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Glossary of Railroad Terms

Alignment: The position of track in a horizontal or vertical plane.

Ash pit: Shallow pit used for the dumping of ash and cinders from locomotives.

Ballast: Material, such as crushed stone, gravel, cinders, burnt clay, or slag, that functions to distribute the load of the track and trains over the roadbed and drains water from the track.

Branch line: A secondary line that branches off of a main line.

Bridge: A structure that replaces the roadbed for some distance to provide passage over a body of water, chasm, road, or other feature that cannot support or interrupts the roadbed. It usually consists of two parts—substructure (abutments and piers) and superstructure.

Classification yard: A freight yard where trains are broken up and assembled by shifting cars with a switcher locomotive or by using a hump.

Coaling facilities: Coal storage and handling structures and equipment positioned near the track to deliver coal to steam locomotives.

Coaling station: A structure for storing coal and transferring it into locomotive tenders.

Culvert: A structure, usually a single-unit (a stone box or pipe), which creates a small opening in the roadbed (with some amount of roadbed above it) for the drainage of water.

Cutoff: A rail line constructed off of another to provide a shorter route to a given destination.

Cut: That part of the right-of-way which is excavated to provide a more gentle gradient for ascent or descent of a hill or mountain.

Depot: A building positioned parallel to the tracks used to receive, sort, and load any combination of passengers and freight.

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Depot, Combination: Depot designed to receive both passengers and freight in locations where the amount of freight or the volume of passenger business does not warrant the construction of a separate freight-house or passenger depot.

Depot, Flag: Small, passenger depot at which a limited number of trains stop, usually on the signal of a flag. Historically, a flag depot may have been an open-air or enclosed, gable- or shed-roofed building with a simple platform.

Depot, Passenger: Depot designed solely for the accommodation of passenger business. Historically, small passenger depots consisted of a waiting room, ticket office, and baggage room. Larger, first-class passenger depots provided space for many additional functions, including restrooms, smoking rooms, dining rooms, offices for mail, telegraph, and wire services, news stands, supply rooms, lounges for conductors and trainmen, and administrative offices.

Depot, Union: A union depot united all of the railroads serving a city in a single facility, consolidating the various railroads' station facilities within a building or complex.

Division point: The location in a railroad corridor where one administrative and operational unit of a railroad ends and another begins. Division points often include railroad yards and maintenance shops.

Double track: Mainline constructed of two tracks, in which one track supports traffic flow in one direction, and the other track supports traffic flow in the opposite direction.

Engine house: A railroad shop building used to provide the regular mechanical maintenance for a railroad's locomotives. Historically, these buildings were of the "square-" or "round-" house variety.

Fill: Earth or rock, used to make a level roadbed across a valley or depression.

Freight house: The station facility of a railroad line for receiving and delivering freight.

Grade or gradient: The ratio of elevation gained or lost per distance traveled measured in feet, expressed as a percent. The base is 100 feet, so a 1 percent grade represents a 1-foot elevation change in 100 feet of travel.

Grade Separation: A railroad crossing where the grade of the railroad bed or bridge is separated from another railroad line, a vehicular roadway, a water course, or a topographic feature.

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Granger railroad: A term used for railroads that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hauled large volumes of grain from the primary grain-growing area of the Midwest, extending from Kansas, Missouri, and Illinois north to Canada.

Hinterland: The region situated beyond metropolitan centers but linked to those centers through lines of economic exchange and interaction.

Hump yard: A switching yard with an elevated track or hump over which cars are pushed by a switch engine so that they travel by gravity to classification tracks.

Ice House: Insulated building used to store ice for use in refrigerated and passenger cars.

Interlocking tower: A structure positioned at the point where two tracks intersect in order to house the automated switches that control the crossing of the two tracks.

Intermodal: The use of more than one type of transportation system or vehicle to move freight and passengers.

Interurban (routes): Between two cities.

Limited service: Express passenger or freight service with no stops between major terminals.

Lead track: Railroad track used to connect the through tracks with yard tracks.

Mainline: Rail line used for through trains or as the principal artery of a system, to which branches, yards, and spurs are connected. Mainline tracks are typically constructed for the operation of trains at higher speeds, and these trains are typically given preference in time tables over branch lines. Mainlines are also maintained to a higher standard than yards and branch lines.

Maintenance shops: A group of several use-specific shop buildings located at junctions and division points for the provision of maintenance on railroad rolling stock. The types of buildings that comprise a maintenance shop complex include machine shops, oil houses, blacksmith shops, carpentry shops, wheel foundries, and mill rooms, and shops for painting, carpentry, electrical, and special work could be completed.

Motive power: The locomotives owned and operated by a railroad.

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Rail yard: A system of tracks branching from a common track used for switching, making up trains and storing cars.

Railroad bed: A layer of soils applied to the ground surface to provide a smooth regular plane for the tracks and to uniformly distribute loads from trains, tracks, and ballast.

Railroad corridor: The linear area that encompasses the right of way within which a railroad operated and all of the buildings, structures, and objects that worked together for the dedicated purposed of running trains to transport freight and passengers.

Railroad roadway: The portion of the railroad right of way modified to support the railroad tracks.

Railroad shops: Structures and buildings in which the building and repairing of railroad equipment is performed.

Railroad station: Dedicated stopping points within the right of way where trains load or unload passengers or freight.

Railroad track: A structure consisting of a pair of parallel lines of rails with their crossties, on which a railroad train runs. Standard-gauge railroad tracks are typically 4 feet, 8 ½ inches in width, while narrow-gauge tracks are 3 feet wide.

Railroad yard office: Building occupied by employees working in a transfer or freight yard.

Retarder yard: A switching yard in which the movement of cars, after they are released from a locomotive, are controlled by an employee in a control tower.

Right of way: The area owned by a railroad for the purpose of operating a railroad.

Rolling stock: The various types of freight and passenger cars owned and operated by a railroad.

Roundhouse: A form of engine house constructed with multiple engine berths in a radial pattern; it could have a segmental plan with the berths occupying a segment of a circle or be a closed or full-circle plan.

Section house: Dwelling erected along the rail line used to house the section maintenance crew.

Short line: A rail line that operates over a limited distance.

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Siding: Side tracks that connect to through tracks at both ends.

Signal: A manual or automated device that indicates to the driver of a train information about the line ahead.

Sleepers: European term for railroad ties.

Sorting yard: See classification yard.

Spur: Side tracks that connect to through tracks at one end.

Station platform: A structure that facilitates movement between railroad cars and railroad depots and warehouses; it may be a low platform, at grade, or a structure raised to the height of approximately 4 feet above grade.

Stub line: A railroad corridor that terminates at a point with no through service.

Tender: A car that carries extra fuel or water for rolling stock.

Through route: Railroad corridor that provided through service.

Through service: When railroads offer transportation between major destination points without needing to transfer passengers or freight.

Through tracks: The tracks that continue through a railroad station or yard area where there are several sidings and/or spurs.

Tie or Cross-tie: Ties are pieces of timber that measure 6-by-8 inches to 7-by-9 inches in cross section and 8 to 9 feet in length that are laid perpendicular to the rails and are bedded in the upper portion of the ballast.

Tie plate: A metal plate providing a bearing surface for the rail on the crosstie.

Toe: The base of an embankment where the slope levels off to the naturally occurring ground surface.

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Trackage rights: The legal right of one railroad company to use the tracks of another, as agreed to by the companies concerned or their predecessors.

Transfer line: A railroad corridor whose primary function is to transfer trains between through routes, to connect to large classification yards, or to provide a bypass around heavy traffic areas.

Transfer table and turntable: Structures used to maneuver into engine houses.

Trestle: A structure used to cross a deep river valley or to cross minor streams and gullies; usually a braced framework with 12- to 14-foot spans of wood piles or framed lumber.

Truss: A geometric framework of iron or steel members in various states of tension or compression, used for railroad bridges.

Viaduct: A structure used to cross a deep river valley or to cross minor streams and gullies; usually a structure of iron or steel members.

Water tank: A wood or metal tank used to fill locomotive steam boilers, generally located near or within to railroad stations and yards, and accompanied by a pump house.

Worker shelter: Small structure in which watchmen, flagmen shanties, and signal maintainers could take shelter.