

Turning the Trains

From 1856 to 1971, Folsom was a railroad town. For most of those years, the Folsom depot was the last stop from Sacramento.

Before the trains could return to Sacramento, the locomotives had to be turned around. Until 1913, they were rotated on railroad turntables. Several turntables operated on this site. The first one, built in 1856 by the Sacramento Valley Rail Road, was the first railroad turntable in the West.

The turntable in front of you was erected in 1999 from the original plans for a turntable built here in 1891.

Only the locomotives and their tenders were turned. Operating the first turntable required the strength of several men, but the later A-frame turntables – which this one is – were so perfectly balanced that one person could turn an engine and tender in less than a minute. That was no small feat: Locomotives with tenders could weigh 70,000 pounds.

It was rare that a single person turned an engine. The daily arrival of the train drew crowds to downtown Folsom, and townsfolk and passengers eagerly volunteered to help.

In 1913, the railroad built a Y-shaped track at Bidwell Street to reverse the trains, and the turntable was dismantled. Its foundation lay buried until the site was excavated in the 1990s.

Steam trains stopped often to replenish their water from towers like the one above. Water towers once stood every few miles along the nation's rail lines. Folsom's rail yard had two of them.

Until the mid-20th century, most locomotives were powered by steam. Their tenders carried water and the fuel to heat it. Early western trains burned wood rather than coal.

One of the finds when the turntable site was excavated was the granite pivot stone from 1856. This rebuilt turntable rests on that original stone.

