

# A Look at Amtrak's Available Connections

By David Peter Alan

Here is a look at which Amtrak trains have connections to which other trains, and on which days. I will only examine available connections from one long-distance (L-D) train to another. Most of those changes take place at Chicago, but there are other places where riders can transfer between specific pairs of trains. I will not discuss transfers between an L-D train and a train on a corridor, whether the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and its branches, or a state-supported corridor elsewhere in the country. Amtrak and the states have slashed corridor services in the wake of the COVID-19 virus, too, but every corridor still hosts at least one train every day. Chicago is Amtrak's main transfer hub, so it is a good place for us to start looking at connections.

All trains from the East to Chicago: the *Lake Shore Limited*, *Capitol Limited*, and *Cardinal*, leave on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. That means they arrive in Chicago on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. If their trains arrive in Chicago on or close to schedule, passengers connecting to the *Empire Builder* to Portland or Seattle, or the *Southwest Chief* to Los Angeles, have same-day connections on all three potential travel days. Southbound riders on the *City of New Orleans* have a connection on each of their allotted travel days, too. The *California Zephyr* to Denver and the Bay Area leaves Chicago on Monday and Saturday, so riders leaving the East on Friday or Sunday have a connection to it, but there is no connection to it from the Wednesday departures from the East. Riders going beyond St. Louis on the *Texas Eagle* never have a same-day connection anymore. They must always wait an extra day, so they have 30 to 36 hours' layover in the Windy City.

All eastbound trains leave Chicago on Thursday and Saturday. The third day for the *Cardinal* is still Tuesday. It is Monday for the *Lake Shore Limited* and the *Capitol Limited*. Passengers can leave the West Coast on the *Empire Builder*, *California Zephyr*, or *Southwest Chief* every day they run (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday), and connect to the *Lake Shore Limited* or the *Capitol Limited*, but not to the *Cardinal* if they leave the West on Saturday. They will have to spend an extra day in Chicago. The passengers on the *Texas Eagle* route do better getting to the East than in the other direction. If they take the *Eagle* on Friday, they have a Saturday connection at Chicago to all three eastbound trains. Leaving on Sunday they have a connection to the *Capitol Limited* or the *Lake Shore Limited*, but not to the *Cardinal*. If they leave on Tuesday, they have an extra day in Chicago. Northbound riders leaving on Wednesday or Friday on the *City of New Orleans* have connections to all eastbound trains at Chicago. If they leave on Sunday, they still have connections to the *Capitol Limited* or the *Lake Shore Limited*, but not the *Cardinal*, which leaves Chicago on Tuesday.

What about connections between the South and the West through Chicago? The *City of New Orleans* leaves the Crescent City on the same days that trains leave the East for Chicago, so riders on that train have the same connections going west from the Windy City as their counterparts leaving the East. In the other direction, all three trains leave the West Coast on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday; arriving in Chicago two days later, and with a connection to New Orleans on each of those evenings.

Northbound riders on the *Texas Eagle* can leave that state on Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday. They can connect with the *California Zephyr* using a bus from Springfield, Illinois to Galesburg the next day, on each of the available travel days. The same connection is available to the *Southwest Chief* only from the Friday and Sunday departures from Texas. The journey from Texas on a Tuesday requires an extra day. Connecting to the *Empire Builder* is trickier, since the *Eagle* is scheduled to arrive in Chicago only minutes before the *Builder's* departure time. Passengers leaving Texas on Sunday or Tuesday must wait in Chicago until Thursday afternoon, while those leaving on Friday must wait until Monday afternoon to head west. No trains from the West make same-day connections with the southbound *Eagle*, even through Galesburg and Springfield. It always leaves the day after the western trains arrive.

While Chicago is the major transfer hub for Amtrak, there are some transfers between long-distance trains that occur elsewhere.

It has been decades since there were any same-day connections at New Orleans. All trains leave that city before the first ones arrive, but there are no more overnight connections there. Eastbound, the connection from the *Sunset Limited* to the *Crescent* requires two overnight stays in the Crescent City on every available travel day. Westbound, riders arriving in New Orleans on Monday or Saturday nights (Sunday or Friday departure from the Northeast) have two nights there before going west. If they arrive on Wednesday night (leaving the Northeast on Tuesday), they must wait until Saturday morning.

The westbound *Sunset Limited* arrives in Los Angeles early on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, making a connection with the northbound *Coast Starlight* on all of those days, if it is on or close to schedule. In the other direction, only the Saturday southbound departure from Seattle can connect to the eastbound *Sunset* on Sunday. The Monday and Wednesday departures require a layover of about 25 hours in the City of Angels. In addition, the westbound *Sunset* no longer has any same-day connections with the eastbound *Chief*, which now leaves Los Angeles one day later, for a scheduled 37-hour layover. Riders on the westbound *Chief* do better, but only if they arrive on Wednesday, when they can leave on the that night. If they arrive on Monday morning, they must also wait until Wednesday night. If they arrive on Saturday morning, they can

leave Los Angeles on Sunday night.

Historically, there were tightly scheduled connections between the *Starlight* and the *Builder* at Portland, but not at Seattle. The northbound *Starlight* arrives in Portland on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday; making a connection to the eastbound *Builder* on each of those days (although the connection is tight; about one hour). The westbound *Builder* arrives there on Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, connecting with the *Starlight* on those days. The westbound *Builder* arrives there on the same days, and also connects with the southbound *Starlight* if it is on or close to schedule.

Passengers on the *California Zephyr* would connect with the northbound or southbound *Starlight* at Sacramento. Coming from Chicago, the *Zephyr* arrives there on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons. There is a connection to the northbound *Starlight* each of those evenings, around midnight. Passengers arriving in Sacramento have a connection to Los Angeles early the next morning; a layover of about 16 hours. The southbound *Starlight* arrives early Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday mornings. Passengers arriving on Tuesday or Thursday can go east on the *Zephyr* later that morning. Passengers arriving on Sunday have no connection at all; they must wait until Tuesday to go east. Northbound riders on the *Starlight* travel on Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, and reach Sacramento about midnight. They all have an eastbound connection on the *Zephyr* late the next morning; an overnight connection. It is also possible to travel between Los Angeles and Sacramento on the *San Joaquin* line, but that trip requires two bus rides (Los Angeles – Bakersfield and Stockton – Sacramento, and a train in between).

Charlottesville, Virginia can be a potential transfer point between the *Crescent* and the *Cardinal*, for a trip between Cincinnati and Atlanta, for example. The eastbound *Cardinal* arrives there on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings and has a connection going south only on Friday and Sunday. The northbound *Crescent* gets to Charlottesville on Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday mornings and also has a westbound connection only on Friday and Sunday.

Washington, D.C. is the transfer point between the *Capitol Limited* and points south to New Orleans or Florida. It leaves Chicago on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday; arriving on Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday and connects with the southbound *Crescent* all three of those days. Its northbound counterpart leaves New Orleans on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and arrives on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. The connection to Chicago is also available on all of those travel days.

Connections to or from Florida are trickier. There is now a single train to Florida: either the *Silver Star* or the *Silver Meteor*, depending on the day. Passengers arriving from Chicago and east on Tuesday can catch the *Meteor* that evening. If they arrive on a

Friday or Sunday, they have a tight connection to the *Star*; scheduled for less than two hours. The northbound *Meteor* arrives early on Monday or Thursday morning, with a same-day connection going toward Chicago. Arriving on Saturday, the train from Florida is the *Star*, which has a tight connection scheduled for 82 minutes; it would misconnect if it does not run on or close to schedule.

So Amtrak travel has become much more complex in the past two months, especially as far as connections are concerned. I hope this report helps when you plan an Amtrak trip in the future that requires at least one change of train.