaics that lined the rotunda and the concourse. The two large murals in the rotunda illustrate the history of transportation, westward expansion and the growth of Cincinnati. The concourse contained fourteen murals highlighting workers in significant Cincinnati industries and companies, including Procter & Gamble, Baldwin Piano Co., Kahn's Meat Packing, Crosley Broadcasting, and Rookwood Pottery. The end wall of the concourse contained a map of the United States with views of the continents on each side.
The huge project involved over two thousand workers constructing twenty-two buildings on 287 acres. It included the Western Hills Viaduct, cooling station, machine shop, power plant, roundhouse and a car service building. Some facts and figures:

- 300 separate contracts negotiated
- 94 miles of track laid
- 5,663,065 cubic yards of fill material
- 8,250,000 bricks
- Total cost $41,000,000 - almost entirely from private funds through the sale of bonds (In 2001 dollars, the construction figure would be $512,119,484.)

Union Terminal is a monumental structure. The rotunda dome spans 180 feet and reaches a height of 106 feet. The train concourse was 450 feet long with eight station platforms that extended 1,600 feet.

The station could accommodate 216 trains daily. During its first year of operation, the station saw an average of 150 trains each day. Amenities in the new terminal included a newsstand, toyshop, tearoom, barbershop and elegant lounges for men and women.
Pierre Bourdelle painted murals for the dining rooms and lounges and created the jungle scenes carved from linoleum panels still seen in the women's restroom next to the dining room. Maxfield Keck designed the two large figures on the building facade representing transportation and industry.
The great flood of 1937 crested at 79.9 feet on January 26. Although the rotunda of Union Terminal was above the floodwaters, only two railroad companies—Chesapeake & Ohio and Cincinnati Southern Railway—were able to continue their service during the devastating flood.
The War Years

During World War II, Cincinnati Union Terminal was the center of rail activity for the region. By 1944, Union Terminal averaged 34,000 passengers daily. Armed forces personnel and civilians coping with gasoline rationing packed the building. The USO took over the Rookwood Tea Room for the duration of the war.

Cincinnati's many factories counted on railroads to move their products. During the war Cincinnati plants and warehouses unloaded and loaded an average of 28,300 railroad cars each month. The war years saw Union Terminal used to capacity, the only such time in its history.
1945 - 1972

With postwar prosperity and the return of civilian industry, Americans renewed their love affair with the automobile. The construction of the interstate highway system and the growth of passenger airline service in the 1950s and 1960s dealt an almost fatal blow to passenger rail service in the United States. In 1953, fifty-one trains arrived at Union Terminal daily. By 1962, passenger train traffic at Union Terminal had shrunk to only twenty-four trains a day. Seeking a solution to the enormous operating costs, Cincinnati Union Terminal Company offered to lease the building to the City of Cincinnati for $1 a year. The City could then utilize the building for other purposes.
In June 1963, the Cincinnati Planning Commission received a report that included eight possible uses for Union Terminal: railroad museum; transportation center for air, bus and rail lines; courts building; convention center; Air Force Museum; museum of science and industry; private industry; and a shopping center. Nothing resulted from these efforts.

From 1968 to 1970, the Cincinnati Science Museum operated in Union Terminal.
1972 - 1985

By 1972, Union Terminal was handling only two trains each day and passenger train service halted on October 28, 1972. The Cincinnati Union Terminal Co. put the facility up for sale for $10 million.

The Cincinnati Southern Railway purchased the rail yards and planned to demolish the 450 foot-long concourse in 1973 to provide height for piggyback railroad cars. Before demolition, workers removed the fourteen Cincinnati worker/industry murals designed by Winold Reiss and installed them at the Greater Cincinnati International Airport. A group called Save the Terminal raised over $400,000 to cover the cost of removing and transporting the murals to the airport.
In August 1975, the City of Cincinnati purchased Union Terminal for $2.00 and its fifteen-acre site for $1,000,000. The City then began to look for uses for the building. Three developers presented ideas for the building and Cincinnati selected the plan presented by the Columbus-based firm of Joseph Skilken. Company president Steve Skilken proposed turning Union Terminal into a thematic shopping complex with everything from an ice skating rink to a human pinball machine to a bowling alley. He called the project “Oz.” Skilken's elaborate plans never materialized but Skilken did create an urban shopping center in Union Terminal. It opened on August 4, 1980 with forty tenants. At its
peak, the complex had fifty-four tenants and drew 7,800 to 8,000 customers a day. Les Palmiers, an upscale restaurant, opened in the Terminal as well. However the first tenant moved out in 1981 and by 1982 only twenty-one vendors remained. By 1985, only Loehmanns, situated in the center of the rotunda, did business in the Terminal.

Cincinnati Museum Center 1985 - 2003

In the early 1980s, the Cincinnati Historical Society and the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History were both looking for new homes. In a 1981 report for the Historical Society, museum consultant E. Vernon Johnson provided three options for growth. One option proposed that the Society join forces with the Natural History Museum to form a museum complex. A site selection study completed in April 1985 had only one recommendation—Cincinnati Union Terminal. Voters of Hamilton County approved a bond levy in May 1986; the State of Ohio provided $8 million; and the remainder of the funding came from corporations, foundations, and individuals.
The new venture opened to the public on November 10, 1990. At that point the museum complex included the Cincinnati Historical Society Library, the Cincinnati History Museum, the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and the Robert D. Lindner Family OMNIMAX Theater. A year later the two museums opened the first of their permanent exhibits. “Grand Opening Day” was on November 2, 1991.

Passenger train service returned to Union Terminal on July 29, 1991, with the arrival of Amtrak’s Cardinal that runs from Washington, D.C., to Chicago.

Cincinnati Museum Center is the largest cultural institution in the region. Total attendance for CMC for the 2001 fiscal year was 1.47 million. During the 2001-2002 school year, over 110,000 students toured Museum Center. Our education staff reached another 21,000 with presentations at local and regional schools. In September 2002, the University of Cincinnati's Economics Center for Education and Research reported that Museum Center had a total economic impact of $75.6 million on the Greater Cincinnati community for the 2001 fiscal year.

In 2003 Cincinnati Union Terminal will celebrate its seventieth year. In its thirteenth year, Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal will continue to educate and entertain with special exhibits on Africa, Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Civil War, baseball, and treasures from the Vatican.