UNCOVERING THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD:
2011 EXCAVATIONS AT THE SITE OF RIVER STATION IN LOS ANGELES STATE HISTORIC PARK

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The Southern Pacific Railroad transported people and supplies across southern California. Connecting Los Angeles to the eastern United States, it sparked a commercial agricultural boom for the region. Established in 1875 and active until 1992, Southern Pacific Railroad's River Station was the area's first station and shops facility, located adjacent to the city center, and helped transform Los Angeles from a small pueblo into a bustling metropolis. At Los Angeles State Historic Park, excavations in 2011 by California Department of Parks and Recreation archaeologists focused upon the hotel and depot site, a water closet, and ice house, during which the archaeologists uncovered exterior brick wall foundations, brick piers, and terracotta pipes, as well as trash deposits with ceramics and glass bottles. Excavations in 2011 also sought evidence for a nineteenth-century transfer table and a varnishing and paint shop but were not successful in finding unequivocal archaeological evidence.

At times, we archaeologists may have the opportunity to study the vestiges of certain industries and advances in technology that have greatly influenced people and shaped the cultural landscape of entire regions. The railroad is one such advance that has shaped history, particularly the economic and population growth of regions, influenced construction over broad stretches of the land, and effected significant changes in other realms of society.

The building remains and artifacts from River Station, a nineteenth-century general shops facility, freight warehouse, and depot constructed and operated by Southern Pacific Railroad beginning in 1875, are a reminder of the important role Los Angeles played in the building of the southern transcontinental railroad line connecting the West Coast with the Midwest and East Coast (Figure 1). The success of the Southern Pacific Railroad also helped sell southern California and Los Angeles to the rest of the country in the nineteenth century. River Station served as the arrival point for thousands of travelers and immigrants who flocked to the Southland, such as during the Great Boom of the 1880s (California State Parks 2005:20-2; Mullaly and Petty 2002:9, 20-22, 32-33). Railroad historians Larry Mullaly and Bruce Petty in their book The Southern Pacific in Los Angeles, 1873-1996 point out that Southern Pacific was “always the railroad of Southern California.”

In 1875, Southern Pacific opened a freight house and depot to complement the newly constructed sets of tracks. In 1879, the Pacific Hotel was built next to the existing depot to expand services for passengers (California State Parks 2005:20) (Figure 2). River Station continued to expand soon after its initial opening and eventually consisted of a roundhouse with turntable, freight house, blacksmith shop, machine shop, transfer table, car shop, paint shop, coal dock, and other facilities (California State Parks 2005:20; Mullaly and Petty 2002:10; see also Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. maps) (Figure 3).

By the 1880s, Southern Pacific had become the largest employer in Los Angeles, with River Station being the headquarters for its operations in Southern California (California State Parks 2005:20) (Figure 4). The shops buildings and associated functions that have been the subject of our ongoing excavation program were removed from the present-day Los Angeles State Historic Park (LASHP) by 1904 to a new Lincoln Heights facility. Southern Pacific continued to use the land in the current state park as an important freight operations facility after 1904, until the company ceased operations in 1996.

LASHP, an open space located at the periphery of downtown Los Angeles, is today the site of River Station. In 2001, California State Parks took possession of the parcel where the Southern Pacific railroad facility once stood (California State Parks 2006:6, 13, 26). Historical research on this 32-acre parcel was conducted by State Parks Historian Jim Newland beginning the same year (California State
Parks 2005, 2006). Today, the park is consistently used for many day-use activities. The present program of archaeological research within the park by archaeological staff at the Southern Service Center has been initiated to document evidence of nineteenth-century buildings and the current condition of buried structural remains at CA-LAN-3120. Our archaeological endeavors provide tangible evidence to guide the design and interpretation planning for the park (Figure 5).

So, what is a good strategy, when your project area has no surface expressions of cultural remains but historical research indicates that numerous buildings for an historically significant facility stood here in the late nineteenth century? Upon recommendation from State Parks Archaeologist Michael Sampson, Dr. Dan Larson at Cal State Long Beach was contracted in 2002 to conduct geophysical surveys within the new state park, which at the time was not yet developed. According to Larson, several “geophysical signatures” identified during the fieldwork corresponded well with historic building locations documented on the 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for River Station, such as the roundhouse, turntable, machine shop, car shop, depot, hotel, and an icehouse (Larson 2004:3-7, 13-18). Guided by these geophysical survey data and historical research, the initial 2004 State Parks test excavations under the direction of Herb Dallas exposed a portion of the nineteenth-century River Station turntable (Figure 6). In addition, several exploratory trenches at the hotel and depot site yielded linear brick-and-mortar wall features, but the crew was unable to return to the park at that time to more fully expose these features (Sampson 2010).

Under the direction of Michael Sampson, the 2008 fieldwork exposed the end of the wooden foundation of the turntable, the turntable center, a repair pit of the machine shop, and a portion of the roundhouse. The 2009 excavations within LASHP were focused upon the site of the car shop, where exterior walls and interior architectural and structural support features were uncovered (Figure 7). In 2010 and summer 2011, State Parks archaeologists conducted archaeological fieldwork at the site of the roundhouse, where steam engines would have been brought for routine maintenance at River Station. We
Figure 2. Pacific Hotel “passenger eating station” adjoining Los Angeles depot.

Figure 3. River Station Roundhouse.
have successfully uncovered evidence of service bays, an exterior wall of the roundhouse, and the two ends of this building, which would have been semicircular in shape (Sampson 2011:5-7) (Figure 8).

In September 2011, under the direction of Michael Sampson, we turned our attention to the hotel and icehouse sites to determine their location for development and interpretation of the park. Guided by information obtained from the 2004 exploratory trenches, in which structural remains were uncovered, and the 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for River Station, we uncovered, 3 ft. below the surface, the northeast end of the hotel, in particular two sleeping rooms in which railroad passengers would have
stayed while traveling through River Station. Four walls of these sleeping room features made of brick and mortar were uncovered, and the remnants were approximately 1.5 ft. high and 9 in. thick, with three tiers (Dodds 2011; Sampson 2011:7) (Figure 9). Unfortunately, the archaeologists could not fully uncover the hotel, because the wall ran underneath a pedestrian pathway that they were forbidden to destroy. From the Sanborn map, the hotel is estimated to have been approximately 30 ft. wide, and archaeologists uncovered 22.8 ft. of it (see Sanborn Fire Insurance Co. maps). This indicates that one more sleeping room was underneath the pathway but could not be accessed.

On the 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, a small structure labeled “W.C.” was depicted next to the hotel and depot, and this was determined to be the water closet associated with the hotel. In addition to the two sleeping rooms, the excavations uncovered 10 brick-and-mortar piers (Figure 10), three metal pipes 2 in. in diameter, and one 7 in. diameter terracotta pipe at the hotel and water closet (Figure 11). The metal and terracotta pipes are most likely associated with the water closet. No wall features were uncovered at the water closet site, but the piers surrounding the pipes suggest that the water closet had been supported by upright beams and likely was not as substantial a structure as the hotel (Dodds 2011). At the hotel, archaeologists discovered a saw-cut rib bone and “T-bone”, a 6.5 in. rusted railroad spike, numerous broken glass bottle pieces, and broken white ceramic tea cup and saucer pieces that appeared to be Asian-style. The artifacts recovered range from approximately 1875 to 1904, when the hotel and depot were in operation at the River Station (Dodds 2011; California State Parks 2011).

Farther to the northeast, archaeologists found the brick-and-mortar wall features of the ice house 5 ft. below the surface. The ice house provided the ice necessary to keep the cars cold to be able to ship
Southern California’s produce back East, which was an innovation that ultimately significantly bolstered Southern California’s agricultural economy. Two corners and three walls of the ice house were uncovered (Figure 12). The other two walls were not fully uncovered because of time constraints. The wall features ranged from 1 to 1.5 ft. thick, with three to four rows of bricks to provide the insulation to keep the ice house cool (Dodds 2011). Our interpretation of the Sanborn map suggests that the ice house would have been approximately 55 ft. long, and about 17 ft. was exposed during the excavation.

In October 2011, State Parks also initiated testing at the site of the Painting and Varnishing Shop and Transfer Table. We did not uncover the types of substantial foundations discovered at other historic building locations within the site of River Station. However, twentieth-century use of this site as a busy rail yard and the possibility the latter two buildings did not require substantial foundations can potentially account for the lack of good archaeological evidence.

So, our adventure in Industrial Archaeology in downtown Los Angeles has thus far been successful due to ample background research, careful application of historical data to the fieldwork, geophysical data, and the hard work on-site by dedicated parks archaeologists. In the future, we plan to return to Los Angeles State Historic Park to continue our investigations of the River Station to better understand Los Angeles’s past while providing interpretive opportunities to the visiting public. Fortunately, the building remains are located within a State Park unit and will be protected in perpetuity.

Figure 7. 2009 car shop excavation with exterior walls and structural supports.
Figure 8. 2010 roundhouse excavation with exterior walls, service bays, and terracotta pipes that are used to remove liquid waste from steam engines.

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Figure 9. Two hotel sleeping rooms.
Figure 10. Hotel sleeping rooms and brick piers.
Figure 11. Piers and metal pipes uncovered at water closet.
Figure 12. Ice house remnants.