

Railroad Time

18 November 1883

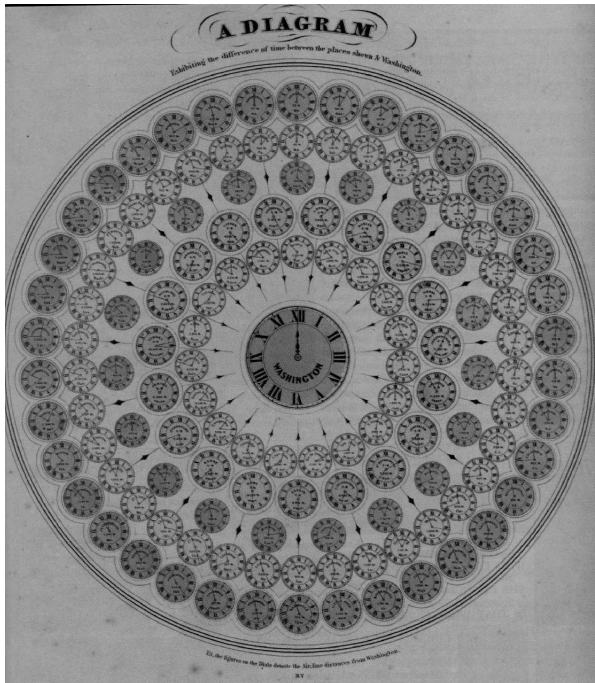
Before the coming of the railroads, American towns kept their own time, using some form of local solar time maintained by a well-located clock—in a church steeple, perhaps, or prominently displayed in a jeweler's window. Most folks simply ignored the fact that solar time changed as the earth rotated and the sun crossed new longitudinal meridians. Thus in the Delaware Valley it might be only 11:55 a.m. as 60 miles to the east the midday whistle blew in lower Manhattan.

By the mid-1800s there were some 144 official times in North America. So long as people lived mostly in towns and villages, and so long as traffic between them traveled relatively slowly, by buggy and barge, competing times seemed to hardly matter. But once the railroads began crisscrossing the country, the keeping (and scheduling) of time grew considerably more critical.

To complicate matters further, some towns boasted more than one official time, such as Buffalo, N.Y., which displayed three, one for each of the three railroads that served the city. Little wonder that many passengers were bewildered. Competing times were not merely disconcerting, they were dangerous. Inevitably, trains employing different times on the same tracks ran into each other, and train wrecks were frequent. Passengers traveling by rail became by necessity obsessively conscious of the time, which, along with everything else, made travel even more nerve-racking.

A new plan of action was introduced at the semiannual meeting of the General Time Convention of the American Railroad Association. On April 8, 1883, the 50 managers of grand-trunk railroads voted to accept the changes. The number of time standards used by American railroads was reduced from almost 50 to only four. They were called Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific—the same names, though not precisely the same zones, we use today. On Sunday morning, November 18, 1883, railroad standard time was established across North America.

Within a few days, 70 percent of North America's schools, courts and local governments had adopted railroad time as their official standard. The federal government did not sign up. It would take 35 years for Congress to recognize the benefits of a standard time and write it into law in 1918.



Prepared before the advent of time zones, this 1860 chart compares local times for cities in the United States and around the world with 12 o'clock noon in Washington, D.C. For example: At noon in Washington, it was 11:21 a.m. in Nashville, Tenn.

1. **Before the growth of railroads, how was time kept?**

2. **By the mid-1800s how many official times were there in the United States?**

3. **Why did Buffalo, NY have three official times? How could this be dangerous?**

4. **What happened on 8 April 1883? How many times zones were created? What were they?**

5. **How prompt was the United States federal government in adopting “railroad time”?**

6. **Why do you think the railroads were the major reformers of “official time”? Did they do it for the “greater good” of the country or did they perhaps have another reason?**