RAILROADS IN THE CIVIL WAR

1854 Railroad Map showing the importance of Mattoon as a major rail hub

At the beginning of the Civil War, there were about 30,000 miles of railway in the United States. About 21,000 miles of track were in the North and the South about 9,000. The railroads in the North were typically longer routes and because of the North's industrial capacity heavier equipment. The South by contrast, had many short lines designed to haul tobacco and cotton, and few interconnecting rail lines. For example, Richmond, Virginia was served by 5 railroads, none of which could interconnect due to different rail gauges.

The Southern commanders, though, were the first to recognize the true tactical advantages of rail. At the Battle of Bull Run in 1861, Confederate forces under General P G T Beauregard were vastly outnumbered by the approaching Union army. Brigadier General Joseph Johnston was 54 miles away with an additional 10,000 men including the soon to be famous brigade led by Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Johnston's force was loaded onto trains and arrived at the battle in time to be the deciding factor in a Confederate victory. To march that army to the battle would have taken 2-3 days and the men would have arrived exhausted.

After that both sides realized that the railroads were both strategic resources as well as military targets. Many campaigns revolved around the seizure of railroads. Raiding parties of cavalry on both sides targeted railroads and rail depots. Grierson's Raid, which gained notoriety for it's raid far into southern territory to disrupt rail traffic and Sherman's March to the Sea, which destroyed hundreds of miles of southern rail and introduced "Sherman's Neckties", rails that had been heated and twisted into the shape of a necktie, into the lexicon were just a couple of such campaigns.

As the war progressed, the South began to lose the war of attrition as they did not have the industrial capacity or the resources to replace damaged and destroyed trackage and equipment. The North on the other hand became adept at quickly replacing damaged rail and prepositioned stockpiles of ties and rails at strategic points.
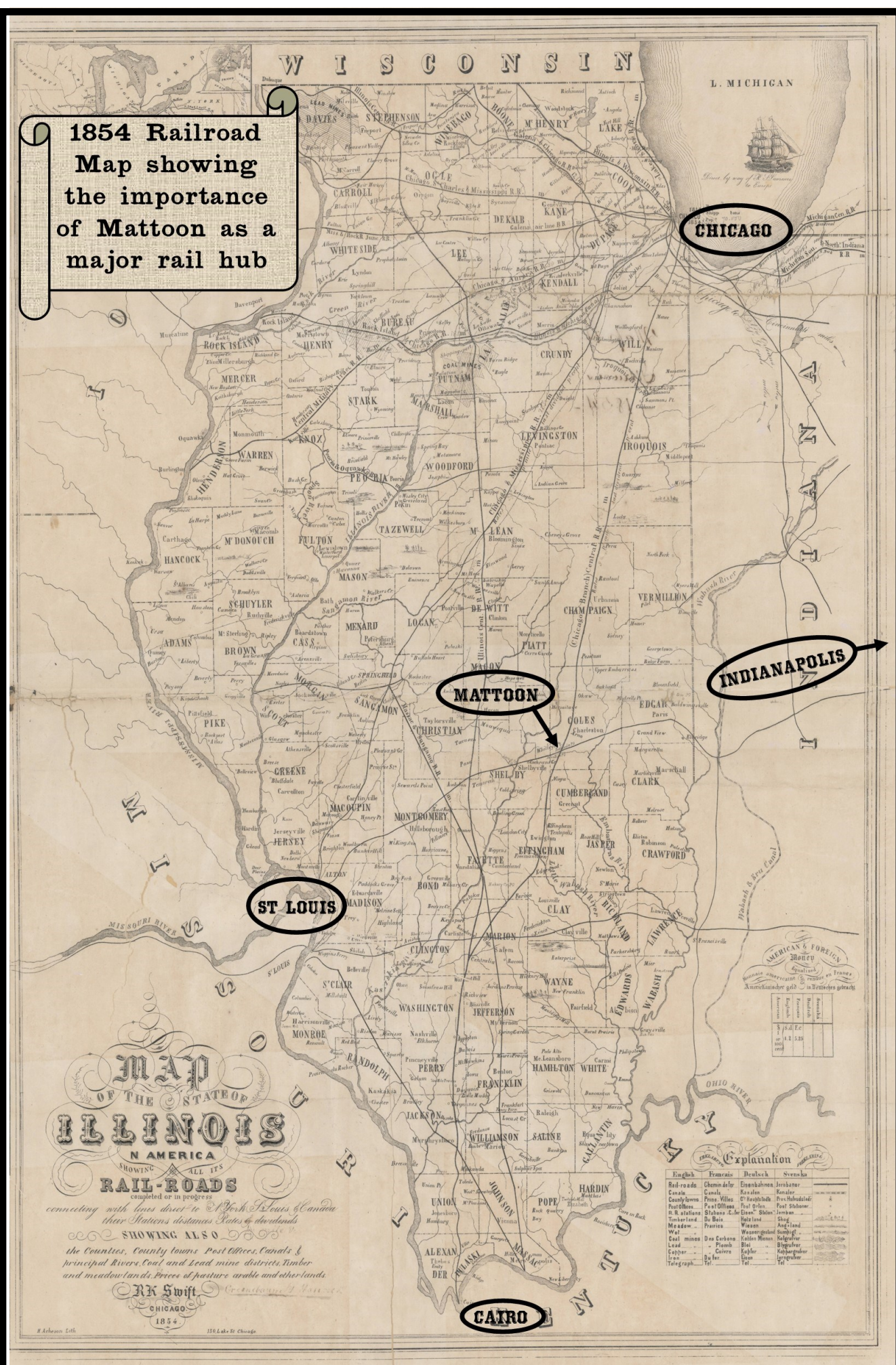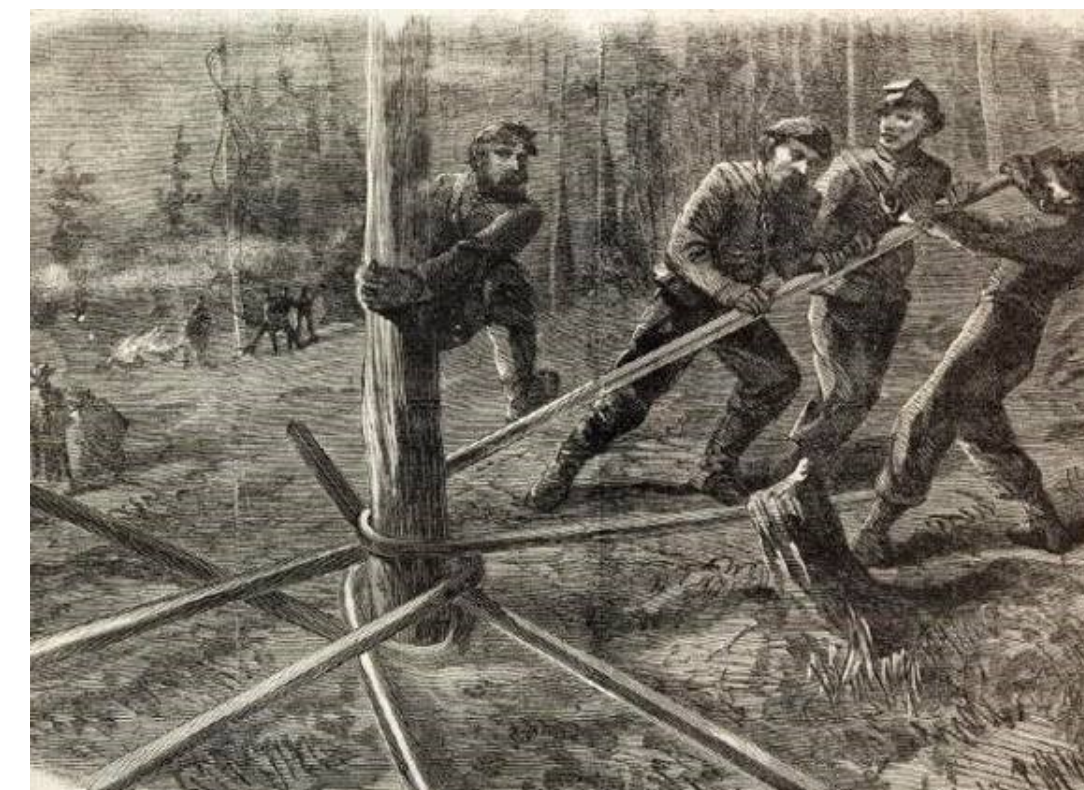
In order to consolidate many diverse railroads, Secretary of War Stanton, who had been the president of the Illinois Central Railroad, established the United States Military Railroad to coordinate nationwide shipping and to administer rail lines captured as Federal armies moved into the South.

The railroads came of age during the Civil War, as troops, material, ammunition, food, horses and livestock, and raw materials, as well as civilians were routinely transported by rail.

Towns and cities like Mattoon, with major railroads, soon became important transportation centers as trains thundered through day and night. Mattoon supported two convalescent hospitals, a Federal corral, a major center at Camp Grant for regimental furloughs, as well as a way point for tens of thousands of troops passing through and obtaining a quick meal or a cup of coffee as the trains paused to take on fuel and water here. The people of Mattoon also saw thousands of southern prisoners pass through on their way to Union prison camps in Chicago, Rock Island, and Columbus.

Mattoon farmers prospered as they found a ready market to ship grain, produce and livestock by rail, to quartermaster buyers who were tasked with feeding a vast army.

An indication of the impact the railroads had on Mattoon directly was the upswing in population from 1,500 at the start of the war to almost 5,000 by war's end. Much of that increase was brought on by the railroad.

The last train operated by the United States Military Railroad was the seven-car special train that carried President Abraham Lincoln back home to Springfield, Illinois.