



# The History of the Railroad in Flagstaff



The historic Flagstaff Train Station built in 1926 is still in use today. It is the current home of the Flagstaff Visitor Center. Photo courtesy Flagstaff Convention and Visitors Bureau.

## Visitor Center Services

For more information about Flagstaff past and present, our friendly Flagstaff Visitor Center staff will be happy to assist you. We can also provide directions, free local and state maps, travel tips, self-guided tours and attraction brochures, dining suggestions and more. Browse our Gift Shop for unique Route 66 and Flagstaff attire, gifts and books.

Open daily in the historic downtown train station. Call 800-842-7293 or 928-774-9541 for more information.

### PHOTO CREDITS

The following photos courtesy Northern Arizona University, Cline Library, Special Collections and Archives: **(Photo A)** George Babbitt Collection; **(Photo B)** Dorothy Morrow Warnock Collection; **(Photo C)** Riordan, Mary and Chambers, Roberts Collection; **(Photo E)** Tad Nickols Collection.

**Photo D:** Courtesy National Park Service, Historic Photograph Collections.

**Front Cover:** Flagstaff Lumber Company, Steam Locomotive #1, circa 1920. Courtesy Northern Arizona University, Cline Library, Special Collections and Archives, Fronske Studio Collection.



FLAGSTAFF VISITOR CENTER

One East Route 66 • Flagstaff, Arizona 86001-5530 USA

800-842-7293 • 928-774-9541

www.flagstaffarizona.org



FLAGSTAFF VISITOR CENTER

www.flagstaffarizona.org

## The History of the Railroad in Flagstaff

By James A. Hardy, Visitor Center Historian

*On August 1, 1882, a rail line built by the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, a subsidiary of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, and its partner, the St. Louis and San Francisco, came to the little settlement that would become the city of Flagstaff. The events behind this historic occasion began many years earlier.*

### In the Beginning

Prior to the mid-19th century, the nation's railroads were largely confined to eastern intercity lines. While some imagined a railroad to the Pacific, there was no real interest in the project until the occurrence of two history changing events.

The first was the Mexican War of 1846. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the conflict and deeded (to the United States) the vast territory between Texas and California, which included most of what is now Arizona. The second

event was the discovery of gold. In 1849, the precious metal was found at Sutter's Mill in California, adding impetus to build railroads westward.

### Whipple's Expedition

To help fund the railroad to the West, President Millard Fillmore signed the First Railroad Land Grant Act in 1850. Soon after the Pacific Railroad Survey Bill was approved, authorizing a series of expeditions along potential railroad routes. Four initial survey crews were sent out, including one led by Army Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple.

Whipple's 70-man expedition left Ft. Smith, Arkansas on July 15, 1853, moving quickly to Albuquerque, where it set out along the 35th parallel toward California. By November, the expedition crossed into the territory that is now Arizona, reaching the San Francisco Peaks near present-day Flagstaff by Christmas. The expedition then continued west, reaching Los Angeles in March 1854.

Although Whipple encountered no major obstacles, the 35th parallel was not chosen due to a calculation error which added \$75 million to his estimate to build a railroad along this route. *Continued >*



Photo A: Flagstaff Passenger Depot, circa 1910.

By the time the Civil War started in 1861, plans to build the railroad to the Pacific had been shelved entirely. It was not until 1864, when Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act signed by Abraham Lincoln, that plans moved forward again.



**Photo B:** Atlantic and Pacific Railroad Depot in Flagstaff, circa 1888.

### The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad

On July 27, 1866, President Andrew Johnson signed a bill chartering a railroad to California, and the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad was born.

The charter stipulated that the A&P railroad was to start in Missouri, make its way through Arizona to California and eventually reach San Francisco. The railway would pass through 10 sections of land per mile in the States and 10 sections in the U.S. Territories. The charter allowed that bonds could be sold to fund the construction with the stipulation that the railway be completed by 1878.

Construction of the railway did not proceed as planned however, and by 1872 the A&P had built only 361 miles of track. By 1875 the company went into receivership.

### The Tripartite Agreement

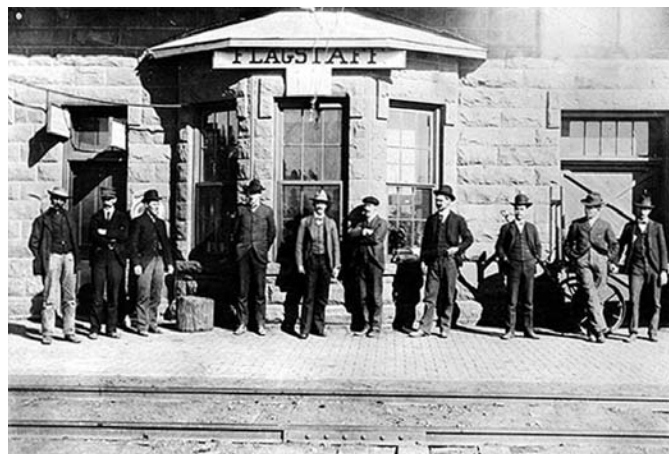
In September 1876, the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad (known as ‘The Frisco’) took over the defunct A&P, mostly to gain A&P’s land grants. The Frisco also intended to build into Kansas, drawing the attention of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe (the ‘Santa Fe’) railway, which felt it owned the rights to Kansas.

As a result, Santa Fe, The Frisco and receivers for the A&P negotiated the Tripartite Agreement in January 1880. Under the new agreement, the Frisco and the A&P Western Division would operate autonomously and the A&P would be a subsidiary of the more powerful Santa Fe. At this time, Santa Fe was seeking a route to the west coast, making the A&P’s New Mexico and Arizona land grants appear very attractive.

### Construction Begins

Almost immediately, Santa Fe began building near Albuquerque. Although initially unsure it wanted to build along the 35th parallel, Santa Fe quickly claimed the route on rumors that William Palmer, its archrival in Colorado, was scoping the area. Soon after, the A&P Western Division was on its way to California.

Armies of workers, including Native Americans, Mexicans and Mormons, began surveying, grading, cutting ties and laying track across the Colorado Plateau. Work progressed quickly, averaging over a mile a day. Just as the steel rails made their mark on the landscape, so did the men who laid them. Many northern Arizona towns still bear their names—among them Kingman, Holbrook, Drake and Winslow.



**Photo C:** Passengers at the Flagstaff Railroad Depot, circa 1902.



**Photo D:** A poster promoting the Grand Canyon for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company, circa 1910.

### The Rails Reach Flagstaff

As the rails neared the San Francisco Peaks, a settlement began to take shape on the slope of what is now called Observatory Mesa (or Mars Hill), just west of today’s downtown Flagstaff. In early 1881, merchants and saloonkeepers, wanting to capitalize on the railroad, set up shop for the advance workers

who were coming to grade the right of way and cut railroad ties from the abundant ponderosa pine forest. By fall of that year, Flagstaff boasted a population of 200, and swiftly became a wild railroad town of saloons, dance halls and gambling houses. Shootings and lynchings became common occurrences, and business owners kept guns handy as protection from troublemakers.

Finally, after a short delay at Canyon Diablo near Flagstaff where a prefabricated bridge proved to be too short, the railroad arrived in Flagstaff on August 1, 1882.

Although nothing is written about Flagstaff’s reaction to the railroad’s arrival, some believe there was great celebration. It is equally likely, however, that there was none. Flagstaff was only one settlement along the way, and the workers had seen the rails reach many such points. The real goal, the Colorado River, was still 200 grueling miles away.

### The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe

A&P was never a real moneymaker, and the cost

of building and upkeep of the line placed no small burden on the Santa Fe as it entered the 1890s. This, coupled with debt incurred by rapid expansion and running The Frisco and other subsidiaries, put Santa Fe in a precarious financial position.

Further damaging was the financial panic of 1893 and a drought, both of which severely cut into freight revenues. Unable to weather the storm, Santa Fe went into receivership in December of the same year. Within a short time, a new organization, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway was incorporated to purchase the holdings of the old Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. Much of Santa Fe’s dead weight was eliminated, but because A&P was so important (without it Santa Fe would be just a regional railroad), it was



**Photo E:** Railroad workers on Lumbering R.R.-Saginaw, Flagstaff, circa 1952.

acquired in 1897 and the railroad reorganized as The Santa Fe Pacific. In 1902, Congress authorized transfer of all A&P holdings to the Santa Fe, and the railroad through Flagstaff became The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway.

It remained so until the 1990s when Santa Fe merged with Burlington Northern to create our present-day Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

Referred to as just the “BNSF” today, the railroad through Flagstaff continues to be as much of its rich history as it is its history.