

The Railroads of Fermilab

Stephen Kent

When the Fermilab site was originally laid out, it incorporated over 70 farm sites plus the town of Weston. Anyone studying a map of the lab site will be struck by the irregular geometry of its boundary. While the overall shape is roughly squarish, the sides are not parallel, nor are they continuous straight lines. It turns out that approximately half the boundary is defined, not by the borders of farms, but by three railroad lines that existed at the time. The three lines each have their own distinctive history, which will be covered in this article.

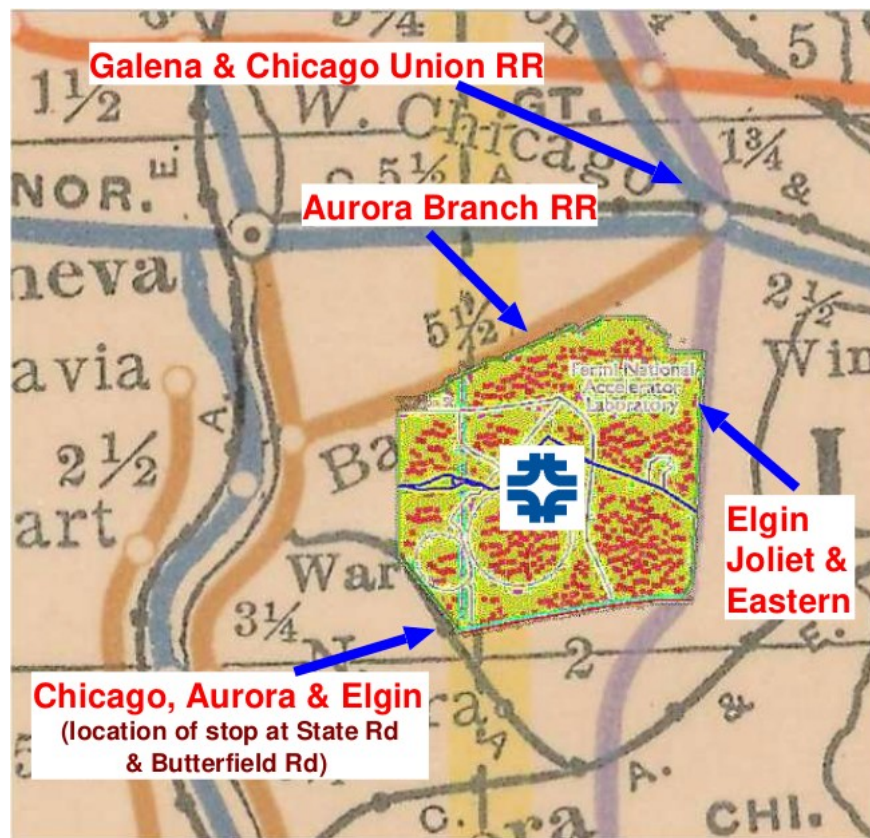


Figure 1. Outline of Fermilab site superposed on a railroad map of Illinois from 1927.

As an initial matter, the first railroad to be built in the Chicago area was the Galena and Chicago Union (GCU), which began construction around 1848. The route ran West from Chicago to present-day West Chicago, then North to Elgin and eventually to Freeport (never actually reaching Galena.) Today this line is owned and operated by Union Pacific. Even before it was completed, the railroad was a big success, and, in response, surrounding communities rushed to build branch lines to connect with it in order to take advantage of this new mode of transportation. The Aurora Branch Railroad was one of the first such lines, running from Aurora, North through Batavia, then East Northeast to join up with the GCU in West Chicago. This line, which started operation in 1850, now forms much of the North boundary of Fermilab. (The lab boundary actually extends slightly beyond but parallel to the line for much of its length.) The line originally carried a mix of both passenger and freight trains. The Aurora

Branch RR itself quickly grew and eventually became the Burlington Railroad (now the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe.) The original branch line is still in operation, although it no longer connects to the former GCU, now Union Pacific, line. The passenger depot in Batavia was located at the intersection of Webster and Van Buren. This building was later moved to the West side of the Fox River where it now houses the Batavia Historical Society and the Depot Museum.

| #83 | #87 | Miles | December 2, 1900 | #84 | #88 |
|---------|----------|-------|------------------|---------|----------|
| 7:45 am | 9:50 am | 0 | Aurora | 9:00 am | 12:10 pm |
| 8:15 am | 10:25 am | 7 | Batavia | 8:30 am | 11:39 am |
| ----- | 10:50 am | 12 | West Chicago | ----- | 11:25 am |



Figure 2. Burlington Railroad schedule for 1900

Figure 3. Former Aurora Branch Railroad Depot



Figure 4. An aerial view of the Fermilab “boneyard,” with the Burlington RR visible on the right.

Anyone entering the lab from the East by way of Batavia Road will cross the tracks of the railroad line that forms the Eastern boundary of the lab, which was known for much of its existence as the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern Railway (EJ&E). This “belt line” encircled Chicago and served to interconnect many of the other major lines that ran radially out from the city. The section of track running past the lab was constructed in 1888 with financing provided by J. P. Morgan. Eventually, ownership of the EJ&E passed to the US Steel Corporation, and much of its freight consisted of coal, coke, and iron ore being delivered to various steel mills along its route. Passenger service existed only for a brief time. The line is now owned by Canadian National and is still in operation.



Figure 5. Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern train 665 at West Chicago in 1987, preparing to head South and block traffic at the East entrance to the lab.

Finally, the Southwest boundary of the lab is formed by the former route of the Batavia branch of the Chicago, Aurora and Elgin (CAE) railroad. This electrified interurban railroad used high-speed streetcar-like trains to provide commuter and freight service into Chicago from towns and cities along the Fox River. It had a relatively short existence, from about 1902 to 1957, but during its peak years it was quite popular. The Batavia branch started at the South side of Wilson Street on the East side of the Fox River, ran South to Glenwood Park, then Southeast to Eola, where it met up with the Aurora branch of the railroad heading towards Wheaton. Several flag stops existed along the route through Batavia, with one being on the boundary of the future Fermilab site at the place where the line crossed Butterfield Road. By the time Fermilab was created, however, the railroad had ceased operating. Today, much of the right of way of the former CAE now constitutes the Illinois Prairie Path.



Central Standard time.
(Trains also stop at Canal Street, Marshwood and Bellwood. Running time from

| Chicago— | [LVE.] | Mls | A M | A M | A M | A M |
|-------------------------|--------|-----|-------|-------|------|------|
| Wells Street.... | 0 | | *1218 | *1245 | *235 | 7 25 |
| Elmhurst (York St.) | 16 | | 12 47 | 1 18 | 3 08 | 5 59 |
| Villa Park (Villa Ave.) | 18 | | 12 50 | 1 21 | 3 10 | 6 03 |
| Lombard..... | 20 | | 12 55 | 1 28 | 3 15 | 6 10 |
| Glen Ellyn..... | 23 | | 12 58 | 1 34 | 3 20 | 6 16 |
| Wheaton | 25 | | 1 04 | 1 40 | *324 | 6 26 |
| Chicago Golf..... | 27 | | 1 07 | A M | | 6 35 |
| Warrenville..... | 30 | | 1 11 | | | 6 49 |
| Aurora | 40 | | 1 25 | | | 7 06 |
| Batavia | 40 | | 1 25 | | | 7 14 |

Figure 6. Timetable for Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin Electric Railroad

Finally, as an added bonus, if one exits the lab out the West entrance to Kirk Road and heads North or South, the route between Aurora and Elgin crosses eight historic railroad lines, including the Burlington, all four branches of the CAE (all now part of the Illinois Prairie Path,) the original Aurora Branch RR, the Dixon Air Line (now the Union Pacific West line), the St. Charles Air Line/Chicago Great Western RR (now Union Pacific), the original Galena and Chicago Union, the Illinois Central (now Canadian National), and the Milwaukee Road (now Canadian Pacific.) Other than the CAE, all lines were built before 1900 and all are still in operation. It is one of the highest densities of historic railroads along one stretch of highway in the state of Illinois.

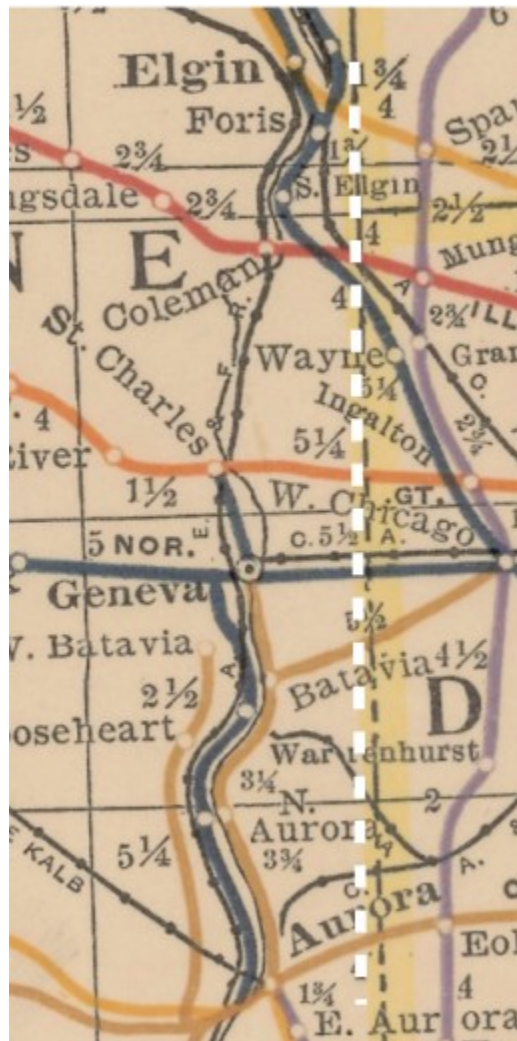


Figure 7. Approximate route of Kirk Road (and connecting roads) between Aurora and Elgin superposed on the railroad map from 1927.

Image credits

1. Prepared by Steve Kent

3. Steve Kent

4. Reider Hahn

5. Roger Puta

All others are likely public domain.