Amtrak Station
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History:
There is a long complex history associated with the railroad in Charlottesville. As a town located at the foot of a gap in the Appalachian mountains it provided a bridge to the west. Starting with the Louisa railroad company in the late 1840’s Charlottesville was connected to the East and by 1856 the West. With the growth in popularity of the railways Charlottesville became a fork in the road to those headed Eastward and the last point East of the Appalachian for those headed West.

It also functioned as a shipping hub for regional freight such as fruit and coal from the West, in addition to mail and passengers. This strategic location would make Charlottesville an important railroad junction during the civil war when it served as a transportation route for supplies and troops in addition to a hospital center for the wounded. Though it was of strategic importance to the South, Charlottesville was spared because it wasn’t considered an important railroad junction by the Union forces.

While Charlottesville’s first railroad depot was built in 1857 South of the downtown mall, this site was not occupied until 1868 and the current structure was built in 1905. From the mid-19th century until the 1920’s the railroad grew in popularity. With the advent of the automobile and the mass construction of highways, the railroad experienced a steady decline in activity.

In 1968 the postal depot closed it’s railway post office at the station. In 1980 the rail yard and C&O were dismantled, concentrating rail traffic at Union Station. As the years progressed the station became increasingly decrepit until it was finally renovated in 1999.

Currently, the station area and ticket booths are housed in a former storage area for baggage. The original waiting area, ticket booth and restaurant have all been condensed into an area roughly a quarter the size of the former structure. Today the waiting area is much smaller and the restaurant has been replaced by vending machines, but the station still serves the same function it has for the past 150 years, a place of meeting and departure for people.

Located off main street between the UVA campus and downtown mall, the station was named Union Station as it marked a point of Union between two places.

Above: A picture of the station’s roadside entrance. It also has two additional entrances/exits for North/South bound passengers and East/West bound passengers.

Right: This is a composite of Charlottesville and railroad history in the region assembled by the Charlottesville historical society. The chart features many valuable facts concerning these histories. Passengers and visitors to the station can read these fascinating displays while they wait.

Left: This is a diagram that details the levels of activity of the train station over different durations of time. Notice the peak of train activity in Charlottesville around 1920 and the decline from that point. This is due to the fact that Charlottesville no longer was a major transportation hub for east west and north south commercial transportation.

Above: This diagram illustrates the development and growth of the station over a period of roughly 150 years. Notice the re-alignment of the blue tracks to North/South orientation at the beginning of the 20th century.
While its conditions have vastly improved over time, according to the station manager, the station doesn’t maintain its former dignity. This is due to the public’s decreased demand for rail travel because of the advent of airplanes and automobiles. The Station’s function is also diminished by the location of the platforms, which represents an obstacle for travellers. Trains going to New York or New Orleans leave from a platform located under the main street bridge while Chicago or Washington bound trains depart from platforms located behind the station. According to the manager, the location of platforms often proves confusing to travellers.

The station is open to the public during regular hours from 6am until 9pm however it is rarely occupied outside of time near to departures and arrivals. Thus, while it maintains a high level of public accessibility the train station remains a space of fleeting occupancy. Although one may go to the station without a purpose, there is nothing outside of the historical information on the wall to keep people there. Essentially the space is restricted by purpose to those utilizing the rail service or awaiting an arrival of someone using the service. The only other instance of public use that the manager mentioned was Kindergarten tours through the station which occur roughly 2-3 times a month.

As a collection point and crossroad, the Charlottesville Amtrak station has a unique history and bears a strong connection to the surrounding region. However its function as a station and public space remains one of temporary occupancy, which marks a point along the way rather than actual destination. Without incorporating another function into the space it is difficult to make it a more frequently used public space.