

Chronology of U.S. Railroading

- 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*.
- 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. In 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 U.S., 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.
- 1860** 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** Abraham Lincoln 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 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. 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** On May 10, Locomotive No. 999 of the New York Central hits a speed of 112.5 miles per hour between Batavia and Buffalo, New York — the first time a train exceeds 100 miles per hour.
- 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.
- 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 in need of 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.
- 1929–1940** The Great Depression exacts a heavy toll on the railroad industry, forcing substantial segments of the 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. By 2003, Class I railroads had nearly 104,000 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 1976** The Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act creates the Consolidated Rail Corp. from six bankrupt Northeast railroads. It also included regulatory reforms that were supposed to make the rail regulatory system more responsive to changed circumstances.
- 1980** The Staggers Rail Act reduces the Interstate Commerce Commission’s regulatory jurisdiction over railroads and sparks 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 as investors pay \$1.9 billion to buy shares in the railroad.
- 1996** After 108 years of existence, the Interstate Commerce Commission goes out of existence and is replaced by the Surface Transportation Board, which assumes responsibility for remaining railroad economic regulation.
- 2003** For the first time ever, intermodal overtakes coal as the primary source of revenue for U.S. Class I railroads. According to railroad financial reports, rail intermodal revenue in 2003 was \$7.7 billion (22.0 percent of total revenue), compared with coal revenue of \$7.6 billion (21.8 percent of total revenue).
- 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.” The rail industry reduced its overall train accident rate 65 percent from 1980 to 2003. The rate of railroad employee casualties fell 75 percent since 1980; 2003 was the lowest rate on record.
- 2004** U.S. and Canadian railroads move 13.2 million intermodal trailers and containers, an all time high. The 2004 total exceeded the previous record, set in 2003, by almost 9 percent.