

The impact of railroads in america



Nineteenth century America was a time of rapid growth and expansion. The movement of settlers further and further west accompanied by technological advances led to the major growth of cities and industries across the American frontier. However, it was the major innovations of transportation that had the most significant impact on the expansion of Midwestern and western America. The construction of canals and roads led to the increase in the use of stagecoaches, steamboats, and ultimately railroads. Railroads became extremely popular in America in the 1800's.

The railroad industry itself began to boom; it was supported by its reputation for speed and efficiency. But, along with the booming industry of railroads came the strong debate that plagued Congress for years: should railroads be constructed as the major source of transportation over roads and canals? Although roads had become increasingly popular, the railroad industry was also viewed as being monopolistic, undemocratic, and unsafe. Despite the fact that railroads were sometimes monopolistic and undemocratic in that respect, railroads proved to be most vital in the expansion of the Midwest and western America.

It was the use of railroads over all other methods of transportation that aided in communication, the transportation of goods, and ultimately decreased the costs of transportation, all of which contributed to the expansion of the American frontier. Before the rise of railroads, stagecoaches and steamboats dominated the transportation industry. Stagecoaches were an effective means of transportation, but in the early 1800's they were accompanied by Robert Fulton's invention--the steamboat. The steamboat was a " combined

river and overland transport system” that proved to be effective in transporting goods and people.

These locomotives were able to travel the rivers from the north and provide military posts and plantations with goods in the south while transporting passengers and immigrants. Prior to railroads, steamboats were the major and often only form of transporting settlers and maintaining communication between certain areas. Yet, the rise of railroads led to the inevitable fall of the steamboats, and the railroads took over as the major method of transportation. Although stagecoaches and steamboats were effective means of transportation, they were soon surpassed by railroads as the preferred method of travel.

Railroads began blanketing America in the 1820's and by the 1860's over 30,626 miles were covered by the railroads. This rapid growth of railways was due to the fact that railroads offered better economy, speed, and reliability than other methods of transportation at that time. First, a cheaper alternative to traveling by stage or steamboat was to use the railways. Railroad companies offered low-fare excursion rates that made it more economical to travel. Overall, the cost of transportation was reduced by \$150 million by 1859 due to the economic advantages of traveling by rail.

Another advantage the railroads had over stages and steamboats was its high rate of speed. Railroads were two times as fast as stagecoaches and four times as fast as steamboats (Shi, 499). Also, the railroads were much more reliable than the roads or canals. Railroads had the ability to travel all year long with few limitations, while both stagecoaches and steamboats had

difficulty traveling during the winter months, “ at no time... was stagecoach travel more trying and difficult than during cold, winter months” (Winther, 72).

With that in mind, steamboats could not function or operate when the canals were frozen over. These difficulties were all contributing factors in the expansion of the railroad industry. With railroads quickly becoming the preferred method of travel, the demand began to rise and railroads were being built in high numbers in order to accommodate the increasing demand. The more railroads that were available meant more and more industries could use them to transport goods. There was better communication between the east and west, and people could also use the railroads to travel throughout the states.

And it was there that railroads began to have a significant impact on the development and expansion of American society. At the peak of expansion in the 1800's, communication between the east and west was at the forefront of importance. A document from the State of Pennsylvania regarding railways in 1825 remarked that there is extreme “ importance and necessity of effecting a communication between the eastern and western divisions of the commonwealth” (Wade, 5). The appearance of the railroads in the early 19th century decreased and nearly diminished the communication gap as it provided a reliable and speedy method of communication.

As the railroads became more prominent across the United States, the western states naturally became linked to the Midwestern and eastern states through the Union Pacific Railroad. This railroad running from the east coast

to the west coast opened up new doors in trans-continental communication. Businesses between the east and the west were able to communicate more effectively, and thus, trans-continental trade became more defined throughout the United States. The mail services began using railroads as well, which was a large factor in improving communication across the US.

Trans-continental communication was broadened simply by the increased number of people traveling across the country. And, even when the railroads seemed an impractical method of transportation, “ they might make possible long lines of communication otherwise impracticable” (Haney, 183). So, railroads played an important role in broadening communication between the east and the west. Another factor that was directly benefited from the widespread use of railroads was the transportation of goods between the states.

Before the rise of railroads, interstate trade was limited. Most goods were transported by way of boat, which was a slow, expensive transportation method limited to the water, or by wagons. Also, the types of goods that were transported were limited as well. Perishable items, which were potential victims to bacteria and spoilage, could not be preserved on boats, and therefore could not be traded throughout the states. These were inefficient methods of the transportation of goods. On the other hand, railroads allowed for better inter-continental trade.

The rail cars themselves could carry heavier loads of goods at higher speeds than boats or wagons, which made them extremely efficient methods for trade. Furthermore, goods transported on railroads faced a lower risk of

damage or breakage than by boats because land travel is much more uniform in motion than water travel. Oppositely, canals posed a high risk of damage to the transported goods: “ much damage has been received by goods from the roughness of the water” (Wade, 41). With regards to perishable goods, the railroads offered safer traveling conditions by eliminating the bacteria produced by stagnant water as well as dust particles.

Some rail cars even served as “ refrigerators”, so meat could be transported across the country. Of course, the tremendous speed of the railroads contributed to their efficiency in the transportation of goods. Along with communication and trade, the railroads made a significant change in the overall cost of transportation. First, railroads could be constructed across the country at one-third of the expense to build a single canal. This was primarily due to the on land construction, which took one-third of the time to build than canals, so workers were not being paid for such an extended period of time (Wade, 6).

The railroads offered greater promise in making more money because they could be used for every season, all year long. The costs decreased even after the construction of railroads. The tolls on canals were expensive while the tolls on railroads were only one-third the cost per ton of that of canals. Also, railroads were preserved and repaired more easily than canals. While the cost to repair canals was extremely expensive, railroads were repaired at one-third the cost. When repairs were needed there was no delay for the passengers or the goods because it was quite customary to transfer from one rail station to another (Wade, 35).

The decreased costs to build and repair both contributed to the lower rates of travel for the passengers. Railroad rates were based on cost, determined by weight, distance, and grade, not on profit. These decreased costs were important in promoting the railway industry because they offered such affordable means of traveling for their passengers. Overall, the rise of railroads across the United States in the 1800's led to great benefits in communication, the transport of goods, and the overall decrease in cost of transportation. These factors all played important roles in the expansion of America.

Breakthroughs in communication and trade led to the rise of major cities and industries. The low rates offered by the railways allowed affordable means of transportation for all people, which brought more and more settlers westward. Oscar Winther relates that “ the building of these western railroads had been in a very real sense frontier enterprises; they were, by and large, gigantic thrusts into and across the heretofore unsettled domain” (Winther 116). It was, in fact, the railroads that led to the ultimate expansion of the American frontier.