

Railroads in the united states of america history essay



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In the early 19th century the United States was in the early stages of industrialization. We began to see advances in transportation and manufacturing. The Erie Canal, for example, allowed for the ability to conduct intrastate commerce and paved the way for later advances in transportation. No longer did a region have to be self-sufficient, advances in transportation allowed these isolated regions to purchase items that were not always available to them. At this point in time in the nation's history, boats and waterways were the most efficient means for transportation. However, the benefits of this particular mode of transportation were fairly limited to the northeastern United States and other areas with a network of waterways. While projects like the Erie Canal showed that canals could be constructed to link vast areas of land, it remained a limited option since relatively flat land was required so that boats would not get stuck..

Around this time (1791) we saw the invention of the steam locomotive in England. In 1815 the first railroad charter was granted to Colonel John Stevens of New Jersey, however, he did not construct a railroad until the 1830's. In 1827 a group of Baltimore merchants chartered the first railroad in the country, the Baltimore & Ohio. As time progressed, more and more people realized the benefits of the railroad over boats and waterways. A railroad could be constructed in direct routes from point to point and were fairly impervious to weather and the elements. Transporting cargo and persons over rail could be done in a shorter and more efficient manner.

In the beginning railroads were paid for and built by private business with little to no government oversight. As such, there was no standardization.

Private individuals and companies built their own networks of tracks and
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often times did not allow the traffic of competitors on their track system. As such, railroads were largely regional with no interconnectivity but track continued to be laid down across the country. By 1860 there were 30, 000 miles of track in operation in the United States.

As the country entered the Civil War, the railroad gained greater prominence as it became the best way to move troops and supplies during the conflict. After the war, trains also served an important role in rebuilding efforts in the south. In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the Pacific Railway Bill to build a transcontinental railroad. On May 10, 1869, the railroad was completed and linked in Promontory Point, Utah. This further solidified the place of the railroad as the most important mode of transportation in the country. It linked the western and eastern United States and facilitated interstate commerce and contributed to the country's economic growth. Passengers also benefited because rail travel was reliable and enabled people to move and explore greater areas of the country. The gold rush in California was in full effect at the time and the railroad served the boom by bringing in potential prospectors, materials, and other essential items that helped build the state of California.

As the railroads ushered in the 20th century, it was during this era that they saw their greatest growth and profitability. Interstate traffic was almost entirely moved on railroads.

The transcontinental railroad allowed for the settlement of areas in the interior of the country. Towns no longer had to be located near waterways or the coasts. Many cities and towns built their own networks of railways that

connected to the transcontinental railroad. This enabled larger and larger areas of the country to be interconnected and the national economy benefited as a result. Special train cars were able to transport perishable items great distances. Agriculture benefitted greatly and the railroad allowed for an increase in the quality of life for many Americans. Fresh produce and meat could be obtained in areas of the country where they might be out of season. For example, in the winter, areas in the northeastern United States could find fresh produce and other perishable items transported by rail from more temperate areas of the country like Florida and Texas. Food and other items were also brought to ports and shipped around the world allowing for the country to operate on a global scale. Products and supplies could also be brought into these ports and distributed throughout the nation through the rail network.

With this expansion also came several problems. The practice of eminent domain became common and people often had their land taken in order to facilitate the building of rail. Railroads also cut through areas predominately inhabited by Indians and violence against trains and passengers was sometimes common in these areas. Aside from the benefits rail provided for moving cargo and other goods, rail also served to bring entertainment to many people who could not otherwise enjoy things such as the circus. Circus operators like the Ringling Bros. moved animals, equipment, and props from town to town via rail. Eventually, large circus operators bought and operated their own trains. Another group to benefit from trains was politicians.

Presidential candidates were able to travel to greater areas than they otherwise could before trains and reach a wider cross section of people. The

trains offered a relatively comfortable ride compared to other modes of transportation and train stations around the country would become rallying stops for potential candidates.

The railroads were starting to fall into a decline by the 1930's. With the advent of the automobile and airplane, the dominance of the railroad was beginning to be chipped away. More and more roads were being built around the country and eventually the interstate highway system allowed people and cargo to move in automobiles and trucks. Large numbers of people began to move away from city centers into the suburbs and commuted into the city via other modes of transportation instead of by train. Automobiles allowed people greater freedom and flexibility and how and when they traveled. Vehicles became more reliable and less expensive and attainable by greater numbers of people. After World War II, the railroads saw a sharp decline in traffic. Trucks increasingly moved cargo along roadways and airplane travel became more common and cheaper.

The decline of the railroad continued into the 70's, 80's, and 90's. For a period of time the railroad infrastructure fell into a state of disrepair while railroad operators tried to cope with the losses monetary losses they were experiencing due to the drop in traffic on their rails. Passenger rail service has, for all intents and purposes, come to an end. Amtrak continues to offer passenger rail service but it is not a profitable enterprise and is heavily subsidized by the federal government. Rail traffic is now predominantly freight and remains an important mode of moving supplies, cargo, and consumer goods. Some advocates of rail point to it as becoming more important in the future in helping to ease traffic congestion on our roadways.
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While the trucking industry gained importance over the last several years, with the increase in fuel prices and wasted time sitting in traffic, many companies have turned to rail to transport their products and merchandise to hubs like warehouses. From these hubs, trucks can move the cargo to their final destination. The rail industry has also touted the fuel efficiency of trains over other modes of transportation and has stated that the amount of fuel/per tonnage moved is more efficient than a truck. For these reasons, I believe that the rail industry will continue to serve an important role in our society and economy. As newer technologies evolve, I believe we'll continue to see more efficient locomotives further ensuring that rail continues to have a place in our lives. There is no question that the advent of the railroad and locomotive allowed us to harness the great resources and expanse of our country and made us into an economic superpower.