

The Mackinaw Depot
Gateway to the Interurban Era
1909-1953 • Mackinaw, Illinois

*The Story of the Illinois Traction System Depot and the Electric Railway That Connected
Central Illinois*



Welcome

Every community has places that tell its story.

For more than forty years, the Mackinaw Depot welcomed travelers, connected neighbors, helped power the Illinois Traction System, and stood as a symbol of progress in our growing village. While the interurban trains have long since disappeared, the depot remains one of Mackinaw's most recognizable historic landmarks and an important reminder of the role our community played in central Illinois transportation.

This booklet was created to preserve that story. Inside you'll discover the history of the Illinois Traction System, learn why Mackinaw Junction became one of the busiest locations on the interurban network, and explore how the depot survived to become one of the few remaining Illinois Traction depots still standing today.

Whether you are a lifelong resident, a first-time visitor, or simply someone who enjoys local history, we hope these pages provide a greater appreciation for the people, places, and events that helped shape the Village of Mackinaw.

Thank you for taking the time to explore the history of the Mackinaw Depot.

May its story continue to inspire future generations.

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First Edition

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Celebrating the history and preservation of the Mackinaw Depot and the Illinois Traction System

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Chapter 1

The Mackinaw Interurban

The arrival of the electric interurban railway during the first decade of the twentieth century transformed life in Mackinaw. Unlike traditional steam railroads, interurban lines were powered by electricity supplied through overhead wires and offered frequent passenger service between communities. For the first time, residents of Mackinaw could travel quickly and comfortably throughout central Illinois without owning an automobile.

The line serving Mackinaw became part of the Illinois Traction System (ITS), one of the largest electric interurban rail networks in the United States. At its height, the system connected Peoria, Bloomington, Decatur, Springfield, Champaign-Urbana, Danville, and St. Louis through more than 600 miles of electrified railway.

The Bloomington-to-Peoria route, which passed through Mackinaw, officially opened in April 1907 and was quickly promoted as one of the most scenic routes on the entire system. Passengers crossed the Mackinaw River and traveled through rolling hills, wooded valleys, and rich farmland that characterized central Illinois.

The driving force behind the Illinois Traction System was William B. McKinley, whose vision helped create one of the nation's most successful interurban railroads. Operating under the slogan "The Road of Good Service," the system provided dependable passenger transportation while also hauling freight such as coal, grain, gravel, mail, express shipments, and manufactured goods. By 1911, the network operated approximately 165 trains each day.

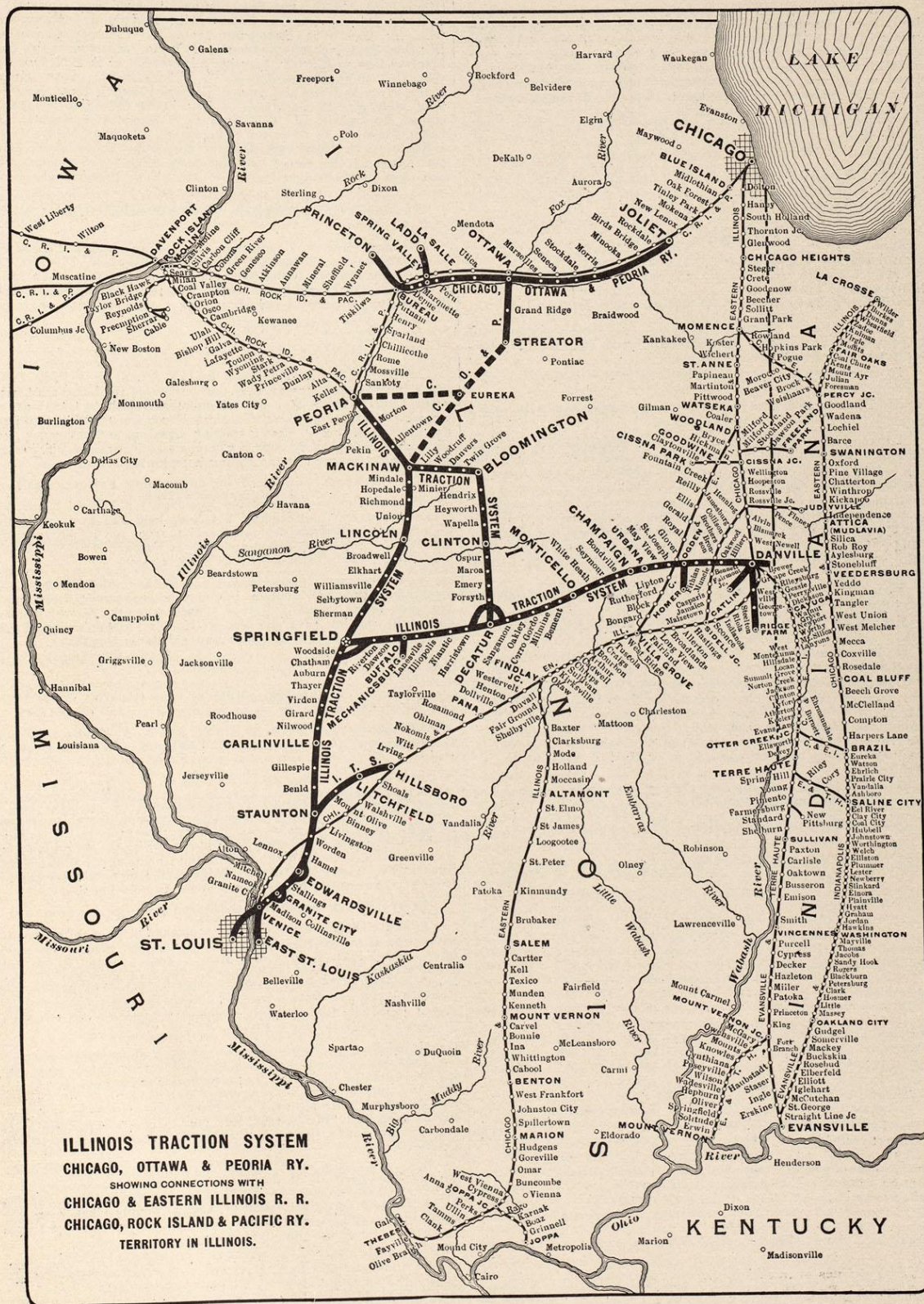
Unlike steam railroads, electric interurban cars accelerated quickly, stopped frequently, and served many small communities that larger railroads often bypassed. For rural residents, the interurban became an important part of everyday life, providing convenient transportation for work, shopping, school, business, and social activities. The line also played a vital role in moving agricultural products and supplies throughout central Illinois.

By the 1920s, however, the rapid growth of automobile ownership and the expansion of paved highways began to reduce passenger traffic. Buses and trucks increasingly competed for passengers and freight, making it difficult for interurban railroads to remain profitable. Although the Illinois Traction System modernized portions of its fleet during the late 1940s, changing transportation habits continued to erode ridership.

Passenger service through Mackinaw ended in February 1953, marking the close of nearly half a century of electric railway service. While the interurban itself disappeared, one important reminder of that era still remains—the Mackinaw Depot.



1939 Aerial Photo from ILHAP



Illinois Terminal Railroad System

Illinois Terminal Company, Lessee of

The St. Louis, Troy and Eastern Rail Road Company

St. Louis Electric Terminal Railroad Company

East St. Louis & Suburban Railway Company

O'Fallon Freight Line

St. Louis & Adams Railway Company

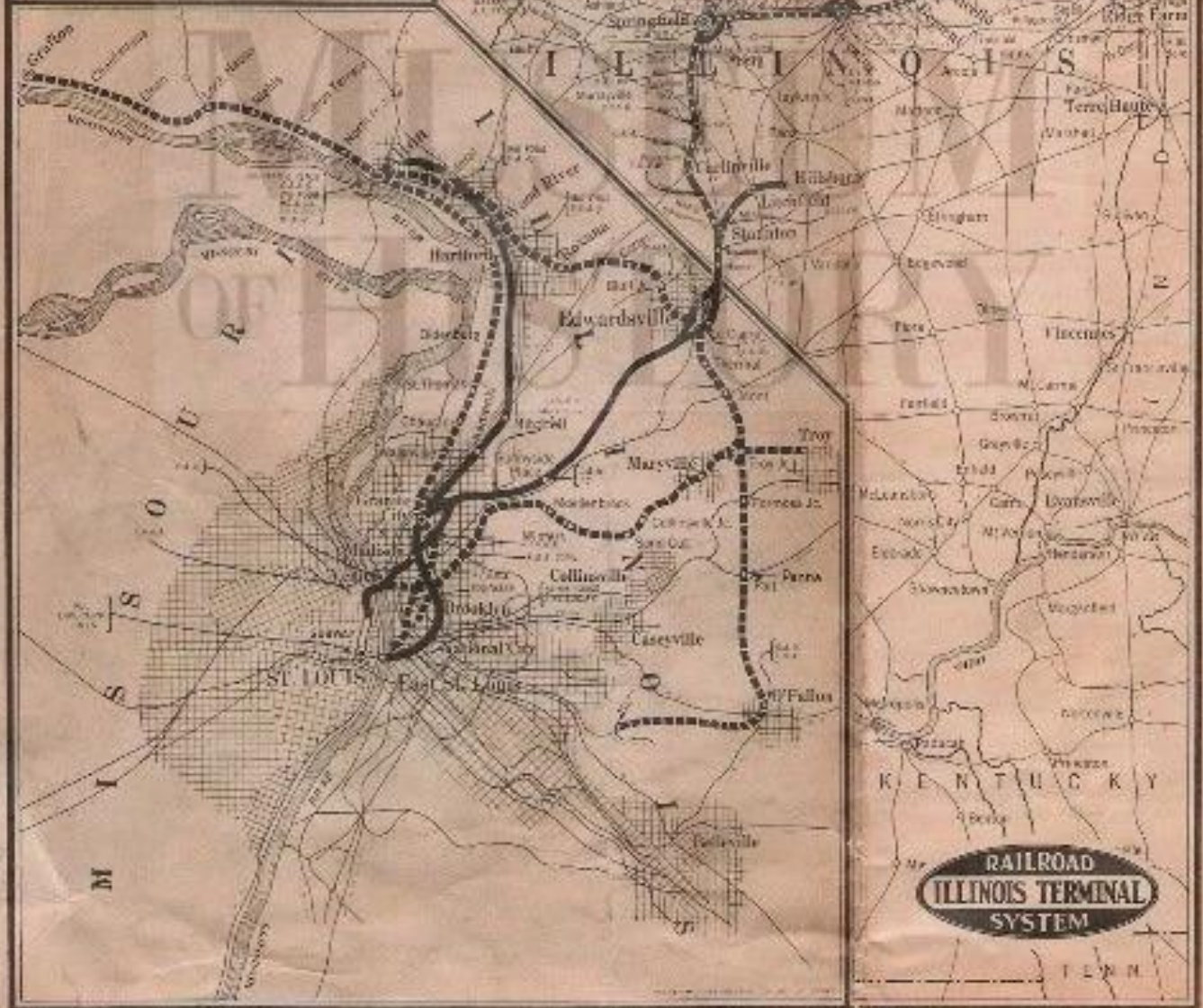
Alton & Eastern Railroad Company

St. Louis and Illinois River Railroad

Illinois Traction, Inc.

The Illinois Terminal Railroad System is a comprehensive system serving
stages in the St. Louis and East St. Louis area, with main
line and branch lines and with freight, passenger and
interurban lines to and from Chicago, New Orleans and other Illinois

Legend:
—— Freight and Passenger Lines, generally operated
—— Freight Lines, operated
—— Gas ONE COMPANY, operating lines and branches to the
St. Louis, Troy and Eastern Railroad System



Chapter 2

The Mackinaw Depot



Constructed between 1909 and 1910, the Mackinaw Depot quickly became one of the Village's most recognizable landmarks. Located along North Main Street, it served as both a passenger station and an electrical substation for the Illinois Traction System. The depot's distinctive Spanish Colonial Revival architecture made it one of only a handful of similarly designed Illinois Traction depots built in Illinois.

The 27-by-93-foot Mackinaw Depot/Substation contained a waiting room, ticket office (25'3" × 16'6"), machinery room or substation (53'4" × 25'3"), freight room (18' × 24'), and a lineman's room.

Unlike a traditional railroad depot, the Mackinaw Depot served two essential functions. The passenger station welcomed travelers boarding and departing electric interurban cars, while the adjoining substation converted high-voltage alternating current into the 600-volt direct current needed to power the electric railway.

From Mackinaw, passengers could travel throughout central Illinois with connections to destinations including:

- Peoria
- Bloomington

- Decatur
- Springfield
- Champaign-Urbana
- St. Louis

The depot also handled far more than passengers. Every day, Illinois Traction cars carried:

- Mail
- Express packages
- Farm products
- Grain
- Coal
- Manufactured goods

For many local businesses and farmers, the depot served as an important shipping point, making it a vital part of Mackinaw's economy as well as its transportation network.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the depot bustled with activity. Passenger cars arrived regularly throughout the day, while freight movements supplied local merchants and carried agricultural products to markets across central Illinois. The depot became a familiar gathering place where residents welcomed visitors, boarded trains for business or pleasure, and remained connected to neighboring communities.

As automobile ownership increased and improved highways spread across Illinois, fewer travelers relied on the interurban. Passenger service gradually declined, and in 1953 Illinois Terminal ended electric passenger operations through Mackinaw, bringing more than four decades of service at the depot to a close.

Although railroad operations ended, the building itself survived.

Following the end of passenger service:

- The electrical equipment was removed.
- The depot stood vacant for many years and gradually deteriorated.
- In 1978, the Mackinaw Historical Society successfully helped secure the depot's listing on the National Register of Historic Places, recognizing its architectural and historical significance.
- In 1998, the building was purchased and carefully restored by Beth Wiegand, preserving the building while giving the historic structure a new purpose.

Today, the Mackinaw Depot remains one of the Village's most treasured historic landmarks. More than a century after it was built, it continues to tell the story of the electric railway that connected Mackinaw with communities across central Illinois.



Chapter 3

The Mackinaw Junction



Mackinaw Junction Depot of the Illinois Terminal Railroad Traction System near Mackinaw, Illinois. 1915

While the Mackinaw Depot welcomed passengers and freight, the operational center of the Illinois Traction System in this area was Mackinaw Junction. Located just south of the Village, the junction was far more than a simple railroad crossing—it was one of the most important operating centers on the Illinois Traction System in central Illinois.

Why was it called a "junction"?

A railroad junction is a location where two or more rail lines meet. At Mackinaw, three major routes converged:

- Northwest to Peoria
- Northeast to Bloomington
- South to Lincoln, Springfield, Decatur, and St. Louis

Because of this strategic location, trains arriving from several directions met at Mackinaw Junction before continuing to their destinations. Passenger cars, freight trains, express shipments, and maintenance equipment all passed through the junction, making it one of the busiest points on the Illinois Traction System.



Illinois Terminal Railroad, Conductor pulls switch at Mackinaw Junction on Decatur-Bloomington-Peoria Interurban line, 1950

Why was it important?

At its height, dozens of passenger and freight movements passed through Mackinaw Junction each day.

The junction controlled traffic over much of the Illinois Traction System's Northern Division. Passenger trains, express cars, freight trains, and maintenance equipment all depended on the dispatcher at Mackinaw Junction to keep trains moving safely over single-track lines.



Illinois

Terminal Interurban Train is at Mackinaw Junction, Illinois. circa 1950.

The Dispatcher's Office

The most important building at Mackinaw Junction was the dispatcher's office.

From this office, railroad dispatchers directed train movements across much of the Illinois Traction System's Northern Division. Using telegraph and telephone communications, they:

- Controlled train movements.
- Issued train orders.
- Coordinated schedules between Peoria, Bloomington, Springfield, Decatur, and St. Louis.
- Ensured trains met safely on the railroad's predominantly single-track lines.

Without the dispatchers, the system simply could not have operated efficiently or safely. Their work kept trains moving throughout central Illinois every day.

The Fire of 1925

One of the most dramatic events in Mackinaw Junction's history occurred on January 8, 1925.

Following a severe ice storm, damaged telephone wires came into contact with a 33,000-volt transmission line, igniting the dispatcher's office.

Dispatcher William L. Knowles rushed inside to save company records before barely escaping the burning building. As flames engulfed the structure, the crew of the northbound

sleeper train The Owl arrived and assisted in the rescue. Despite their efforts, the dispatcher's office and nearly all of its records were destroyed.

Rebuilding the Junction

The Illinois Traction System moved quickly to restore operations.

Immediately after the fire, dispatching continued from a temporary office created inside a retired interurban car placed on the ground at Mackinaw Junction. In 1926, a new two-story brick dispatcher's office was completed, allowing Mackinaw Junction to continue serving as the control center for the Northern Division. Dispatching remained there until 1929, when operations were centralized in Springfield as part of a company-wide reorganization during the early years of the Great Depression.



Train 44

Car 280 running as Decatur–Peoria train 44 at Mackinaw Junction, June 19, 1950.

William D. Middleton

Passenger Service

Many of the Illinois Traction System's best-known passenger trains passed through Mackinaw Junction, including:

- The Owl – overnight service between Peoria and St. Louis

- The Illini
- Capitol Limited
- The streamlined Flyers, introduced during modernization efforts in the late 1940s

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the junction handled dozens of passenger and freight movements each day, making it one of the busiest locations on the Illinois Traction System.

The End of an Era

Like the rest of the Illinois Traction System, Mackinaw Junction gradually declined as automobiles, buses, and improved highways became the preferred means of transportation.

Passenger service through Mackinaw ended in 1953, and the tracks, sidings, and railroad facilities were eventually removed. Today, little remains of the once-busy junction itself.

The Mackinaw Depot stands as the community's most visible reminder of the electric interurban era and of the important role Mackinaw played in one of the nation's largest interurban rail systems.

Today, the Mackinaw Depot is the primary surviving reminder of what was once one of central Illinois' busiest interurban railroad junctions.



IT interurban southbound on the St. Louis Main at Mackinaw Junction

Caption data from Dale Jenkins and the [Illinois Traction Society](#); photo courtesy the Bill Volkmer collection

Chapter 4

Decline of the Illinois Traction System and the Interurban

For nearly half a century, the Illinois Traction System connected communities throughout central Illinois, providing dependable transportation for passengers, mail, freight, and express shipments. Long before widespread automobile ownership, the electric interurban made travel between cities and small towns fast, affordable, and convenient. Residents of Mackinaw could board a train and travel to Peoria, Bloomington, Springfield, Decatur, Champaign-Urbana, and even St. Louis without owning an automobile.

Yet the very advances that transformed transportation eventually led to the interurban's decline.

During the 1920s, automobiles became increasingly affordable, giving families the freedom to travel whenever and wherever they wished rather than following railroad schedules. At the same time, state and federal investments in paved highways made automobile travel faster, safer, and more practical throughout rural Illinois.

Competition also increased from buses and trucks. Bus companies could provide passenger service without the expense of maintaining tracks, overhead power lines, substations, or depots. Likewise, trucking companies offered direct, door-to-door freight service, reducing the railroads' role in transporting goods.

As ridership declined, the Illinois Traction System continued to face the high cost of maintaining hundreds of miles of track, bridges, overhead wires, substations, electric railcars, and passenger stations. With fewer passengers and less freight revenue, the system became increasingly difficult to operate profitably.

The Great Depression further reduced both passenger traffic and freight shipments. In an effort to attract new riders, the Illinois Traction System introduced streamlined passenger equipment during the late 1940s. Although these modern trains reflected the company's commitment to innovation, they could not overcome the growing popularity of the automobile.

Following World War II, the decline accelerated. Returning veterans purchased automobiles in record numbers, suburban growth increased highway travel, and commercial trucking continued to expand. Passenger ridership continued to fall as more Americans chose the convenience and flexibility of personal transportation.

On February 21, 1953, Illinois Terminal discontinued passenger service through Mackinaw, bringing more than four decades of interurban service to an end. The Mackinaw Depot, once a busy center of transportation and commerce, closed its doors after serving the community for over forty years. Freight operations continued on portions of the Illinois Terminal Railroad for several years, but the era of electric interurban passenger service had come to a close.

Although the trains no longer travel through Mackinaw, the legacy of the Illinois Traction System endures. The depot remains as one of the Village's most significant historic landmarks

and stands as a reminder of a time when electric railroads connected communities across central Illinois, helping shape the growth of Mackinaw and countless other towns throughout the region.

The decline happened in stages:

- February 21, 1953: Illinois Terminal abandoned the main interurban line through Mackinaw between Mackinaw Junction and Forsyth (north of Decatur), ending regular service through the depot.
- April 26, 1953: The remaining stub operations were discontinued, ending the railroad's use of the Mackinaw Depot.
- The depot was then left vacant until preservation efforts began decades later.

Chapter 5

Preservation and Legacy

Although electric passenger service through Mackinaw ended in 1953, the story of the Mackinaw Depot was far from over. Across Illinois, hundreds of interurban depots, substations, and railroad structures disappeared as the electric railway era came to a close. Mackinaw's depot, however, survived, becoming one of the state's best-preserved reminders of a transportation system that once connected communities throughout the state.

Recognizing both its architectural significance and its role in Illinois transportation history, preservation advocates worked to ensure the depot would not be lost. Their efforts were rewarded in 1978, when the Mackinaw Depot was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The designation recognized the building not only for its distinctive Spanish Colonial Revival architecture but also for its uncommon design as both a passenger station and an electrical substation—one of only a handful of surviving examples in Illinois.

A new chapter in the depot's history began in 1998, when Beth Wiegand purchased the building and undertook its restoration. Great care was taken to preserve the depot's historic character while adapting it for a new use, allowing the building to once again become an active part of the community rather than a forgotten landmark.

Today, visitors can still appreciate many of the architectural features that made the depot unique more than a century ago. Its stucco exterior, red clay tile roof, broad overhanging eaves, and distinctive tower continue to reflect the optimism and craftsmanship of the interurban era. More than just an attractive historic building, the depot stands as a symbol of the innovation that once connected Mackinaw with communities across central Illinois.

The preservation of the Mackinaw Depot is a reminder that local history is worth protecting. Buildings like the depot tell the stories of the people who built them, worked within them, and depended upon them every day. They connect today's residents with the generations who helped shape the Village of Mackinaw and preserve an important chapter of Illinois history for those who will follow.

Chapter 6

Interesting Facts

Did You Know?

- The depot served two purposes under one roof—welcoming passengers while also housing an electrical substation that powered the interurban railway.
- The Village of Mackinaw once purchased its electricity from the Illinois Traction System. Several neighboring communities also relied on the traction company for electric power.
- Mackinaw Junction was one of the most important operating centers on the Illinois Traction System. Three major rail lines converged there, making the village a key transportation hub in central Illinois.
- At its peak, the Illinois Traction System operated more than 600 miles of electrified railway and approximately 165 trains each day, making it one of the largest interurban systems in the United States.
- The Illinois Traction System proudly advertised itself as "The Road of Good Service," reflecting its reputation for dependable passenger and freight transportation.
- Following a devastating fire in 1925, train dispatchers temporarily worked from a retired interurban railcar until a new dispatcher's office was completed in 1926.
- The Mackinaw Depot was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, recognizing its architectural significance and its important role in Illinois transportation history.
- Thanks to local preservation efforts, the Mackinaw Depot remains one of the Village's most recognizable landmarks and one of the best-preserved reminders of Illinois' interurban era.
- The Mackinaw Depot was built between 1909 and 1910 using standard Illinois Traction System plans and is one of only a handful of surviving depots of its kind in Illinois.

A Lasting Legacy

For more than forty years, the Mackinaw Depot stood as a symbol of progress, opportunity, and connection. Long before modern highways and automobiles, it was where neighbors gathered, families welcomed loved ones home, and travelers began journeys across central Illinois. Farmers shipped their harvests, merchants received goods for their businesses, and residents boarded electric railcars that connected their small village to a much larger world.

The depot was more than a railroad station—it was part of everyday life in Mackinaw. It represented a time when the Illinois Traction System brought people together, supported local commerce, and helped shape the growth of communities throughout the region. Like so many small-town landmarks, it became woven into the memories of generations who lived and worked here.

Although the last passenger train departed in 1953, the story of the Mackinaw Depot did not end. Thanks to the dedication of preservationists, community leaders, property owners, and local residents, this remarkable building was saved for future generations. Today, it stands as one of the Village's most treasured historic landmarks and one of the few surviving reminders of Illinois' interurban era.

Historic places preserve more than old buildings—they preserve the stories of the people who came before us. They remind us of where we have been, help us understand how our community has grown, and inspire us to protect the heritage that makes Mackinaw unique.

As you leave this booklet and perhaps take one last look at the depot, imagine the sound of an approaching interurban car, the conversations on the platform, and the excitement of a new journey about to begin. Though the trains no longer stop here, the Mackinaw Depot remains a lasting symbol of our community's rich history. May it continue to remind future generations of the people, the progress, and the spirit that helped shape the Village of Mackinaw.



The railroad may be gone, but the Mackinaw Depot remains as a reminder of a time when electric rail connected neighbors, communities, and opportunities across central Illinois. Through its preservation, the story of Mackinaw's interurban era continues to inspire future generations.