

THE HISTORIC VENICE TRAIN DEPOT



The Historic Venice Train Depot, owned by Sarasota County, is the only surviving passenger station in the County. Located east of downtown Venice at 303 East Venice Avenue, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Since November 12, 2003, a cadre of trained docents from the Venice Area Historical Society (VAHS) has provided tours of the Depot building and campus to visitors from around the world. On display in the Depot waiting rooms are informative panels and exhibits developed by VAHS, illustrating both Venice history and Depot history. The presence of VAHS at the Depot is a major effort in preserving and celebrating the Depot's history and its historically significant architecture.

To learn more about becoming a docent, please contact us at depot@veniceareahistoricalsociety.org.



THE HISTORIC VENICE TRAIN DEPOT

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is located at

303 E. Venice Ave., Venice, FL 34285.

From U.S. 41 Bypass, turn west onto E. Venice Avenue. Just before the bridge, bear right. Continue through the Seaboard Avenue intersection to the Depot on the right.



941-412-0151

veniceareahistoricalsociety.org

The only surviving passenger station in Sarasota County

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Located in the Rollins W. Coakley Railroad Park

The Depot is open
Saturdays, 10 am - 1 pm, year-round.
Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays,
10 am - 3 pm, November - April.
Check website below for holiday schedule.
Appointments required for Group Tours of 10 or more.

For more information, contact the **Venice Area Historical Society**
veniceareahistoricalsociety.org
941-412-0151

depot@veniceareahistoricalsociety.org

VENICE TRAIN DEPOT TIMELINE

- 1927** Depot constructed by Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE). First passenger train departs March 27th.
- 1928** BLE departs Venice.
- 1929** Venice becomes ghost town. Stock market crashes.
- 1933-1970** Kentucky Military Institute uses tracks and Depot.
- 1942-1945** Army personnel and materials arrive via Depot.
- 1960-1991** Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus train arrives/departs annually.
- 1964** Civil Rights Act ends segregation. Separate waiting rooms abolished.
- 1971** Last passenger train leaves Depot April 30th. Depot continues as freight depot.
- 1975** Depot closes.
- 1989** Depot listed on National Register of Historic Places.
- 1992** Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus uses tracks to remove equipment.
- 1992-1997** Tracks used exclusively for freight.
- 1999** Sarasota County purchases Depot.
- 2003** Depot listed on City of Venice Register of Historic Places. \$2.3 million renovation completed. Restored Depot dedicated October 24th. Depot classified as a Sarasota County Park. SCAT bus system hub moved to Depot November 1st.
- 2005** Rollins W. Coakley Railroad Park dedicated March 22nd. Gunther Gebel-Williams Statue dedicated December 5th.
- 2008** Legacy Trail Grand Opening held March 28th.
- 2010-2011** Legacy Trail bridges (U.S. 41 Bypass, Roberts Bay, Dona Bay) completed.
- 2012** 85th Anniversary of Depot celebrated. New displays unveiled.

HISTORY OF THE HISTORIC VENICE TRAIN DEPOT

In 1903, a subsidiary of the Seaboard Air Line Railway brought the first train into what is now Sarasota County. In 1911, the tracks were extended 16.5 miles south at the request of Bertha Honore Palmer, a Chicago businesswoman who was a major landholder in the area. Palmer named the new terminal Venice. The original train stop and siding were located near the current corner of St. Augustine Avenue and Tampa Avenue West.



In 1925, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) purchased land to develop the City of Venice according to a plan drafted by city planner John Nolen. The BLE recognized that a new depot would be essential for importing materials and attracting potential land buyers and visitors to Venice. Completed in 1927 at the height of Venice's early development, the new Depot was the last structure built before the BLE closed operations in Venice in 1928.

Designed by the architectural firm of Walker and Gillette, the Depot is historically and architecturally significant. Built as a racially segregated building with two waiting rooms, it was 50 feet wide and 400 feet long. The Depot's architecture embodies the Mediterranean Revival style planned for the City of Venice. When opened on March 27, 1927, the Depot was heralded as the finest station on the Seaboard Air Line Railway.

Over the years, many station agents served at the Depot, with responsibilities for reservations, ticketing, and freight. Of these agents, VAHS knows the most about Devon Grady Hough (years of service in Venice 1949-1956) and Donald W. DeCoster, Sr. (1963-1975). Both men had long careers with the Seaboard. They are remembered for their courteous service to the traveling public and their involvement in the Venice community. The Donald W. DeCoster, Sr. Exhibit at the Depot illustrates the work of a station agent.

The last passenger train departed from the Depot in 1971, but freight traffic continued until 1997. The Depot building closed in 1975, and it subsequently fell into disrepair and decline. Sarasota County purchased the structure in 1999 and renovated it in 2002-2003. Dedicated on October 24, 2003, the restored Depot stands as a magnificent representation of the architecture of early Venice. The renovation added 40 feet on the south side of the building, and the additional space accommodates the Sarasota County Area Transit (SCAT) bus system hub at the Depot.



The original Depot cost the BLE \$47,500. The renovation cost \$2.3 million: \$1.4 million funded by the Florida Department of Transportation, \$825,000 by Sarasota County, and \$75,000 by the City of Venice.



On March 22, 2005, a portion of the Depot campus was designated the Rollins W. Coakley Railroad Park. The park was named for a former president of VAHS in recognition of his tireless efforts in preserving and restoring the Depot.

The park includes a red caboose, donated to Sarasota County by CSX Transportation, Inc. After extensive restoration, paid for by the County, the caboose was placed on the site on October 16, 2003.

Also on the site is the Gunther Gebel-Williams statue. Gunther Gebel-Williams was a world famous animal trainer and mega-star of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. He arrived in the U.S. in 1968 and became known as "The Greatest Wild Animal Trainer of All Time" and "The Lord of the Rings."



His training and performing techniques changed the American circus forever. Gebel-Williams' first Venice performance was in January 1969. He subsequently took up residence in Venice, and the city adopted him as its favorite son.

The Gunther Gebel-Williams statue was created by artist Edward Kasprovicz. Kasprovicz was selected in 2003 by the community-wide Gunther Gebel-Williams Statue Steering Committee, chaired by George McLean, a former president of VAHS. The statue, the first piece of commissioned public art in Venice, was turned over to Sarasota County in 2005 for display in the Rollins W. Coakley Railroad Park.



Rollins W. Coakley Railroad Park.

THE DEPOT'S ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF VENICE

The 1927 Depot was the entry point for three institutions that influenced Venice's growth and development in the twentieth century.

First, in 1932, the Kentucky Military Institute (KMI) chose Venice as its winter headquarters. From 1933 to 1970, the KMI cadets arrived by train at the Depot after New Year's Day and left around Easter. Family members and friends also came to Venice to visit and enjoy the mild winter weather.



Second, in 1942, the U. S. Army established the Venice Army Air Base and utilized it until 1945. Its facilities were able to accommodate up to 6,000 people, and some 22,000 personnel were trained there. The railroad Depot was a prime entry point for people and material during the war, thereby playing a vital role in our nation's history.



Third, from 1960 to 1991, Venice was the winter headquarters of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Each winter, the circus train came to Venice and stayed for a month or two while performers prepared for a new season of circus acts in the Venice Circus Arena. Although the Depot had closed in 1975, the railroad tracks and Depot property were used by the circus during its winter stay in Venice until 1992 when the remaining circus equipment was removed from the Arena.



Photographs courtesy of Michael Radomski and Venice Museum and Archives.