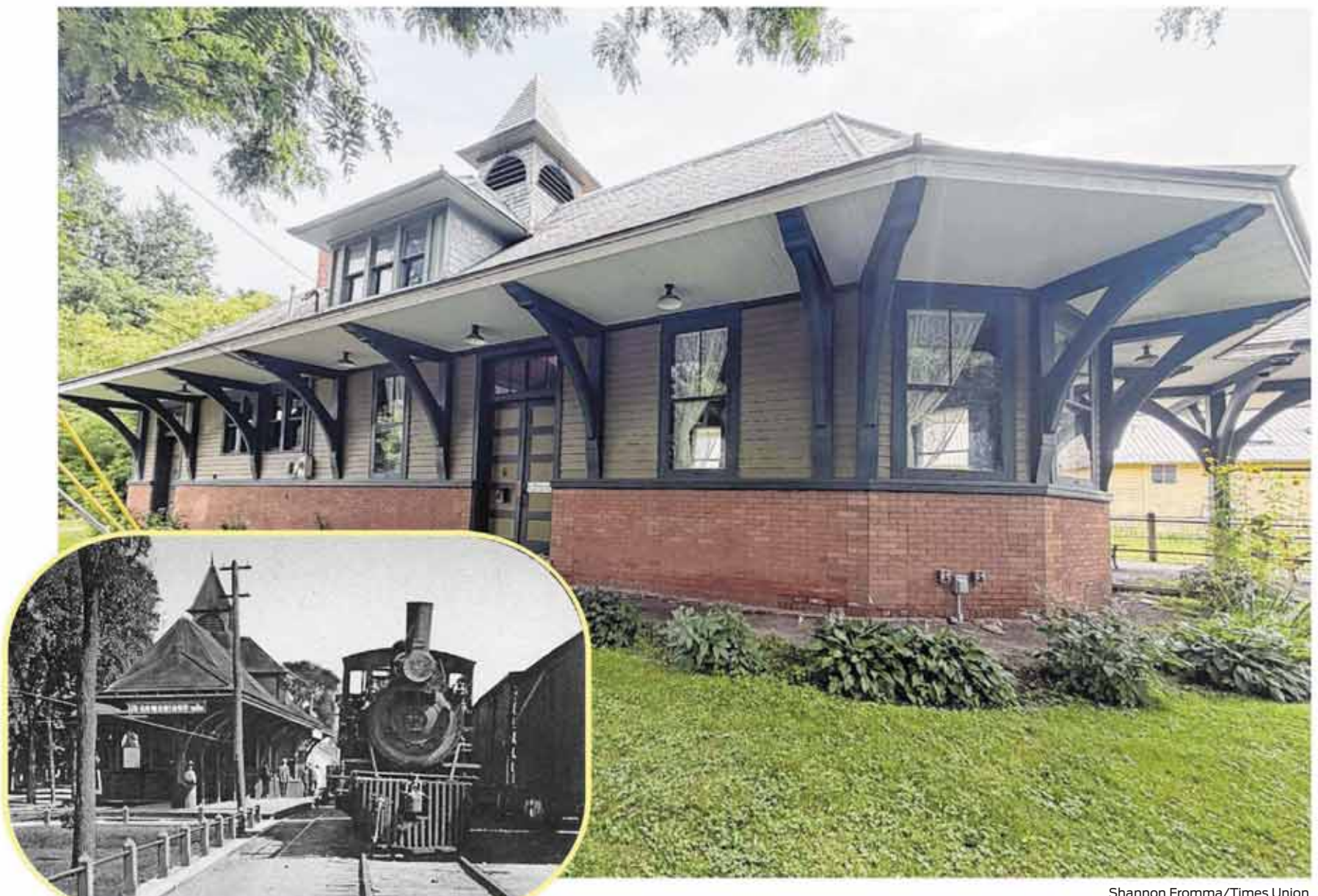
CORNERSTONES



Shannon Fromma/Times Union

Courtesy of Ken Gottry

The 1902 Cambridge Depot, inset, still retains its historic character along Broad Street, above, more than a century after it first welcomed railroad passengers.

Historic train depot once again a destination

Owner creates community gathering place at former Cambridge station

By Shannon Fromma
STAFF WRITER

The trains no longer stop at Cambridge Depot, but the building is still doing what it was meant to do: bringing people together.

More than 120 years after passengers first walked through its doors, the grand old Delaware and Hudson station is once again a gathering place. Only these days, the arrivals come for tacos and trivia, live music and song circles, local art and a drink with friends.

"It's saving a building and at the same time creating a community space," said Sara Kelly, who bought the 1902 depot in January 2025, transforming it into the Cambridge Depot, a space on Broad Street in the small Washington County village where "history meets hospitality."

For a building that helped transform Cambridge from a rural farming community into a bustling railroad and industrial center, it is a fitting new chapter.



Shannon Fromma/Times Union

Sara Kelly has written a new chapter for the Cambridge Depot as a restaurant, bar, music venue and gathering place while preserving many of the building's historic features.

A village on the move

Long before the depot was built, transportation was already shaping Cambridge.

The Northern Turnpike came through in 1790, helping establish the village as a stop along a growing network of roads. But the arrival of the railroad in 1852 changed the pace — and the possibilities — of life in Cambridge.

Before the tracks came through, most area farmers were largely self-sufficient, producing a variety of crops and animal products for their own use. The railroad meant that Cambridge was suddenly within reach of markets beyond Washington County.

The timing was right. Cambridge already had a growing industrial base. The Rice Seed Company had moved from Salem to Cambridge in 1844

See ***DEPOT,*** *G4*

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DEPOT

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and went on to become the nation's second-largest seed company. The following year, the Lovejoy Company opened a foundry, producing stoves and farm equipment, including its steel plow. Mills and factories also were operating along Owl Creek and White Creek.

The railroad connected all of it.

Historian — or "raconteur," as he prefers — Ken Gottry described Cambridge's growth as a series of fits and starts. After the Civil War, the village's fortunes waned, followed by the economic downturns of the 1870s. Then, around 1880, things began to turn around.

"We started blossoming," Gottry said. "We had everything. We built things."

By the turn of the century, the once-sleepy bedroom community had become a surprisingly busy commercial and industrial center, he says. While the population has remained relatively steady since the mid-1800s, the character of the community has changed, with its former industrial energy giving way to today's quieter arts scene.

A station to match its ambitions

The railroad didn't just move goods through Cambridge. It brought people into town.

The first passenger depot was built in 1852, but by the turn of the century, the village had outgrown it. The original station was moved to Pleasant Street in 1900 — where it still stands as a private residence — to make way for a larger passenger depot.

Gottry believes the new station was both practical and symbolic, including being a physical manifestation of the town's success, he says. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of significant growth and prosperity in Cambridge. The depot was part of that transformation.

At the height of passenger service, six trains, each with four coaches, traveled the Washington Branch of the Delaware and Hudson Railroad each day. The trains brought travelers and tourists, but they also brought culture.

Mark Twain and Susan B. Anthony were among the notable figures who arrived in Cambridge by train to speak at Hubbard Hall, the nearby opera house and community arts center founded in 1878. Travelers waiting for connections could stay at one of the village's three hotels, including the famed Cambridge Hotel across the street.

When the trains stopped

Eventually, the passenger trains disappeared, but freight trains remained important much longer. Paper mills became major railroad customers, while milk trains continued into the 1960s. Today, the tracks that run through Cambridge still carry occasional freight trains, transporting feed and fertilizer to local distributors.

While the railroad may be quieter, it is not gone. Kelly sees the evidence regularly.

She photographs passing trains and posts videos on Facebook and Instagram, where railroad enthusiasts follow the locomotives and routes. One of her videos of railfans gathered near the tracks has drawn more than 300,000 views.

"You always know when we get a really good train coming, because I see all these guys with cameras," she says. "I'm like, 'Ooh, we must have something really good'."

The railroad enthusiasts sometimes come inside the depot, too, bringing a new generation of visitors to a building that was originally designed for travelers.



Shannon Fromma/Times Union

The Cambridge Depot, built in 1902, has served Cambridge in many forms over the years and now operates as a restaurant, bar and community gathering space.

A new life for an old station

The depot's history became less defined after passenger service ended.

It spent stretches of time vacant and was used for a variety of purposes. Gottry recalls that in 1973, the Vennard family opened a dress shop in the building, called The Whistle Stop, that also sold guns and ammunition. He believes it may have later been used as an antique store.

The Cambridge Valley Community Partnership eventually took ownership and helped maintain the building. Argyle Brewing leased the space beginning in 2018. When that lease ended in December 2024, Kelly saw an opportunity.

She had lived in Cambridge since 2001 and had long admired the building. She purchased it in January 2025.

Kelly had spent more than two decades working as a freelance graphic designer. She jokingly calls the depot her retirement job. She put nearly all her savings into the venture, but ultimately decided the risk was worth taking. Rather than settling into a traditional retirement, she found herself working roughly 60 hours a week.

"It's been exhausting, but fun," she laughs. "It's a really great adventure."

Kelly wanted to build on the role Argyle Brewing had played in the community, particularly as a music venue and gathering place.

"When Argyle Brewing closed, we realized it was kind of a big hole in the community," she remembers. She also worried about what might happen to the building if it fell into the wrong hands. "I was kind of, I hate to say, afraid that somebody else would get it and turn it into something that wasn't community minded," she says.

Instead, she has filled the old station with activity again.

The depot is now a restaurant and bar, serving tacos, quesadillas, nachos, flatbread pizzas and hot dogs. Kelly is the building's prep chef, arriving early to make chili, pulled pork and other large-batch dishes before her kitchen staff arrives.

The building also doubles as an informal gallery for local artwork and a venue for live music. Sunday song circles bring local and regional musicians together for impromptu performances. The acoustics are one of Kelly's favorite features.

"The height of the ceiling is so spectacular," she says looking toward the timber-clad ceiling. "When you get a few people in here, and then get somebody on the stage with something like an upright bass, it resonates in this wood."

Trivia nights can pack the building, too. The outdoor space is used by the community even when the business is closed, and Kelly works with neighboring organizations on events that bring people together.

Preserving more than a building

Kelly has made improvements to the depot, replacing the furnace, adding storm windows and addressing brickwork and other maintenance. But she has been careful not to erase the things that make the station special.

"The bulk of it is untouched from 1902," she says.

The original windows remain. So do the wood floors, whose wear Kelly loves. The exterior retains its historic Delaware and Hudson-inspired colors, a mustard-olive green paired with a deep teal blue that appears almost black from a distance.

The building's quirks have survived, too, including what Kelly jokingly calls the "tallest bathrooms in New York state."

And then there are the details that reveal just how well the depot was built, like the original electrical box next to the ticket window with mother-of-pearl inlays.

"This is when stuff was built well," Kelly said.

For Gottry, the survival of the depot is part of a larger question about what communities choose to preserve. He points to the houses and structures that have disappeared over the years and wonders how communities decide which buildings are important enough to save.

Cambridge has been fortunate, he said, to have a few "movers and shakers" in each generation willing to take on the responsibility of preserving its past.

Kelly is one of them.

Her goal isn't to turn the depot into something it isn't. She wants to keep it useful, welcoming and connected to the community around it.

"It doesn't need to get bigger. It doesn't need to change a whole lot," says Kelly. "I just want to get community support and continue making people happy."

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Our built environment — the buildings we pass by, into and out of every day — are the backdrop to our lives, the silent figures in our memories and photographs. A building doesn't need to be an architectural marvel or possess historic pedigree in order to be important in a community. The Egg is a landmark, but so too are the gas stations where we get coffee and catch up with neighbors every day and the ice cream stands we look forward to every summer. In every community, there are spaces still serving their original purpose — schools, churches, city halls. But there are also buildings built for one purpose and then used for another, and another — buildings that have been called by many names, like a place now known as a bar that used to be an auto parts store and before that, a garage.

Cornerstones celebrates the life stories of public and commercial buildings. We start at the beginning, when each one was built, by who and why. Next, we look at how it evolved, what changes were made to the structure along the way and what it is used for now.





