

Railroads: Part 4 - Passenger and Tourist Train Services ^[1]

Railroads

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[Part 1 - Introduction](#) ^[2], [Part 2 - First Rail Lines and the Birth of the North Carolina Railroad](#) ^[3], [Part 3 - The Civil War, Postwar Struggles, and the Transportation of Agricultural Products](#) ^[4], [Part 4 - Passenger and Tourist Train Services](#), [Part 5 - Twentieth-Century Trends and Decline](#) ^[5].

Passenger and Tourist Train Services

Although originally built for commerce, North Carolina's railroads from the beginning tried to offer passenger service as a matter of pride and as a "bonus" to bring in more profits. The railroads became a critical means of transportation for North Carolinians of all economic levels, but in the early days amenities were few. There were no dining cars, and schedules were planned with stops for meals at stations and hotels along the route. Cars were poorly heated; in the summer, open windows let in smoke, ash, and cinders along with air. Nevertheless, wooden cars were often elegantly fitted out with gilt scroll work and gleaming coats of varnish.

Steel cars with central heating (and later air-conditioning) arrived on the major lines after the turn of the century, and passenger trains remained the major form of long-distance travel through the 1920s. However, the convenience of the automobile in the late 1920s and the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s started the decline of passenger traffic. Local service suffered the most; on main lines across the state the railroads responded with sleek stainless steel and aluminum streamliners pulled by cleaner diesel engines. The gas and tire shortages of World War II temporarily restored ridership, but the early 1950s saw another decline that ended with the discontinuance of all local passenger trains and most long-distance ones.

Tourists had constituted a major part of passenger traffic. Some of the first trains on the Raleigh & Gaston in the 1840s were designed for residents on the line to take their first ride, and a number of lines, such as the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1878, ran excursions to watch the railroad being built through the scenic mountains. As the novelty wore off, railroads increased passenger traffic by running special trains to the beaches and to the mountains. To further encourage ridership, they often built hotels at vacation spots and offered special package rates. The Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad owned the Atlantic Hotel at Morehead City from 1880 until it burned in 1933 and promoted it as a summer resort. The railroads opened still-prominent resorts in Southern Pines and Asheville as well as many others, almost forgotten, such as those around medicinal springs. Railways also were critical in the opening of religious assembly retreats, in particular the ones at Ridgecrest, Lake Junaluska, and Montreat.

Keep reading >>[Part 5 - Twentieth-Century Trends and Decline](#) ^[5] 

Subjects:

[Industry](#) ^[6]

[Railroads](#) ^[7]

[Transportation](#) ^[8]

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From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[11]

1 January 2006 | Detreville, John R.; Wait, Douglas A.

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