

Definition of a Railroad

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What constitutes a railroad? In the early years, railroad tracks were laid down and freight cars were hauled over them but they were drawn by horses since practical locomotives were not available yet. Do we count these? In some cases, the rails were of wood and not metal. Do we count these? In some cases, tracks were laid down on a construction site just to get materials from the edge of the site up to where the construction was in progress. Do we count these? Obviously, some decisions have to be made just to decide which railroads to count and these decisions are necessarily somewhat arbitrary. We decided to count all but the latter category. If a railroad was only built just to aid in the construction of some building or monument and then torn down, we did not count it. That immediately eliminated all such special purpose railroads built before 1826.

One could argue that it should also eliminate the so-called anthracite railroads in Pennsylvania that were built just to get the coal from a mine to another railroad or canal which transported the coal to the cities. After all, they hauled nothing but coal and were constantly changing railbeds as the mining activity shifted from one mine to another. Why count those? The Census Bureau definitely did not count some of these railroads when they reconstructed railroad activity prior to 1880. We felt these should be counted if the railroad was incorporated and/or received a charter from some governmental agency. If they went to all that trouble, we feel they were serious about doing business. The special purpose railroads for construction projects do not meet this definition. Thus we did not count the special purpose railroad built to aid in the construction of the Bunker Hill Monument in Charlestown, Massachusetts. But we did count the Granite Railroad built in 1826 to haul the granite blocks from the quarry in Quincy, Massachusetts to a river dock a short distance away even though those blocks were used in building that same monument. Why? Because the Granite Railroad continued to haul blocks for other projects after the Bunker Hill Monument was completed.