

Railroads & the Land

Railroads were central to business expansion in the late 1800s and their coming had far-reaching consequences.

Numerous small towns such as Gladstone and Big Stone Gap sprang up along railroad lines, which also transformed the hamlet Big Lick (population 400 in 1881) into Roanoke (population 25,000 in 1892). Roanoke became headquarters of the Norfolk & Western Railroad that connected the coal fields of southwest Virginia to Norfolk and Newport News, which became two of the world's largest coal ports.

In the late 1800s, coal fueled the world's ships, locomotives, homes, and industries, and the discovery of vast coal deposits in 1873 transformed southwest Virginia from a hardscrabble, sparsely populated agricultural corner into a booming industrial area.

Railroads linked Virginia to the rest of the country, creating larger markets for Virginia's farm and manufactured goods. But the reverse also was true. Northern factory-made products replaced many homemade and local craftsmen's goods.

The penetration of virgin areas by railroads facilitated use and abuse of natural resources through strip mining, pollution, and excessive timber cutting. But, overall, railroads fueled economic growth and improved living standards.

They also boosted tourism. Earlier, only the well off could visit distant wonders such as Natural Bridge or Luray Caverns. Cheap railroad excursions brought these destinations within reach of the average Virginian.