

Missouri History through the Art of Our State Capitol

Written by Bob Priddy

Railroads

Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri spoke of a dream that would not come true for another 20 years when he told a national railroad convention in St. Louis that it was time to build a railroad to the Pacific Ocean. It was an ambitious dream in 1849, when not one mile of "iron road" existed west of the Mississippi River.

A five-mile long road of oak rails was built from Richmond to the Missouri River about 1850, using horse-drawn cars. But it lasted only a short time.

Missouri's first railroad convention had been held in 1836 with representatives from 10 counties gathering in St. Louis to call for creation of several lines. But none of those lines was ever built.



David Rice Atchison proposed a railroad be built along a central route from St. Louis to the Pacific coast. This bust, by William J. Williams, is located in the third floor hall. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

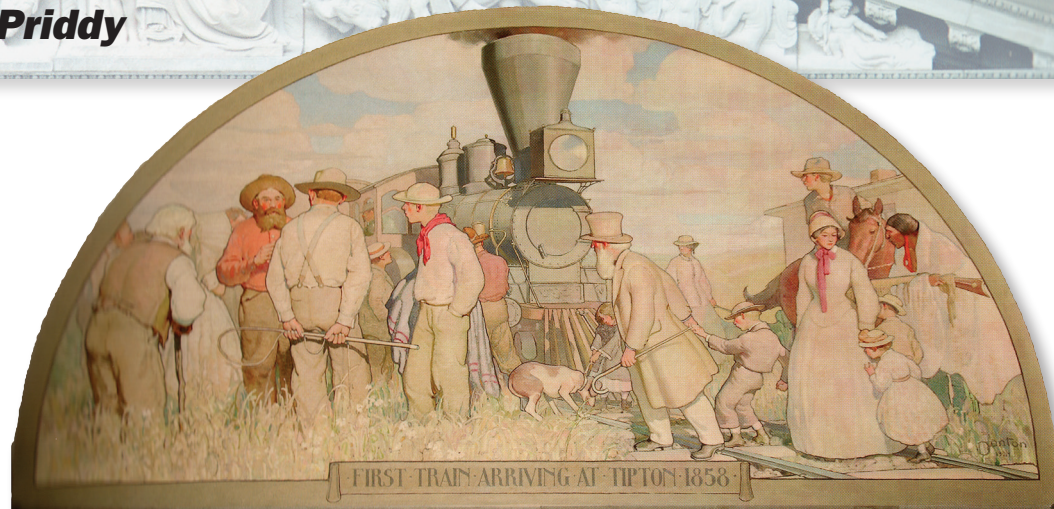
The age of the iron road in Missouri began in July 1850 when ground was broken in St. Louis for the Pacific Railroad. But progress on the tracks to Kansas City was slow. It took 18 months to lay the first 5 miles of track.

Opening the line as far west as Jefferson City was delayed for several months by the collapse of the Gasconade River bridge on Nov. 1, 1855, killing more than 30 people. When the tracks reached Tipton, mail was taken off the train and put on a Butterfield stagecoach for the long trip to the west coast.

The Civil War and other factors delayed train travel between St. Louis and Kansas City until 1865. Rails were being built to speed migration to the west, so trains were heading west from Kansas City. Passengers heading west traveled by steamboat from St. Louis to Kansas City, where they boarded trains and continued westward. The first passenger train between those two cities went eastward from Kansas City to St. Louis.

The first completed railroad across Missouri linked Hannibal and St. Joseph. It was this line that carried the mail that was stuffed into Pony Express saddlebags and taken to Sacramento, Calif. The Hannibal and St. Joseph was the only railroad underwritten by state bonds that did not go bankrupt, costing the state millions of dollars.

The Southwest Branch of the Pacific Railroad survived ownership changes, bankruptcy, and even murder,



The end of the line for the Pacific Railroad was once Tipton, a small town between Jefferson City and Sedalia, where the mail was taken from the train and put on a stagecoach to be carried on to Los Angeles and San Francisco. Herbert Dunton's painting is in the southwest hall of the Capitol's second floor. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

but it did not reach Springfield until 1871.

The railroads changed Missouri. Before the Civil War and the spread of railroads throughout Missouri, the state's 10 largest cities were along rivers. The railroads



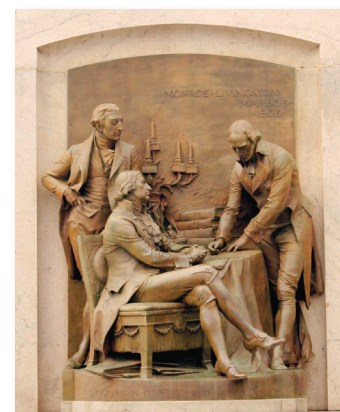
The visionary businessman who saw opportunity in building a great national system of railroads is captured by Allen True in his painting in one of the third floor small domes. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

opened areas away from the rivers to settlement and development by making it easier for people to travel and

do business in those areas. Many towns created by the railroads or for the railroads became trade centers. One of those towns was Sedalia, founded by railroad booster George R. Smith after another town refused to allow the Pacific Railroad to come through it.

Another legacy of the railroads that is part of American culture is the train robbery. Jesse James and his gang were so feared that the railroads financed the \$100,000 reward offered by Gov. Crittenden that led to Jesse's murder and the surrender of his brother, Frank.

Today about 20 freight railroads operate almost 7,000 miles of track in Missouri. Three more are private freight carriers and others provide tourist trips. AMTRAK has three lines across Missouri. Thousands of people owe their livelihoods to a system that began with oak tracks at Richmond and a dream voiced by a Missouri Senator more than 160 years ago.



The Signing of the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, portrayed in this bronze grouping by Karl Bitter, made the United States a nation stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Six decades later, the transcontinental railroad became the iron link between east and west. The bronze panel is on the north side of the Capitol. Courtesy of Missouri State Archives

Bob Priddy is a veteran Missouri Capitol reporter and co-author of "The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone."

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