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The History of North American Rail

Christopher Chant

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Beginning with the introduction of the steam locomotive, followed by the development of iron railroads, the North American railroads impacted the nation in ways unseen by anyone before or since. Just under two centuries ago, not even the most gifted of visionaries could have foreseen the impact on the development of the United States of America that would follow the introduction of the steam locomotive. Then, in the second quarter of the 19th century, the trails of horse-drawn wagon trains were quickly followed by the iron railroads with steam locomotives hauling an ever larger and more diverse assortment of loads - humans, animal and freight. So while the horse may have opened up the North American continent, its real exploitation was made possible by the steam-hauled railroad service. Whereas it had taken weeks, if not months, to take long journeys within and across the U.S.A., the advent of the railroad permitted such journeys to be completed in days, or at worst weeks. While the steam locomotive did not complete the exploration and opening of the U. S. A., it was essential to its development in social, political and economic terms, in the last half of the 19th century turning a small, poorly populated and economically insignificant nation into a huge, rapidly growing and economically powerfully entity that had come to rival the most advance European nations.

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