



During the early 1880's, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad rushed to compete with the Southern Pacific for Southwestern rail traffic. The AT&SF's first objective was to reach a Pacific Coast port, when the SP was already in Los Angeles and the SP-affiliated Central Pacific was already in the San Francisco Bay Area. The AT&SF first reached tidewater at Guaymas, Sonora, Mexico (south of map area), in 1882, via trackage rights over the SP's Sunset Route (1881) from Deming, New Mexico, to Benson, Arizona (this location), then via its New Mexico & Arizona Railroad (1882) and the AT&SF's Sonora Railroad (1882) in Mexico. The AT&SF built the NM&A southward from Benson, Arizona (on SP's Sunset Route) along the San Pedro River to Fairbank, then west up the tributary Babocomari River to grasslands at Sonoita, then over a low pass in the Conejo Hills to follow Sonoita Creek southwestward to its confluence with the Santa Cruz River at Calabasas (also known as Rio Rico), and finally south along the Santa Cruz River to Nogales, on the border with Mexico and the connection with the Sonora Railroad (1882). But even as it reached tidewater at Guaymas, the AT&SF was busy building to other Pacific ports. The AT&SF reached San Diego in 1885 (via its Atlantic & Pacific (1883) and California & Southern (1885) railroads), Los Angeles in 1887 (via the California Central (1887) and other lines), and the San Francisco Bay in 1900 (via its San Francisco & San Joaquin Valley (1900) and other railroads). The NM&A (1882) to Guaymas became less important to the AT&SF and by the 1910's was an SP branch line.

Meanwhile, in 1888-1889, Phelps Dodge built the Arizona & South Eastern Railroad to connect its copper mines at Bisbee, Arizona, with the national rail network via the NM&A at Fairbank. The A&SE expanded northward from Fairbank in 1894, parallel to and just west of the NM&A (1882) to join directly with the SP Sunset Route (1881) at Benson (this location). In 1901, the A&SE was renamed the El Paso & Southwestern Railroad, which extended the line east to El Paso in 1902 and to Tucson from Fairbank in 1912 to bypass the SP entirely between Tucson and El Paso. The collapse of copper prices after World War I severely affected the mines and the EP&SW, and in 1924 the SP leased the entire EP&SW. The SP re-configured the EP&SW trackage to supplement its Sunset Route (1881), which became the SP's North Line between Tucson and El Paso, and the EP&SW became the SP South Line. The SP purchased the EP&SW from Phelps Dodge in 1955. In the early 1960's, the SP abandoned the South Line between Douglas and El Paso, leaving the trackage from Benson to Douglas and Bisbee. Around 1993, the SP sold the remaining EP&SW trackage, largely corresponding to the original A&SE route, to the short line San Pedro & Southwestern Railroad, which operated freight and excursions for a while but in the early 2000's abandoned the line almost all the way back to Benson.

The SP built through Benson in 1880 on its way to El Paso, Texas, and established a passenger station. The station built at that time was razed in the 1970's after SP halted its passenger services, but a replica of that structure was built near the site of the original and serves as the town's visitor center. The container train is on the SP (now UP) mainline.





The Benson Visitor Center honors the town's railroad past. The insignias below adorn the parking lot and are placed in order of those railroads' arrivals at Benson, starting with the SP (1881) mainline, then the Santa Fe's NM&A (1882), the A&SE (1894) (represented by the EP&SW, which acquired the A&SE line in 1901), the SP&SW (which in the early 1990's acquired the EP&SW's remaining trackage from SP), and the UP (which acquired the SP in 1996).







SP caboose on display at the Benson Visitor Center.



There were two adjacent junctions at Benson, one for the NM&A (1882), which was a complete wye, and the other just to the west for the A&SE (1894), which was a single switch but had a turning wye just south of Benson (based on a 1913 topo map). The SP acquired both lines and re-configured the junction as a single, asymmetric wye, similar to but larger than the NM&A wye.

In this northwestward view of the west branch of the current wye, which is on the A&SE (1894) alignment, the UP container train is on the SP (1881) mainline heading west. Note that the train is making a turn to the right; this curve was re-aligned, probably by the SP when the wye was re-configured, to make a broader curve. The weird jog in the wye track, just on this side of the engine, was part of that realignment. Also note the water tower with the "B" for Benson, which we will use as a landmark in later photos.





In this eastward view of the east branch of the current wye, the UP container train is on the SP (1881) mainline and the bridge over the San Pedro River is on the far right. The tight curve of the east branch of the wye, compared to the west branch (previous photo), defines the asymmetry of the wye. The east branch of the NM&A (1882) wye was in the same location but on a tighter alignment, and the west branch went through the dirt area in the foreground, both of which have since been obliterated.



Northwestward view of the tip of the Benson wye. Note the location of the Benson water tower and the tighter curvature of the east (right hand) branch of the wye.





Southward view of the tip of the Benson wye, with sidings for car storage just beyond on the A&SE (1894) alignment. The track extends 7 miles to Curtiss and is operated by the SP&SW to service one freight customer and to store cars for UP. The A&SE (1894) turning wye was on the right (west) side of the line about where the stored cars are located, but was obliterated by Arizona Highway 80 and development. The turning wye was moved to the east side of the line, probably by SP in the 1920's, and is barely visible just to the left of the parked engines.





Northwestward view of the A&SE (1894)/EP&SW/SP/SP&SW alignment one mile south of the Benson wye (note same water tower as before).





Northwestward view of the A&SE (1894)/EP&SW/SP/SP&SW and cattle guard, 5 miles south of the Benson





Southward view of the A&SE (1894)/EP&SW/SP/SP&SW, 5 miles south of the Benson at the same location as previous, where Arizona Highway 80 crosses the grade. The tracks end 2 miles farther south, but at one time continued to El Paso.