



The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad built its San Juan Extension to serve the silver mining districts of the San Juan Mountains in southwestern Colorado. The narrow gauge line was built westward from the now-abandoned D&RG (1876n) mainline at Cuchara Junction (south of Denver) and reached the town of La Veta, Colorado (this location), in 1876. In 1877, the D&RG crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains at La Veta Pass to enter the Rio Grande drainage and in 1878 reached Alamosa on the Rio Grande in the San Luis Valley. In 1881, the narrow gauge San Juan Extension was completed to Durango via Cumbres Pass and in 1882 reached its terminus at the silver mining center of Silverton.

In 1894, standard gauge rails were extended west from the D&RG mainline at Cuchara Junction to La Veta (this location) and in 1899 a new, lower grade, standard gauge route was completed over Veta Pass, 9 miles south of the original La Veta Pass and about 100 feet lower at 9,242 feet above sea level. The standard gauge rails were extended west through Alamosa then south to Antonito, Colorado, where the D&RG's standard-gauging program ended. The narrow gauge route over La Veta Pass was abandoned the following year in 1900 and much of the track and the summit turntable were moved to the D&RG Crestone Branch (1900n), which was under construction at the time. The San Juan Extension passed from the D&RG to the Southern Pacific in 1988 and to the Union Pacific in 1996. In 2003, the Veta Pass line was purchased by RailAmerica and made into the San Luis & Rio Grande Railroad. In 2005, the SL&RG was sold to Iowa Pacific Holdings and Permian Basin Railways, but operations remain largely unchanged.

We will explore the D&RG lines in La Veta starting with this southwestward view of the depot. The depot, now the La Veta Town Hall, claims to date back to 1876, when the narrow gauge tracks of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) arrived here.





Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), which at this location was converted to standard gauge in 1894. The SL&RG serves freight customers on the route as well as passenger excursions, such as the one shown here parked on a siding. The depot is just out of sight in the left distance, just beyond railroad crossing arm visible at the far left.





Southward view of the town of La Veta, with the San Juan Extension (1878n), now SL&RG, running across the valley of the Cucharas River. The two peaks in the background are 12,683-foot East Spanish Peak (left) and 13,626-foot West Spanish Peak (right). The Spanish Peaks are east of and separate from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The peaks were formed by igneous intrusions during the Oligocene Epoch; West Spanish Peak is older (24.6 million years old) and East Spanish Peak is younger (23.4 million years old).





Now we are back at the depot looking south. The farthest track is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline, which at this location was converted to standard gauge in 1894. The next closer track is a siding, the same one with the SL&RG passenger train, which is parked 200 feet to the left (east) of this photo. The closest track is the east branch of a turning wye, which was used to turn helper engines for the climb up to La Veta Pass (for narrow gauge trains) and since 1899 has been used to turn helper engines for the climb up to Veta Pass (for standard gauge trains).







Eastward view at the same location as previous. The track in the upper right is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline and the depot is out of sight to the right of the photo. Of the two tracks in the foreground, the track on the right is the siding and the track on the left is the east branch of the turning wye. The two tracks converge and the siding beyond is where the SL&RG passenger train was parked, but this photo was taken on a different day and the train is gone.







Northwestward view of the east branch of the turning wye, 200 feet northwest of the previous location. I'm not sure if this water tower is historical or was built for the current steam excursion operations.





Southwestward view 150 feet northwest of the previous location. The east branch of the wye is in the foreground and runs next to the same water tower as in the previous photo and the west branch is on the right side of the photo. The siding is barely visible in the distance and the depot is visible behind the water tower.





Northward view a few steps north of the previous location at the tip of the wye. There is just enough track beyond the switch to turn a steam engine with and its tender or a diesel engine.





Southeastward view of the west branch of the wye (foreground), the track that emerges from the upper right edge of the photo is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline, the switch connects the mainline to the siding, and the depot is in the upper right.





Eastward view a few steps south of the previous location. The track to the left is the west branch of the wye, the track on the right is the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline, switch in the upper right connects the mainline to the siding, and the depot is just out of sight to the right of the photo. Note that the west branch of the wye connects directly to the mainline at a switch behind the viewer whereas the east branch connects to the siding (as seen in earlier photos).





Westward view at the same location as previous, showing the connection of the west branch of the wye (on the right) with the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline, which heads out of town after crossing the small bridge over the Cucharas River.





Eastward of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) mainline, 1,100 feet west of the previous location.





Westward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) at the same location as previous. Historical topo maps indicate that the alignment of the original narrow gauge route over the Sangre de Cristo Range (La Veta Pass route) diverges from the alignment of the 1899 standard gauge route (Veta Pass route) one mile in the distance (farther west), just west of the other end of the siding that starts here. However, all evidence of the narrow gauge route is obliterated around the divergence point.





Southeastward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n), 2 miles west-northwest of the previous location and 1 mile northwest of the point where the original narrow gauge route over the Sangre de Cristo Range (La Veta Pass route) diverges from the alignment of the 1899 standard gauge route (Veta Pass route). The San Juan Extension (1878n), which was abandoned in 1900, ran through this location, but I could find no evidence of the narrow gauge grade in this view or anywhere between here and the standard gauge route (which is 1,500 feet south of this location but is not visible in this view).





Northwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) at the same location as previous. The peak in the distance is 11,569-foot Mount Maestas, and directly below the peak is a fill grade that heads almost directly away from the viewer; this is the first remnant of the abandoned San Juan Extension (1878n) west of La Veta. The tracks were removed from this grade in 1900.





Closer northwestward view of the D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) fill grade. A 1963 topo map shows this as the southeastern end of an "Old Railroad Grade."





Northward view of the abandoned D&RG San Juan Extension (1878n) fill grade, an "Old Railroad Grade" on topo maps, taken a few steps west of the previous location.