

We feel that a new attempt at getting more accurate figures regarding early American railroads is warranted. There are several things wrong with the existing figures for track mileage built by various railroads by year. Most railroad historians have relied on the 1880 Census figures because they are the earliest figures that give a complete breakout by railroad and year back to the beginning. The 1880 Census figures for railroads are based on the situation in 1880 where several railroads were still torn up or had not been rebuilt after being destroyed in the Civil War. While it is necessary to delete the figures for these railroads in the year they were eliminated, those railroads were in existence before the Civil War and should have been counted. The second problem is that the 1880 figures are for the railroad companies in existence then and not for the company who originally built them back going back more than fifty years.

Historians are reluctant to argue with census data because they are relied on for so many extremely important decisions from reapportionment to the distribution of federal government funds based on population. The historian needs a lot of justification to depart from relying on census data on any subject, railroads included. So what can we do to resolve this problem? We believe that the answer lies in looking at the much more accurate data on railroads in the 1860 Census. Historians have overlooked this data because while it was broken out by railroad and by year of construction, it only did so for the years from 1850 to 1860. So what good is that for the years before 1850? Most importantly, it gives us a checkpoint on what the totals were in 1850 for each railroad and each state. The census data shown in our breakouts is the 1860 Census figure for each railroad and state in the year 1850. Click on [Railroads by State](#) for the state figures and on [Railroads by Name](#) for the figures for each railroad.

As you can see from the foot totals, the accumulated track mileage according to the 1860 Census for the year 1850 is 8,539.79 miles ([Preliminary Report on the Eighth Census 1860](#) in Table 38 on page 231). Our table entries for the [1880 Census Data](#)

give that figure as 8,747.79 miles (
[1880 CENSUS VOLUME 4 PAGES 308-9](#)
)

. While that is not a huge difference, in part because the 1880 Census compilers undoubtedly looked back at the 1860 Census to cross check their results, the earlier Census was closer to the years 1826 to 1850 and was more likely to have gotten better figures. The 1860 Census made life difficult because when a railroad crossed a state line, but when there were only a few miles of the railroad in another state, they did not count the small mileage in one state but rather assigned that mileage to the state where the company was headquartered (page 214).

This decision caused the State of Tennessee to be listed as having no railroads in 1850 when in fact the Western & Atlantic Railroad had reached Chattanooga during 1850. In the 1880 census, there are tables breaking the mileage out by state for each railroad. By then there had been so many mergers that trying to use these figures for a state breakout when several railroads who originally built the

roads are all lumped together in the name of their successor railroad in 1880 is not possible in all cases.

Fortunately, that railroad was still in existence in 1880 with the same length so the state breakout in the 1880 Census is valid and that informs us that 16.50 miles of that railroad had been in Tennessee since 1850 (Table XII on page 529).

One other example should suffice to point out the problems in the census data. The Mauch Chunk Railroad was built in 1827 and was reported in the 1860 census under the name of Mauch Chunk and

Summit Hill (more properly the Mauch Chunk, Summit Hill and Switchback Railroad due to a name change in 1846) as having 13.00 miles in 1850 and 26.25 miles in 1860 (page 219). By the time of the 1880 census, this railroad had been acquired by the Central Railroad of New Jersey in 1874 and the mileage should have been reported under that name as 13 miles having been built prior to 1850 in the correct years.

Of course, the 9 miles from

1827 could not have been reported correctly anyway since the census bureau did not recognize anything prior to 1830, but it could have been put in the 1830 column. But what about the 4 miles added in 1846 when a separate line was installed for uphill traffic? In the 1880 Census, the Central Railroad of New Jersey shows no mileage built prior to 1852 let alone all of the mileage from the two railroads it was formed

**from in the first place.
The Mauch Chunk
Railroad was missing
from the 1880 data even
though it was still in
operation and remained
so until 1937.**