



In October 1902, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad incorporated the Eastern Railway of New Mexico and began construction of the “Belen Cutoff” the next January. The entire line was completed to the Atlantic & Pacific route at Dalies, New Mexico, in July 1908, allowing through freight trains to bypass the original AT&SF-A&P route via Raton Pass. The ERNM Belen Cutoff shortened the distance from Chicago to Belen by only six miles, however it decreased the average grade from 158 feet per mile through Raton Pass to 66 feet per mile. Today, the combined California Southern-Southern Pacific Mojave Branch-A&P-ERNM line is entirely double tracked and is the premiere transcontinental route in the Southwest.

I am not sure why the ERNM was called the “Belen” rather than “Dalies” cutoff, the latter being the western terminus of the ERNM. At Belen, the ERNM tracks from Dalies cross the original 1881 AT&SF route along the Rio Grande to El Paso, but this is by no means a simple crossing. Instead, the ERNM tracks from Dalies merge with the AT&SF mainline and parallel one another through a huge classification yard for 2 miles through Belen. We’ll explore the Belen crossing from north to south, starting with this northwestward view of the ERNM double tracks and a siding.





Northward view at same location as above, where the 1881 AT&SF Rio Grande-El Paso line on the left joins a siding for Amtrak passenger loading with concrete ties on the right.



Southward view at same location as above, where the 1881 AT&SF Rio Grande-El Paso line is the bolted track in the center, the ERNM comes in from the right, and the Amtrak siding is across the fence on the left.





Northward view of the north end of the Belen yard showing an overview of same location as above. The 1908 ERNM comes in from the left, the 1881 AT&SF Rio Grande-El Paso line is in the center, and the Amtrak siding and passenger loading platform are on the right.



Access to the Belen yard is restricted; satellite images show about 30 tracks in this portion of the Belen yard. Transcontinental trains following the ERNM route must negotiate through and across this yard to continue on their journeys.