

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Evidence 1: Total U.S. Railroad Mileage, 1850-1890



Introduction

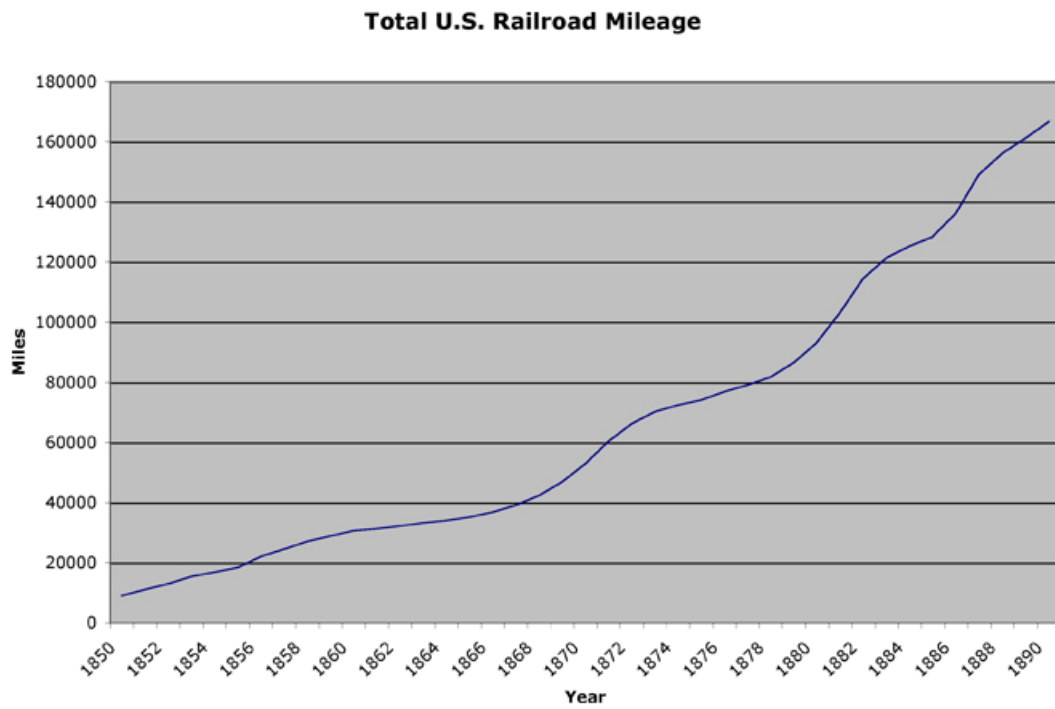
By the time of the Great Strike of 1877, the largest, most powerful corporations in America were railroads. From modest beginnings in the 1830s, they grew by leaps and bounds in years after the Civil War, profoundly transforming society in the process. Railroads became the quintessential symbols of American progress: they bound the nation together, eased the flow of goods and people across the vast North American continent, and greatly accelerated the pace of industrialization. The poet Walt Whitman captured a sense of the excitement and power of the technological advancement in 1855, when he celebrated the locomotive as the "Type of the modern — emblem of motion and power — pulse of the continent." More than twenty years later, the *Chicago Tribune* echoed his sentiment, declaring the railroad the "very heart and life of the modern system of commercial existence" (Foner, 14).

The graph below, which traces the growth in track mileage, serves as a convenient way to measure the expansion of American railways.

Questions to Consider

- What general trend does the graph reveal?
- Why did the growth rate level off in the early 1860s?
- Why did it level off again in the 1870s?

Document



Source:

U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1975), 731.