

The Age of the Railroads

BEFORE YOU READ

In this section you will read about the growth of the nation's railroad industry and its effect on the nation.

TERMS AND NAMES

transcontinental railroad A railroad that crosses the entire country

George M. Pullman Inventor of the sleeping car

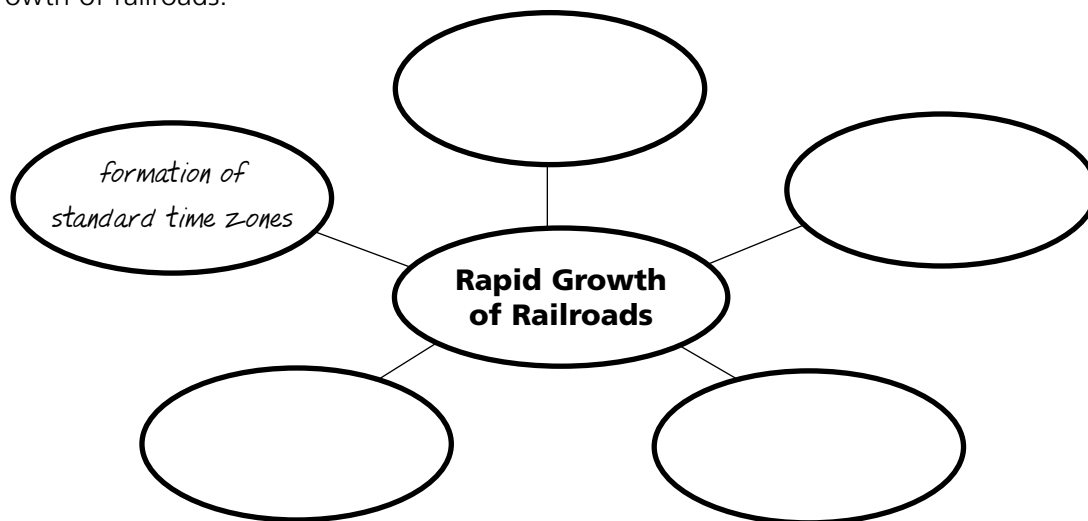
Crédit Mobilier Name of company involved in stealing of railroad money

Munn v. Illinois Court case that gave government right to regulate private industry

Interstate Commerce Act Law granting Congress authority to regulate railroad activities

AS YOU READ

Use this diagram to take notes on the effects of the rapid growth of railroads.



Railroads Span Time and Space

How did the railroads change the way Americans told time?

Before and after the Civil War, railroads were built to span the entire United States. In 1869, the nation completed work on its first **transcontinental railroad**—a railroad that crossed the entire continent. In the years that followed, railroad tracks spread throughout the country. By 1890, more than 200,000 miles of rail lines zigzagged across the United States.

Railroads made long-distance travel a possibility for many Americans. However, building and

running the railroads was difficult and dangerous work. Those who did most of the work were Chinese and Irish immigrants and desperate out-of-work Civil War veterans. Accidents and diseases affected thousands of railroad builders each year. By 1888, more than 2,000 workers had died. Another 20,000 workers had been injured.

Railroads eventually linked the many different regions of the United States. However, railroad schedules proved hard to keep. This was because each community set its own times—based mainly on the movement of the sun. The time in Boston, for example, was almost 12 minutes later than the time in New York.

To fix this problem, officials devised a plan in 1870 to divide the earth into 24 time zones, one for each hour of the day. Under this plan, the United States would contain four time zones: Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific. Everyone living in a particular zone would follow the same time. The railroad companies supported this plan. Many communities also supported it.

1. How did times zones first come about?

Opportunities and Opportunists

How did the growth of the railroads affect the nation?

Railroads made it easier for people to travel long distances. They also helped many industries grow. The iron, steel, coal, lumber, and glass industries all grew partly because the railroads needed their products. Railroads also increased trade among cities, towns, and settlements. This allowed many communities to grow and prosper.

Railroads led to the creation of new towns. In 1880, **George M. Pullman** built a factory on the prairie outside Chicago. There, workers made the sleeping cars he invented for trains. As demand for his sleeping cars rose, Pullman built a large town to house the workers he needed. Pullman created quality housing for his workers. But he tried to control many aspects of their lives. Eventually, his workers rebelled.

The railroad industry offered people the chance to become rich. The industry attracted many *corrupt* individuals. One of the most well-known cases of corruption was the **Crédit Mobilier** scandal. In 1868, some officers of the Union Pacific railroad formed a construction company called **Crédit Mobilier**. They gave their company contracts to lay railroad track at two to three times the actual cost. They kept all profits. To prevent the government from interfering, they paid off members of Congress. Eventually, authorities uncovered the *scheme*.

2. What was one positive and negative effect of the growth of railroads?

The Grange and the Railroads

Why did the farmers fight the railroads?

One group angered by corruption in the railroad industry were farmers. Farmers were upset for a number of reasons. First, they claimed that railroads sold government land grants to businesses rather than to families. They also accused the railroad industry of setting high shipping prices to keep farmers in debt.

In response to these abuses, the Grangers took political action. They convinced some states to pass laws regulating railroad activity. Members of the railroad companies challenged the states' rights to regulate them.

The battle reached the Supreme Court in 1877. In the case of ***Munn v. Illinois***, the Court declared that government could regulate private industries in order to protect the public interest. The railroads had lost their fight.

A decade later, Congress passed the **Interstate Commerce Act**. The act gave the federal government even more power over the railroads. The railroad companies, however, continued to resist all government intervention.

Beginning in 1893, an economic depression struck the country. It affected numerous institutions—including the railroads. Many railroad companies failed. As a result, they were taken over by financial firms. By 1900, seven companies owned most of the nation's railways.

3. Give two reasons why farmers were upset with the railroad companies.
