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## Railroads: The Industry That Shaped Kansas

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**Paxico, Kansas, Depot 3**  
Don Wolfe

## RAILROADS

### THE INDUSTRY THAT SHAPED KANSAS

Transportation technology. Call it the hammer that forged Kansas.

Proponents of establishing Kansas Territory in 1854 wanted to foster expansion of railroads west of Missouri and Iowa. Railroad extension reopened the political division over expansion of slavery, turned Kansas Territory into a battleground between pro-slave and free-state factions (it was known as Bleeding Kansas), and thus sparked the Civil War.

Railroad construction, including construction in the Flint Hills, burgeoned after the war, shaping the young state's economic development, migration, population distribution, rise of towns and cities, and social institutions. Even after the development of the highway system for cars and trucks, rise of the aircraft industry and air travel, and implementation of pipelines, railroads remain a vital part of Kansas.

### TRANSCONTINENTAL DREAMS

Serious planning to construct a railroad to California began after the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), by which the U.S. acquired nearly three-fifths of Mexico, and after California's statehood and creation of New Mexico Territory in 1850.

The Compromise of 1820, by which Maine became a free state in 1820 and Missouri a slave state in 1821, had closed lands west of Missouri to Euro-American settlers, reserved that land for Indigenous Americans, and prohibited the expansion of slavery into lands west of Missouri and north of the southern boundary of Missouri. Present Kansas was

sometimes called the “permanent Indian frontier.”

That changed because of railroads.

Railroad interests in the Northern states, where most railroad development in the nation had occurred, did not want a transcontinental line built from the South to California. Illinois Sen. Stephen A. Douglas led efforts to create a new territory west of Missouri and Iowa to assist railroad development from Northern states. Southern congressmen opposed until Douglas proposed creating two territories, Nebraska and Kansas, and reopening the possible expansion of slavery in the region via popular sovereignty (letting the voters of a territory decide to become a slave state or free state upon admission to the Union).

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The resulting contest between pro-slave and free-state interests in Kansas led to violence. This led directly to the Civil War following the admission of Kansas as a free state in January 1861.

Before statehood, the Kansas territorial legislature chartered new railroads during each session. Two railroads established

during the territorial period evolved into major railroads. The Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western, chartered by the first territorial legislature in 1855, evolved into the Union Pacific Railway, Eastern Division, which became the first railroad to build from east to west across Kansas, completing a line from Kansas City to Denver in 1870. The Atchison & Topeka Railroad, chartered in 1859, evolved into the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, extending to the Colorado border in 1872.

Many other railroads crossed Kansas, some going south to the Gulf Coast.

By 1890, Kansas had more miles of railroad track in service per capita than any other state or nation. Shipping freight by rail instead of wagons pulled by draft animals was faster and more economical. At the end of the Civil War, shipping by rail was about 21% of the cost of shipping by wagon train, and the time of delivery by rail was less than 10% of the time of shipping by wagon.

The federal government provided assistance, including low-interest loans and grants of public lands, to help railroads with costs of construction. It granted one-fifth of all land in Kansas to a few railroads. Many smaller railway companies constructed short lines to expand rail service into every county in the state. These railroads shaped Kansas in numerous ways.



**Strong City, Kansas, Depot 1**  
**Florence, Kansas, Depot 1**  
Don Wolfe

### IMPACT OF RAILROADS

Construction and operation of railroads required many workers and provided jobs for Kansas settlers. By 1870, railroads had become the second-largest employer in the U.S., exceeded only by agriculture. Railroads in Kansas created cowtowns for shipping cattle driven from Texas over famous cattle trails, creating the era of the cowboy and the image of the “Wild West.” Railroads also shipped cattle into and out of the Kansas Flint Hills, creating one of the finest ranching regions in the nation.

Railroads entered the Flint Hills in the late 1860s and expanded into the early 1900s. The large shipments of cattle from Texas and other regions for a period of grazing on the tallgrass prairie shaped the area economy from the 1890s through the twentieth century. The railroad stockyards and shipping facilities brought people and prosperity to the towns and ranches. During the early 20th century, before trucks replaced railroads for the transport of cattle, railroad stations in the Flint Hills shipped more cattle than any other region in the United States.

The federal government removed several Indigenous nations from eastern Kansas and the Flint Hills to open lands for settlers and the construction of railroads. Tribes that hunted in the Flint Hills and those that resided there were mostly gone before the railroads

built into the area. The last two tribes removed from the Flint Hills to reservations in Oklahoma were the Osage in 1872 and the Kanza (Kaw) in 1873. Railroads faced Indigenous resistance in western Kansas and facilitated the removal of tribes in that region.

Railroads made possible the great slaughter of bison after 1870 in response to the demand for leather, shipping more than 7 million hides from the Great Plains during 1872-1874. In 1840, an estimated 40 million bison roamed the Great Plains, but by 1886, only about 1,000 remained. This eliminated the Indigenous Americans’ “supermarket,” resulting in the defeat of most of the Plains tribes and their removal to reservations, opening the land to Euro-American settlers.

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### KANSAS HAS MORE THAN 6,000 GHOST TOWNS AND ‘DEAD TOWNS,’ MANY OF WHICH FAILED BECAUSE THE RAILROAD DID NOT ARRIVE.

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Railroads needed settlers both to buy the lands granted to aid with the costs of construction and to produce freight after the rail lines were constructed. Railroads promoted immigration for workers and settlers to buy the granted land. Several

Kansas railroads brought workers from Mexico to help with construction and to provide maintenance of track and equipment. Many Kansas towns that had railroad repair shops developed a Mexican community within or near the town. Railroads also recruited settlers from Europe to purchase railroad land. Railroads boosted towns that were on the line and founded new towns for shipping points and passenger service.

Towns that expected but did not receive a rail connection often disappeared, and those that remained seldom grew. Kansas has more than 6,000 ghost towns and “dead towns,” many of which failed because the railroad did not arrive.

Railroads made commercial agriculture possible in most areas of the state. They changed society as well as the economy with the introduction of standard time (1883) and made possible regular mail service, mail-order catalogs, coal

mining (the “Little Balkans” of southeast Kansas), the meat-packing industry (Strawberry Hill community at Kansas City), salt mines and the petroleum industry. Passenger service made rapid travel possible and facilitated business and leisure travel until superseded by automobiles and air travel.

By 1900, Kansas had more than 9,000 miles of railroad track in service. Railroads carried about 96% of all freight moved more than 30 miles.

Today, many short-line rail extensions and links between major routes have closed. Kansas now has half as many miles of track in operation.

Railroads carry about 16% of freight in the nation, with the rest carried by trucks, barges, pipelines and airlines. But railroads, the force that shaped Kansas, remain an essential part of the economy of the state and the nation.

Leo E. Oliva, Woodston, Kansas, holds a doctorate in American studies from the University of Denver and is a former professor of history at Fort Hays State University. He is currently a member of the Humanities Kansas Speakers Bureau with the topic “Railroaded: The Industry That Shaped Kansas.”