

Freight Comes Full Circle

A trend that takes us back to the future

BY BILL R. MEDLEY, SR/WA

When it comes to the movement of freight, it's undeniable that America's past is repeating itself.

Prior to the 1800s, freight had to be moved by horse-drawn carriages and barges in the river systems of the Northeast. In the early 1800s, John Stevens, long considered the father of the railroad, presented the first steam locomotive in Hoboken, New Jersey, on a circular, experimental track. This led to the rise of trains as a quick way to move people and freight. Soon railroad charters were given to entrepreneurs and trading companies that wanted their products moved more efficiently, especially into the southern and westerly undeveloped areas of the United States. Barges and other means of moving freight also experienced evolution, and steam-powered paddle boats brought raw materials and finished products to the consumer faster than ever before.

The growing demand for fast-moving freight became the driving force in the rapid development of rail and river boat/barge infrastructure. As the westerly expansion continued during the middle to late 1800s, many of the uncharted areas developed into towns and cities using the railroad and river locations as their roadmap.



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It was increasingly evident that the railroad and barge systems were the new kings of freight. A good example of this was the movement of cotton grown in the South to supply northern textile mills. Plantation wagons brought the cotton to the market place where it was bundled and sold. Railroads delivered the bundles to the river cities, where the cotton was loaded onto barges or riverboats to be transported to the mills of the Northeast via the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. The finished product was then shipped to the consumer, enabling us to meet society's demand for cotton. This remained the model for many years up until the industrial revolution.

Then, in the early 1900s, the development of the automobile created a new, faster mode of transportation for movement of freight. Now trucks were being used to convey cargo for short distances. During this time, rural roads and state highway systems were developing at a breakneck pace. Larger trucks started moving over the expanded highways and road systems in longer hauls. When the U.S. entered into World War II, it created an even bigger need to transport troops and freight faster across the country.

In the 1950s, the Eisenhower Interstate System was developed, connecting all points of the country via four-lane highways. As a result, the movement of freight over the rail and water systems steadily declined over the next 50 years, not only because of the speed and versatility of the motor carrier trucks, but also due to an abundant supply of cheap fuel.

By the end of the 20th century, however, higher fuel prices and an environmentally conscious, global society changed the equation in favor of the once reliable trains and river barges. No longer could the enormous cost of the national highway infrastructure be sustained to keep up with the demand of goods. Realizing this, the federal government recently changed its priorities to a more conservative green approach, focusing less on highway construction and allocating more funding for the redevelopment of cheaper rail and water systems of transportation.

According to the 2010 Environmental Leadership Report published by CSX Railroad, trains can move a ton of freight 500 miles per gallon of diesel fuel. Trains

can also reduce CO² omissions by eight percent per ton mile and additionally take 441,000 trucks off the road each year.

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The consumer society we live in today demands that products produced worldwide be readily available. The difference from our past self-sustaining, agricultural/ industrial society to our present one has led us to change the way goods are brought to our doorstep. Freight that moves over the oceans in containers is once again transferred intact to the railroad and barge intermodal facilities. This has replaced semi-trucks as the primary carriers of long-haul freight in much of the United States.

The recessionary economic times we are facing today have affected freight and freight carriers forever, in positive as well as negative ways. And while motor carrier and air cargo companies are, for the most part, still being used for the last mile of delivery, the rail system and barges are again being used for the freight's long haul from one coast to another.

Rail and water transport have now come full circle. From the early 1800s to the present, we tread proudly into the future. The original kings of freight are back.



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