

How Freight Railroads Shaped the Eras that Defined America

Key Facts

- For nearly 200 years, freight rail has helped power America's defining moments—from the automobile boom to the AI revolution.
- Freight rail moves the raw materials, products, and equipment that keep America's economy and supply chains running.
- Many of the moments that shaped America were made possible by one constant: freight rail connecting industries, businesses, and communities.

America's defining moments didn't happen by accident. From the automobile boom and the first supermarkets to suburban neighborhoods, the Moon landing, globalization, e-commerce, and artificial intelligence, each era depended on the ability to move enormous quantities of materials, products, and equipment across the country.

For nearly 200 years, freight rail has been a critical part of that story—helping build industries, strengthen supply chains, and keep America moving through periods of growth, innovation, and national challenge. The examples on the following pages show how freight rail shaped some of the country's most iconic cultural moments and continues to support America's future today.

1920s: The Automobile Changes America

By 1929, there were more than [23 million registered vehicles](#) on American roads—up from fewer than eight million just a decade earlier.

American innovation and mass production transformed the automobile from a luxury into an everyday necessity, creating one of the nation's most powerful economic engines.



An automobile showroom from the 1920s ([LOC](#))

The industry generated millions of jobs, fueled demand for steel, rubber, glass, petroleum, and machinery, and reshaped where Americans lived, worked, and traveled. Freight rail helped power that transformation—and still does today. Railroads remain the backbone of the automotive supply chain, [moving nearly 75%](#) of all new cars and light trucks sold in the United States while carrying the raw materials, components, and finished vehicles that support American auto manufacturing.

1930s: The Supermarket Revolution

The stock market crash of 1929 plunged the United States into the Great Depression, leaving millions of Americans unemployed and forcing families to stretch every dollar. Consumers needed groceries they could afford, and supermarkets answered the moment by offering lower prices, greater variety, and a more efficient way to shop than ever before.

Freight rail helped make that model possible by creating a national food network. Refrigerated railcars connected farms and food producers across the country, bringing year-round produce, meat, dairy, and packaged goods to a single store while helping supermarkets expand rapidly throughout the decade.

Today, freight railroads continue to supply America's supermarkets, moving approximately 1.6 million carloads of grain and 1.7 million carloads of food products [every year](#). By moving large volumes efficiently over long distances, freight rail also helps keep transportation costs low—making modern life [more affordable for American families](#).



1938 Allentown, PA Supermarket ([Wikimedia](#))

1940s: World War II

World War II cemented the United States' position as the world's leading industrial powerhouse. At the [peak of the war](#), railroads carried nearly 70% of intercity freight and more than 70% of passenger traffic, moving troops, raw materials, and finished equipment across the country.

Millions of soldiers and vast quantities of coal, steel, and fuel moved by rail to support factories and front lines alike. Today, freight railroads still [move thousands of carloads of military equipment](#) every year.



1940s Tank plant in Detroit, MI. ([Wikimedia](#))

1950s: Moving to Suburbia

After World War II, the American Dream moved to the suburbs. Low-cost mortgages, rising incomes, and the Baby Boom fueled a homebuilding surge unlike anything the country had ever seen. Millions of new homes were constructed as families traded city living for backyards, automobiles, and homeownership.

Freight rail helped turn open land into entire communities, delivering the lumber, cement, steel, stone, and other building materials needed to construct America's suburbs.



Levittown, PA, a planned suburban community constructed in the 1950s ([Wikimedia](#))

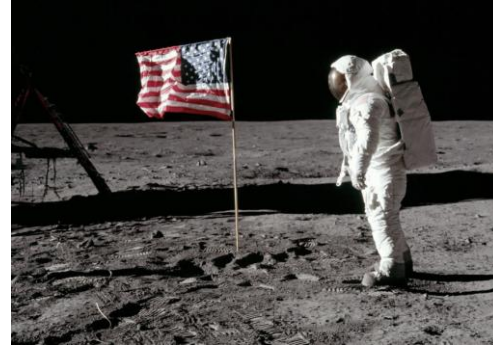
Today, freight rail remains essential to homebuilding, [moving more than two million carloads of construction materials each year](#). In fact, rail lumber shipments closely track housing starts, making freight rail an important indicator of the nation's homebuilding activity.

1960s: Reaching the Moon

Putting a man on the moon required one of the largest industrial efforts in history. More than 400,000 people worked on the Apollo program, with thousands of companies supplying the materials, machinery, and equipment needed to make the mission possible.

At Kennedy Space Center, NASA's railroad delivered tens of thousands of tons of specialized stone used to build the crawlerway connecting the Vehicle Assembly Building to the launch pads.

More than half a century later, freight rail continues to support America's space program, moving oversized rocket and spaceflight components that are too large or heavy for conventional highway transport.



Astronaut Buzz Aldrin walking on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission on July 20, 1969. ([NASA](#))

1970s: The Energy Crisis Changes America

In the 1970s, global conflicts disrupted oil supplies to the United States, triggering fuel shortages, soaring gasoline prices, and long lines at gas stations.

Practically overnight, energy conservation became part of everyday life. Americans lowered their thermostats, insulated their homes, drove smaller cars, and accepted a new national speed limit of 55 mph to save fuel. Conserving energy wasn't just economical—it became a patriotic responsibility.

The crisis also sparked a lasting shift in how Americans thought about energy and the environment. It raised awareness of fuel efficiency, strengthened support for conservation, and highlighted the value freight railroads—the nation's most fuel-efficient way to move freight over land. Today, [one train can move one ton nearly 500 miles on one gallon of fuel](#).



Gas station attendants peer over their "Out of Gas" sign in Portland right before the state's requested Saturday closure of gas stations in 1973 ([David Falconer, U.S. National Archives](#))

1980s: The Mall Becomes America's Town Square

By the 1980s, the shopping mall had become a fixture of American life. Anchored by department stores and filled with specialty retailers, food courts, and arcades, malls drew millions of visitors each year and became a defining feature of suburban America.

Behind the scenes, freight rail was evolving, too. The rapid growth of intermodal transportation—moving shipping containers seamlessly between ships, trains, and trucks—helped retailers stock stores faster and more efficiently, laying the foundation for the nationwide [supply chains](#) that continue to serve American consumers today.



*Food court of an indoor mall in 1980
(Carol M. Highsmith, LOC)*

1990s: A More Connected World

The 1990s marked the rise of globalization as a defining force in America. Trade expanded rapidly, imported goods became everyday purchases, and consumers gained access to an unprecedented variety of products from around the world. Big-box retailers grew, supply chains stretched across continents, and “Made Around the World” became the new normal.

Freight rail helped connect America’s ports to inland distribution centers and manufacturing hubs through a rapidly expanding intermodal network. Containers arriving from around the world could move seamlessly by ship, rail, and truck, laying the foundation for the global supply chains that continue to power the modern U.S. economy. Today, nearly 40% of freight rail traffic is tied to [international trade](#), moving key goods like grain and autos.



Inside of a Kmart in 1991 (Kmart Corporation)

2000s: Shopping Goes Online

The 2000s changed how Americans shopped. As companies like eBay and Amazon transformed online retail, consumers grew accustomed to ordering vast amounts of products with a few clicks and having purchases delivered directly to their doors. E-commerce turned convenience into an expectation and permanently changed the retail landscape.

Behind every online order was a vast logistics network. Freight rail's intermodal system connected ports, warehouses, and distribution centers across the country, helping move shipping containers filled with consumer goods quickly and efficiently. The same supply chain that powered the rise of e-commerce continues to deliver millions of online purchases every day.



Amazon homepage in 2000.

2020s: The AI Revolution

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming how Americans work, learn, create, and communicate. What once seemed like science fiction is now part of everyday life, helping people quickly write, design, code, research, and solve problems. Few technologies have spread as quickly or promise to reshape as many industries.

Freight rail is evolving alongside it. Railroads are [using AI](#) to inspect infrastructure, identify potential equipment issues before they become problems, optimize network operations, and improve the efficiency and reliability of the nation's supply chain.

As AI transforms the economy, freight rail is helping put the technology to work in the real world.



Example of a Digital Train Inspection Portal