

Erie Railroad Depot

The first depot in Kent was simply a large wooden box of a building, but it served the same purpose as the later one. It was a place for people to wait for trains as well as a place where freight could be deposited or picked up.

By 1874 this first depot was thought to be unattractive as well as inadequate and the citizens of Kent asked the A&GW to build a depot that would better reflect the pride Kentites had in their hometown railroad. The railroad agreed, provided that the town would pay \$4,000 of the estimated \$10,000 cost. In fact, the depot contribution was over-subscribed by \$400. This second depot was constructed of local brick and was, when it opened in 1875, second only to Cleveland's in size.

Inside the depot was a large waiting room for passengers, a lunch counter, and plenty of space for freight shipments. The railroad's Agent was its chief representative in Kent and for many years the post was held by George Hinds. The long one-story building was punctuated by three large towers, adding to its imposing appearance. In the central tower living quarters were placed to house the Agent; later this space was given over to the people that worked at the downstairs lunch counter, such as the Elgin family, one of whose children was born here. The south tower contained beds where train crews could rest and sleep on their layovers. In the north tower Mr. Hinds placed books that could be borrowed and read by crewmen. As the number of crewmen increased they could not all sleep in the depot tower and the Erie decided it was not in the library business. Mr. Hinds took his book collection elsewhere and thus was formed what became the Kent Free Library, which by 1902 had its own building.

In the somnambulant world of small-town 19th century America, the depot was the place where news came first via telegraph, where little boys and old men killed time while watching trains, where passengers got their first vivid impressions of Kent, and where soldiers and sailors left their families and their previous lives. As the years passed, distinguished visitors to Kent State University, as well as countless students and townsfolk, passed through the depot on their business.

The depot was considerably altered in appearance in 1951 by the Erie Railroad and not for the better. Tall windows were largely bricked up, rooms reconfigured, and gradually the depot became less and less used as people turned increasingly to auto and airplane travel. By 1967 the depot served only one train a day in each direction, and it became quite run-down. In January 1970 the last trains departed Kent, and the depot was boarded up and abandoned. It seemed a matter of time until it would be demolished, one way or another. Who could have predicted then that the restoration of this building would lead the way to the revitalization of Kent's downtown?

The Car Shops

Railroading was America's first high-tech industry, and its equipment was developed, built, and repaired in shops such as this. When the Atlantic & Great Western Railroad opened in 1863, the company established its shops in Franklin Mills, later called Kent, Ohio. Marvin Kent's influence as the railroad's president, and his gift of land valued at \$15,000, brought to his home town a complex of buildings that would be the nexus of the town's economy for nearly sixty years.

Constructed of local stone by some of the same German-American masons who had built the canal lock here 20 years earlier, the shops were an impressive sight; the main building was two stories high with three cupolas. The employment of several hundred men here increased Kent's population dramatically and had the permanent effect of causing many new houses to be built for them and their families on Kent's south side. For many years the car shops employed more than half of all the working men in town. By 1918, some 800 of them worked here for the A&GW's successor, the Erie Railroad, a New York to Chicago trunk line railroad.

The Kent shops made many different things for the railroad. Some locomotives were manufactured here in the 1870's, but mostly the shops built wooden passenger cars and freight cars for the Erie. The shops employed highly skilled mechanics and artisans as well as common laborers. The shops grounds were full of lumber, barrels of nails and screws, wheel sets and supplies such as paint and glass. The shops turned out hundreds of cars for the Erie. The passenger cars in particular were works of real beauty and artistry. The box cars, gondolas, cabooses and other rolling stock were built solidly enough to last for decades.

For a number of years, the car shop grounds functioned as a sort of public square for Kent. Because so many men worked here, politicians looking for votes in Kent gave their speeches during lunch hour. The shop grounds, being in a large open area, were also where Kent's citizens gathered to hear a band concert or see fireworks on holidays.

The work here was hard and injuries were common. The shops were cold in winter. The twelve-hour workday was normal, and no one was over-paid. The Erie in Kent did not experience the worst of the labor struggles, some violent, that took place in other towns such as Pittsburgh, but there were strikes here nonetheless. This, plus the change to steel cars built by manufacturers, the Erie's perpetual financial crises and the consolidation of its facilities led to the closing of the Kent car shops in 1922.

What had once been a busy workplace of great importance to Kent now sat empty and neglected. One night in 1930 an arsonist set a fire which spread quickly throughout the dried

wooden building interiors, whose floors, long soaked in grease, oil, and paint all contributed to a spectacular conflagration. When it was over, only the stone building and the brick shed that we see today were spared. The ruins were later demolished and cleared away, and the car shops, once so important to Kent's economic development, were gone.