

Chronology of Railroading in America

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS

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- 1797** The steam locomotive is invented in England.
- 1823** The first public railway in the world opens in England.
- 1827** The first railroad in North America — the Baltimore & Ohio — is chartered by Baltimore merchants.
- 1830** The first regularly-scheduled steam-powered rail passenger service in the U.S. begins operation in South Carolina, utilizing the U.S.-built locomotive *The Best Friend of Charleston*.
- 1832** The Strasburg Railroad in Pennsylvania is founded. It is the oldest continuously operated railroad in the country.
- 1833** Andrew Jackson travels from Baltimore to Ellicott's Mills, becoming the first sitting U.S. president to ride the rails.
- 1833** A total of 380 miles of rail track are in operation in the United States.
- 1838** Five of the six New England states have rail service, as do such frontier states as Kentucky and Indiana.
- 1840** More than 2,800 miles of track are in operation in the United States.
- 1842** Charles Dickens rides the rails while visiting the United States to lecture in favor of an international copyright agreement and in opposition to slavery. Comparing U.S. and English railroads, he wrote, "There are no first and second class carriages as with us; but there is a gentleman's car and a ladies' car: the main distinction between which is that in the first, everybody smokes; and in the second, nobody does."
- 1850** More than 9,000 miles of track are in operation in the United States, as much as in the rest of the world combined.
- 1854** Attorney Abraham Lincoln represents the Illinois Central Railroad.
- 1860** More than 30,000 miles of track are in operation in the United States.
- 1862** President Abraham Lincoln formally inaugurates construction of the transcontinental railroad that will ultimately link California with the rest of the nation.
- 1861–1865** The Civil War becomes the first major conflict in which railroads play a major role, as both sides use trains to move troops and supplies.

- 1863** Congress designates 4 feet, 8.5 inches as the gauge for the transcontinental railroad. Eventually, this gauge became the industry standard. Since 1887, nearly all U.S. railroads have been this width.
- 1865** The “golden age” of railroads begins. For nearly half a century, no other mode of transportation challenges railroads. During these years, the rail network grows from 35,000 miles to a peak of 254,000 miles in 1916.
- 1865** The railroad tank car is invented by Charles P. Hatch of the Empire Transportation Company. The earliest tank cars were flat cars with wooden tubes mounted on top used to transport several thousand gallons of crude oil. In addition to oil products, early tank cars transported, among other things, pickles in brine and oysters on ice.
- 1866** The first U.S. peace time train robbery reportedly occurs outside Seymour, Indiana when two gunmen board an Ohio & Mississippi passenger train traveling between East St. Louis and Cincinnati, empty one safe, throw another safe overboard, and jump off the train after fooling the engineer into slowing down.
- 1869** On May 10, at Promontory, in the Utah Territory, the “Golden Spike” joins the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads, marking completion of the first transcontinental railroad.
- 1872–1945** Presidents from Ulysses S. Grant to Franklin D. Roosevelt travel largely by train. For them, as for virtually every American, the railroad offers the fastest, safest means of travel.
- 1893** May 10, Locomotive No. 999 of the New York Central hits a speed of 112.5 miles per hour between On Batavia and Buffalo, New York — the first time a train exceeds 100 miles per hour.
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- 1900** John Luther Jones, also known as Casey Jones, dies in a train wreck. Jones crashed his Illinois Central passenger train into the back of a stalled freight train in Vaughan, Mississippi, on the foggy night of April 30.
- 1911** Walter Chrysler begins working for the fledgling auto industry. The son of a railroad engineer, Chrysler was an top-notch railroad mechanic and had spent years roaming the West working for various railroads and then for the American Locomotive Company (ALCO).
- 1917** The federal government seizes control of the railroads for the duration of World War I. By the time they are returned to private ownership in 1920, they are in seriously run-down condition and need substantial maintenance and improvement.
- 1900–1940** Other modes of transportation grow from small beginnings to challenge rail dominance over freight and passenger transportation. By the eve of World War II, automobiles, large buses, trucks, planes, and pipelines — supported by government subsidies and less burdened by regulation than railroads — have become full-fledged competitors to railroads.

- 1926-1929** Future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall works as a railroad porter during the summers.
- 1929-1940** The Great Depression forces substantial segments of the rail industry into bankruptcy.
- 1933** Continuous welded rail is laid for the first time in the United States. Continuous welded rail eliminates the familiar “clickety-clack” that, although perhaps soothing to rail passengers, represents the gradual wearing down — chip by chip — of the ends of each separate length of rail. As of 2013, Class I railroads had more than 108,000 miles of welded rail in service.
- 1936** The Chicago Great Western Railroad moves several hundred truck trailers on flatcars modified for this purpose. This marks the beginning of the intermodal concept as we generally know it today.
- 1941-1945** Railroads remain under private control during World War II and on average move twice the monthly volume of both freight and passengers as during World War I.
- 1945-1970** Railroads enter the post-war era with a new sense of optimism that leads them to invest billions of dollars in new locomotives, freight equipment and passenger trains. That investment would see retirement of the last steam locomotive by the late 1950s in favor of diesel engines. In spite of this modernization, the decline in rail market share that began before the war resumes.
- 1945-1953** President Harry S Truman is the last “railroad President.” His successors will rely mostly on planes and automobiles, using trains largely for campaign trips.
- 1955** Intermodal freight — the movement of containers and highway trailers by rail — is reported as a separate category of freight for the first time. In that year, railroads moved 168,000 carloads of trailers and containers.
- 1956** Trucking executive Malcom McLean converted a military tanker into the first marine containership: the Ideal X sailed from New Jersey to Houston with 58 containers on board. McLean’s innovation, which quickly brought huge productivity gains to ocean transportation, is a key technology that makes the globalization of trade possible.
- 1961** Missouri Pacific acquires the rail industry’s first solid-state computer, an IBM 7070. Railroads will become one of the earliest major users of computer technology.
- 1970-1975** Burdened by regulation and faced with subsidized competition, nine Class I railroads, representing almost one-quarter of the industry’s trackage, file for bankruptcy protection.
- 1968** Southern Pacific acquires the rail industry’s first locomotive engineer training simulator.
- 1970** The Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 creates Amtrak to take over intercity rail passenger service. Amtrak officially begins service on May 1, 1971.

- 1970** In June, the giant Penn Central declares bankruptcy. At the time, it was the largest corporate bankruptcy in U.S. history.
- 1976** The Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act creates the Consolidated Rail Corp. from six bankrupt Northeast railroads. It also includes regulatory reforms that are supposed to make the rail regulatory system more responsive to changed circumstances.
- 1980** Congress passes the Staggers Rail Act, reducing the Interstate Commerce Commission's regulatory authority over railroads and sparking competition that stimulates advances in technology and a restructuring of the industry, including creation of hundreds of new shortline and regional railroads.
- 1987** Conrail is privatized in what at that time was the largest share offering in U.S. history. Investors pay \$1.9 billion to buy shares in the railroad.
- 1996** After 108 years, the Interstate Commerce Commission goes out of existence and is replaced by the Surface Transportation Board, which assumes responsibility for remaining railroad economic regulation.
- 2004** In a June report, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) notes, "By nearly every indicator, long-term safety trends on the Nation's railroads appear very positive. Overall, the safety performance record of the nation's railroads has been one of continuous improvement."
- 2005** October marks the 25th anniversary of the Staggers Rail Act of 1980. The global superiority of U.S. railroads is a direct result of the deregulatory reforms embodied in the Staggers Act. Deregulation has allowed railroads to improve their financial performance from anemic levels prior to Staggers to more moderate levels today, which in turn has allowed them to plow back hundreds of billions of dollars into their infrastructure and equipment.
- 2006** U.S. and Canadian railroads move 14.6 million intermodal trailers and containers, an all-time high. The 2006 total exceeded the previous record, set in 2005, by 5 percent.
- 2007** An official from the Federal Railroad Administration testifies to Congress in February that, "The railroads have an outstanding record in moving all goods safely."
- 2007** Musician Rod Stewart is on the cover of the December 2007 edition of Model Railroader magazine. Stewart reportedly said that being on the cover of a model railroad magazine meant more to him than being on the cover of a music magazine.
- 2008** In October, Congress passes "The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008" (RSIA). Among other things, the law mandates that positive train control (PTC) be installed by the end of 2015 on railroad main lines used to transport passengers or toxic-by-inhalation (TIH) materials.
- 2008** Coal again becomes the top source of U.S. rail industry revenue, overtaking intermodal (which had taken over the top spot in 2003). Class I railroads originate a record 879 million tons of coal.

- 2008** Railroads have in service scores of new “genset” switching locomotives that have two or three independent engines that cycle on and off, depending on need. Genset locomotives are expected to reduce NOx and particulate emissions by up to 90 percent and cut fuel consumption by up to 37 percent compared to the locomotives they replace. Railroads have spent billions of dollars in recent years on thousands of new environmentally-friendly locomotives, and have overhauled thousands of older locomotives to improve their environmental friendliness.
- 2009** In November, an independent report prepared for the Federal Railroad Administration finds that railroads, on average, are four times more fuel efficient than trucks.
- 2009** The severe recession leads to sharply lower rail traffic. Based on the AAR’s weekly traffic report, total carload traffic on U.S. freight railroads in 2009 was down 16.1 percent from 2008; intermodal traffic was down 14.1 percent. Every major commodity category of rail traffic was down in 2009, most of them sharply.
- 2011** Ethanol carloads on U.S. railroads rise to nearly 341,000, up from fewer than 40,000 in 2000. In 2011, ethanol accounted for 1.2 percent of total U.S. rail carloads, up from 0.1 percent in 2000. Railroads account for approximately two-thirds of ethanol movements.
- 2012** Amtrak ridership and ticket revenue both set records for the Thanksgiving period. Amtrak carried a record 737,537 passengers during Thanksgiving 2012, up 1.9 percent over the previous year and the prior record set in 2011.
- 2012** A train made entirely of chocolate sets a new Guinness World Record as the longest chocolate structure in the world. The train is 112 feet long, weighs close to 2,800 pounds, and took more than 700 hours to build. It is put on display at a railway station in Brussels.
- 2013** Intermodal revenue (approximately \$15.0 billion) surpasses coal (\$14.3 billion) as the top source of U.S. freight rail industry revenue.
- 2014** Class I railroads originate more than 493,000 carloads of crude oil, up from 9,500 in 2008, 29,600 in 2010 and 234,000 in 2012. By serving almost every refinery in the United States and Canada, railroads offer market participants enormous flexibility to shift product quickly to different places in response to market needs and price opportunities.
- 2014** Class I railroads move a ton of freight 479 miles, on average, per gallon of fuel consumed — roughly the distance from Washington, DC to Dayton, OH or Chicago, IL to Pittsburgh, PA. In 2014 alone, U.S. freight railroads consumed 4.0 billion fewer gallons of fuel and emitted 44.7 million fewer tons of carbon dioxide than they would have if their fuel efficiency had remained constant since 1980. From 1980 through 2014, U.S. freight railroads consumed 74 billion fewer gallons of fuel and emitted 826 million fewer tons of carbon dioxide than they would have if their fuel efficiency had not improved.

- 2015** U.S. freight railroads spend \$30.3 billion — more than ever before — to build and maintain locomotives, freight cars, tracks, bridges, tunnels and other infrastructure and equipment. America’s freight railroads operate almost exclusively on infrastructure that they own, build, maintain, and pay for themselves. By contrast, trucks, airlines, and barges operate on publicly financed highways, airways, and waterways. Through 2016, railroads have spent more than \$635 billion of their own funds, not government funds, on their infrastructure and equipment.
- 2015** U.S. railroads originate 13.7 million intermodal containers and trailers, breaking the previous record of 13.5 million set in 2014, which itself had broken the previous record of 12.8 million set in 2013. In 1990, containers accounted for 44 percent of intermodal traffic. By 2000, the share was 69 percent. In 2015, it was 89 percent. Containers are generally more efficient than trailers, in part because they can be “double-stacked.”
- 2016** Class I carloads originate 491.7 million tons of coal, down 44 percent from 2008’s peak of 878.6 million. Coal accounted for 30 percent of U.S. electricity generation in 2016, down from 50 percent as recently as 2005.
- 2016** Class I railroads pay \$1.24 billion in state and local property taxes, approximately double what they paid 10 years earlier. Unlike trucks and barges, railroads pay property taxes on their infrastructure. In many states, railroads and others also pay taxes on the value of their freight cars.
- 2016** During fiscal year 2016 (October 2015 - September 2016), Amtrak carries approximately 31.3 million passengers, a record high. On an average day, around 85,700 passengers ride more than 300 Amtrak trains.
- 2016** The train accident rate falls to a record low, down 43 percent from 2000. Meanwhile, the railroad employee injury rate in 2016 was down 47 percent from 2000, and the grade crossing collision rate in 2016 was down 39 percent from 2000. By all of these measures, recent years have been the safest in rail history.