

History of the *Southwest Chief* and the rail line through Northern New Mexico

- The rail line the *Chief* uses today was built by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (AT&SF, also Santa Fe) in the 1870s, reaching Albuquerque by way of Raton Pass and Las Vegas, NM in April, 1880.
- The rail line through northern New Mexico was on the AT&SF route from Chicago to Los Angeles and hosted several freight trains per day as well as famous Santa Fe passenger trains such as *The Chief*, *Super Chief* (all Pullman sleeping cars) and *El Capitan* (all coach passenger cars).
- Santa Fe’s “Southern Transcon” – from the Midwest through Texas and New Mexico (Clovis, Belen, Gallup) – was completed in 1907, becoming the major through route for east-west freight trains on the AT&SF. The Southern Transcon was never a major through route for passenger trains.
- Congress created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (known as Amtrak) in 1970. The legislation addressed the decline in intercity rail passenger service as federally subsidized interstate highways were built and air travel increased, and the accompanying operating losses the freight railroads were incurring for operating passenger trains. Amtrak was designed as a hybrid public-private corporation that would receive funding from the federal government and assume operations of the private railroad’s intercity passenger trains.
- The legislation creating Amtrak defined certain city “end points,” between which Amtrak was required to operate passenger trains. This legislation resulted in a national system of regional and long-distance trains.
- On May 1, 1971, Amtrak assumed responsibility for operating most of the intercity passenger trains from the private railroads.
- The primary Chicago to Los Angeles passenger train (what is now known now the *Southwest Chief*) uses mostly the same route as the AT&SF’s pre-Amtrak combined *Super Chief/El Capitan* on a similar schedule.
- The Santa Fe Railway merged with the Burlington Northern Railroad on December 31, 1996 to form the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway (now known as BNSF Railway).
- BNSF is responsible for maintaining the track the *Chief* uses and Amtrak pays the railroad a fee for the train’s use of the right of way.
- In 2005, the NMDOT agreed for the state to buy 300 miles of BNSF track from Belen to the Colorado state line as part of the negotiations to start up the Rail Runner. Negotiations for the Lamy to Colorado state line segment were not finalized, and in April 2011 NMDOT notified the railroad that it was terminating plans to acquire the line.
- BNSF stopped running freight trains over the line in 2007.

Please see the Southwest Chief Coalition – New Mexico Section’s accompanying document “Timeline of Events Since 2010”

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