



Overview Essay

Linking the Nation: The Railroads

Though the United States did not invent rail transportation, it enthusiastically adopted the "iron horse." The image of the powerful locomotive relentlessly speeding through a rugged landscape captures the essence of the restless United States of the mid-1800s. But in reality, the railroads are more than a metaphor for the growth of the nation; they made possible the expansion of the nation's industry and inspired many to explore the West. Above all, the railroads stitched together the thousands of distant patches that made up the great American quilt, uniting the nation both in fact and in spirit.

The Transportation of the Future Arrives

"I do verily believe that carriages propelled by steam will come into general use, and travel at the rate of 300 miles a day." In 1813, when noted inventor Oliver Evans made this declaration, he probably did not realize how accurate was his prediction. For though the nation was struggling to improve its transportation network, its interests did not include railroads. Many industrial and government leaders were putting their energy into building canals. In fact, it was a canal that touched off the railroad revolution in the United States.

Baltimore Takes the Plunge

Between 1810 and 1820, the city of Baltimore had experienced great prosperity. Due to its access to the National Road and navigable interior waterways, the city enjoyed a significant portion of the trade with the rich lands of the West. But this advantage was short-lived. In 1825, Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York pushed the ambitious Erie Canal project through the state legislature, successfully connecting the port of New York with the Great Lakes. This water transport was superior to Baltimore's, and threatened to siphon off the city's source of wealth.

Baltimore's business leaders began to explore ways to regain the city's advantage in western trade. In 1827 they decided on a new

technology being used in England: the railroad. They named their infant project the Baltimore and Ohio (B & O). By May 1830, the first 13 miles of the B & O were in use.

Not everyone greeted the advent of railroads with enthusiasm. Ranchers worried about losing cattle, a fear that proved to be justified. Others simply did not trust railroads. Said one early observer: "The railroad stems direct from Hell. It is the Devil's own invention, compounded of fire, smoke, soot, and dirt, spreading its infernal poison throughout the fair countryside. It will set fire to houses along its slimy tracks. It will throw burning brands into the ripe fields of honest husbandman and destroy his crops. It will leave the land despoiled, ruined, a desert."

The Railroads Break Through Barriers

Despite the opinions of detractors, the new method of transportation caught on quickly. Throughout the 1830s, railroads spread their iron tentacles across the landscape. By 1840, the nation had almost 3,000 miles of track, nearly all of which was located east of the Appalachian mountains. Even by 1850, when over 9,000 miles of track had been laid, more than half was in the Middle Atlantic and New England states.

The New York and Erie line crossed the mountains in 1851. In 1852, the Baltimore and Ohio railroad finally lived up to its name,

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when Baltimore was connected to the Ohio River across the mountains.

While the East was expanding its rails westward, the Middle West was developing its own network in a burst of construction. In the 1850s alone, nearly 5,000 miles of track were laid in Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan.

Railroads proved to be extremely important to the Middle West and to the millions of farmers moving into the old Northwest Territory. For without a reliable means of transportation to take produce to market, millions of acres of fertile farmland were useless.

The Final Barrier

As rails filled much of the territory between the East Coast and the Mississippi River, many people began to dream of a link between the two coasts. Some leaders did not see the value of a transcontinental railroad at all; others debated only where it should be built. Persistent squabbling developed between the North and South over the railroad's projected route. Since both regions were eager to benefit from proximity to a transcontinental railroad, no agreement could be reached on this issue.

The outbreak of the Civil War interrupted the regional debate over the routing of the transcontinental railroad. Meanwhile, though, an enterprising enthusiast named Theodore Judah independently started the transcontinental project. With the backing of a group of California business leaders, Judah approached Congress. The Union, anxious to secure California's loyalty, approved the project in 1862. Congress also decided that while Judah's Central Pacific Railroad Company built eastward from California, another company, the Union Pacific, would build toward the West. When the two companies met, the transcontinental railroad would be completed.

The construction of the transcontinental was a task of epic proportions. The Central Pacific had to pass through the lofty, frozen Sierra Nevada mountains. This task was accomplished with the sweat and blood of thousands of Chinese workers. The Union Pacific em-

ployed as laborers an army of Irish immigrants, who alternately laid rails and fought off Native Americans angered by the intrusion.

The two railroads met at last at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869. The entire country celebrated when the news that the golden spike had been driven was telegraphed nationwide. The United States was at last linked "from sea to shining sea."

The Influence of the Railroads

Railroads continued to play a key part in the growth of the United States well into the twentieth century. But later transportation developments—automobiles and trucks, the interstate highway system, and air travel—greatly diminished the role of railroads.

Yet the railroad's impact on United States history—both positive and negative—cannot be overstated. For example, the superiority of the North's railroad network was a key factor in its defeat of the South in the Civil War. Railroads also played a role in the final overpowering of large groups of Native Americans, slicing through the heart of their land and destroying the buffalo upon which they depended. With the coming of the railroad, America also began changing from a nation of farms to a nation of industry. Towns that were located on the rail

lines grew to prominence, while those that were bypassed remained small or disappeared completely.

Wrote one historian:

The United States was at last linked "from sea to shining sea."

To Americans of not so long ago the locomotive was more than a machine. It meant freedom and power. And the railroad was more than just a means of transportation. It was the fastest way to get from the farm to the Big City, from Nowhere to Someplace. The steam locomotive is part of American history, and Americans will never forget it. Nor will they forget the engine's long sweet whistle, sounding in the night, with its call to adventure and its promise of success.¹

¹Albert L. McCready, *Railroads in the Days of Steam* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1960).

Primary Sources in American History *Continued***An Eyewitness Describes a Historic Occasion**

I saw the Golden Spike driven at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. I had a beef contract to furnish meat to the construction camps. . . . The Golden Spike could have been driven a couple of weeks earlier than it was. But the two companies had settled on Promontory as the meeting place some days prior to the actual meeting. . . .

If the Union Pacific had crowded their work as hard as the Central Pacific did in the last two weeks the Golden Spike would have been driven a good many miles to the west. The Union Pacific employed white labor, largely Irish, and the Central Pacific had Chinese labor. The Irish and Chinese met on Promontory Hill. . . .

On the last day only about 100 feet of rails were laid, and everybody tried to have a hand in the work. I took a shovel from an Irishman, and threw a shovel full of dirt on the ties just to tell about it afterward. . . .

California furnished the Golden Spike. Governor Tuttle of Nevada furnished one of silver. Governor Stanford . . . presented one of gold, silver, and iron from Arizona. The last tie was of California laurel.

When they came to drive the last spike, Governor Stanford, president of the Central Pacific, took the sledge, and the first time he struck he missed the spike and hit the rail.

What a howl went up! Irish, Chinese, Mexicans, and everybody yelled with delight. Everybody slapped everybody else on the back and yelled, "He missed it. Yee!" The engineers blew the whistles and rang their bells. Then Stanford tried it again and tapped the spike and the telegraph operators had fixed their instruments so that the tap was reported in all the offices, east and west, and set bells to tapping in hundreds of towns and cities. . . .

Then Vice President T. C. Durant of the Union Pacific took up the sledge and he missed the spike the first time. Then everybody slapped everybody else again and yelled, "He missed it, too. Yow!"

It was a great occasion, everyone carried off souvenirs and there are enough splinters of the last tie in museums to make a good bonfire. When the connection was finally made the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific engineers ran their engines up until their pilots [metal frame on locomotive front that removes obstructions from the track] touched. Then the engineers shook hands and had their pictures taken and each broke a bottle of champagne on the pilot of the other's engine and had their pictures taken again. . . .

From Reminiscences of Alexander Toponce, Pioneer by Katie Toponce (Salt Lake City, UT: Century Printing Co., 1923), pp. 177-179.

Questions to Think About

Answer the questions below on a separate sheet of paper.

- 1. Distinguishing Fact from Opinion** What were some of the real concerns of the local people who opposed the railroads expressed in Thomas W. Jackson's excerpt?
- Do you think the opponents of the railroads were justified in their fears? What were some of the actual effects of the railroads on American life?
- The building of the transcontinental railroad was marked by the spirit of competition and cooperation. Find some examples in the newspaper account and Alexander Toponce's eyewitness account of both elements.
- Can you think of some inventions that came after the railroad that have created the same kind of controversy and excitement as the building of the railroads did in the 1800s?

