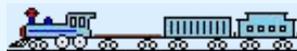


# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FRENCH RAILWAYS

Part 1 - The Early Years  
1827 – 1938

Compiled and Translated  
by

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From numerous sources

# HISTORY OF FRENCH RAILWAYS BEFORE THE CREATION OF THE SNCF (1827-1937)

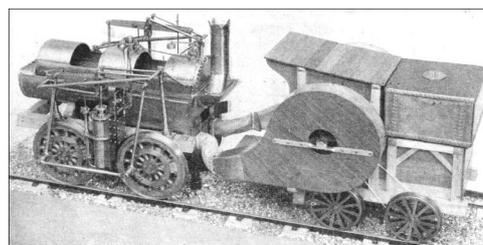
## ✧ THE EARLY YEARS ✧

### Birth of the train

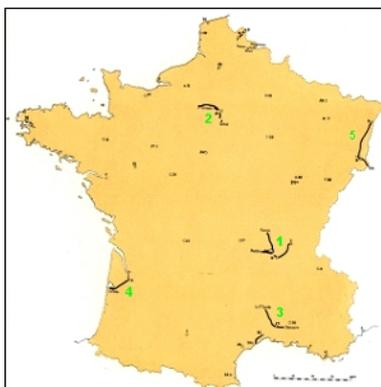
It is between 1827 and 1834, during the reigns of Charles X and Louis-Philippe that are put into service the first lines of railway in France: 1- Saint-Étienne to Andrézieux (1827) thus becoming the first railroad in continental Europe. In July 1830, on the brand new line under construction from Lyon to Saint-Etienne granted to the Seguin brothers, the first French passenger train runs between Givors and Rives-de-Giers. These take place in cars used for the transportation of coal, still drawn by horses. The entire line was opened in 1832. From Saint-Étienne to Lyon (1830-1833), and from Andrézieux to Roanne (1834), the first of these lines was first intended to transport coal only from the mines of Saint-Etienne to the nearest river port, Andrézieux, on the Loire.

Other lines of the period: 3- La Grande Combe-Nîmes. Then the tourist lines were built: 4- from Bordeaux to La Teste (Bay of Arcachon), 2- from Paris to St. Germain-en-Laye.

By the 1850s, town-to-town routes had coalesced into the "Big Six" 'grands réseaux': Est, Nord, Ouest, Paris-Orleans (PO, whose territory extended beyond Orleans itself, south to Bordeaux), Midi (in the deep south), and Paris Lyon-Mediterranean (PLM). The original master plan included a "Grand Central", whose concessions were divided between the PO and PLM before it could come to fruition.



FRANCE'S FIRST LOCOMOTIVE, built by Marc Seguin in 1829 for the St. Etienne-Lyon Railway. The tender carried two rotary fans, driven by the wheels, to provide a draught for the fire.



- 1 - St. Etienne - Andrézieux - Lyon - Roanne and others
- 2 - Paris - Le Pecq - St. Germain-en-Laye (Versailles)
- 3 - Grand'Combe, Alès, Nîmes and Beaucaire on the Rhone river.
- 4 - Bordeaux - La Teste (Arcachon)
- 5 - Strasbourg-Ville to Saint-Louis near Basel (140 km-87 miles)

### The first passengers

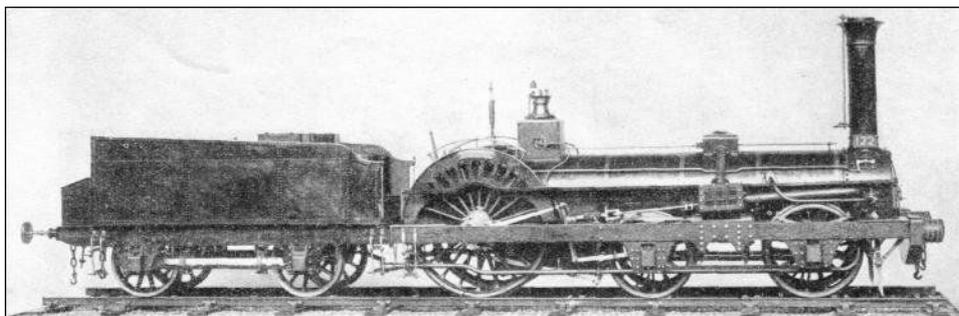
On the second line, from Saint-Étienne to Lyon in 1831, the first steam locomotives arrive and the passenger trains: trains little comfortable, since travelers are installed in the cars used for the transportation of coal! However, the following year, in 1832, appear the first cars for travelers on the line. Ten years after the opening of the line from Saint-Etienne to Lyon, extraction of coal has doubled in the mines de Saint-Etienne and industries have mushroomed throughout the basin: This shows how the creation of a railway line can develop the economy of a region by transporting passengers and goods faster and cheaper.

## Paris jumps on the bandwagon

In August 26, 1837, almost ten years later than the Saint-Etienne line, Paris sees it's its first train: it is a passenger train to Le Pecq near Saint-Germain-en-Laye, inaugurated by Queen Marie-Amélie (as a caution, it was decided that King Louis-Philippe not to ride the train as this new means of transport

was still too risky!). During the following weeks, 400,000 Parisians were keen to use the train to Saint-Germain, manifesting their enthusiasm for the "monster of steel" spinning at a prodigious speed of 60 km/h!

The first significant lines built then are those of 5- Strasbourg to the city of Saint-Louis, near Basel (1841), from Paris to Orleans, from Paris to Rouen (1843) and from Paris to Lille (1846).



AN EARLY FRENCH EXPRESS ENGINE designed by T. R. Crampton, and built at Paris for the Northern Railway of France in 1849.  
Engines of this type worked the French express services until 1876.  
The driving wheels of these locomotives were 6 ft. 10-1/2 in. diameter, and were placed behind the firebox.

Other lines 1838-1842:

- October 21, 1838, inauguration of the line [Abscon - Saint Waast](#) granted in perpetuity on October 24, 1834. A railway of industrial nature and long of 15 km (~10 miles) and operated by the [Compagnie des mines d'Anzin](#) until its nationalization en 1946. In addition to the transportation of coal, this railway provided a passenger service.
- [1838](#), [Baptiste Alexis Victor Legrand](#) traces a network in a star outline centered in [Paris](#), known as the [Star of Legrand](#), similar to the road network of the XVIII century, and which strongly influenced France's economic and social geography.
- [June 9, 1839](#), inauguration of the line from [Montpellier to Sète](#) (formerly Cette).
- [June 15 1839](#), inauguration of the line Nîmes–Beaucaire built by the [Compagnie des Mines de la Grand'Combe et des chemins de fer du Gard](#).
- [2 august 1839](#), inauguration of the line [Paris - Versailles](#) by the Duke of Orleans, granted on July 9, 1836.
- [1841](#), inauguration of the line [from Strasbourg-Ville to Saint-Louis](#) between Koenigshoffen and Saint-Louis, 134 km, the first European international line, built and operated by [Nicolas Koechlin](#) on behalf of the of the [Compagnie du chemin de fer de Strasbourg at Bale](#).
- [Mai 8, 1842](#), [accident in Meudon, the first rail catastrophe in France](#).
- [June 11, 1842](#), At the end of the year on 1841, France had a net delay on the other industrialized countries in the construction of its railroad network. This one included only 319 kilometers in exploitation, on 566 granted, while England had granted 2521, the German States, 627 and Belgium 378, without speaking the United States which exploited 5800 km and had granted 15 500 km. Besides the State had no clear policy, so much on the consistency of the network to be build, than on the policy of exploitation to be retained. The "Charter" of the railways: the Law on the establishment of the main lines of railway, laying down the rules of railways in France, creates an original model of [public-private partnership](#). The State becomes the owner of the retained grounds for the laying of the tracks and it finances the construction of infrastructures (works of engineering and buildings). He grants the operation to companies, which build the superstructures (railroads, installations), invests in the rolling stock and have a monopoly of exploitation on their lines.
- [August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1842](#), First itinerant post office desk on the railroad line from Strasbourg to Basel.
- 1842-45: connection from Nîmes to Montpellier (creating "the star" Sète-Beaucaire-La Grand' Combe). In this occasion, began the construction of the stations of neo-classical style of monumental facades at Nîmes and Montpellier which still exist.\*

\* (this list and links -mostly in French- are from wiki.)

## The big companies

- [1859](#), Railroad agreements State-companies: by an inspiration from the [Duke of Morny](#), the granted lines are split into six big companies.
- [1878](#), nationalization of the [réseaux ferroviaires des Charentes](#) (birth of the [réseau de l'État](#)-State network).
- [July 17, 1879](#), the law adopting the [Freycinet plan](#) which plans a program of works intended to carry the railroad network of general interest from about 29 600 km (where 21 300 are in operation) to 38 300, and incorporating 8 800 km of new lines to be built (including 2 500 km of lines of local interest already granted). This plan, which was to allow serving all the sub-prefectures, was almost finished in 1914.
- [November 20, 1883](#), Law carrying an approval of the agreements with six big companies ([Compagnie de Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée](#), [Compagnie d'Orléans](#), [Compagnie du Midi](#), [Compagnie du Nord](#), [Compagnie de l'Est](#), [Compagnie de l'Ouest](#).\*

\* (This list and the links –mostly in French- are from the wiki)

The Relations between the State and the companies are complex. The State offers the concession; it imposes routes and conditions of establishment. Concretely, this power is held by the [engineers of the department of civil engineering](#). At the same time, the State can offer subsidies before its guaranteed interest to the new invested capitals. This system becomes widespread starting at the Second Empire, moment when the public authorities demand the construction of less and less profitable lines. The balance of transfers will be progressively unfavorable to statutory companies during the second part of the XIXth century. In this frame, the most fragile company, the Chemin de fer de l'Ouest (the Western Railroad), becomes structurally overdrawn: it will be nationalized in 1908. The system of guaranteed interest stresses the guardianship of the State over the private companies whose accounts are permanently checked by the administration.



In 1897, Bordeaux was only 8 hours from Paris

## The importance of private funds

At that time, the railway lines are built and operated by private companies, directed usually by bankers and industrialists (steel especially) who pay the construction of lines and bear the financial risk of their operations. However, companies must obtain prior State "concession" of the line, i.e. the right to build and operate. In addition, the State monitors closely railway rates/fares: in 1839, for example, a decree by the prefect of police fixed authoritatively prices from the line to Paris to Versailles. That is to say, at this time of very liberal economy, the railways do not have the same freedom as other industries: the State already considers that they provide a public service.

## Train and economic development



The imperial train under Napoleon III

It was under Napoleon III that France was covered with tracks: the length of the network passes from 1863 miles to more than 10800 miles. By 1870, all the main lines were built and all the cities of France were connected to Paris whose political and economic role is powerfully reinforced. By the middle of the Second Empire, the overall French opinion realizes that railway can prodigiously increase the wealth of the country and, if it penetrates everywhere, enriching all regions, even the poorest. In fact, between 1825 and 1875, the tonnage of goods moving in France increases in the proportion of 1 to 9

Thus, it can be said that railway allowed the industrial revolution.

However, the considerable development of the French rail network appears to the State, after the defeat of 1870, is still very insufficient both on the economic front than on the strategic plan. In addition, the Minister of public works of the time (1877-1879), Charles de Freycinet, after having established a network of the State (Act of May 18, 1878) through the acquisition of several small companies in difficulty in the West of France, introduced the Act of July 17, 1879 (Freycinet Plan) with the creation of 5600 miles of new lines.

### The onset of financial difficulties

Between 1870 and 1914, the length of the national network grows from 17430 km to 39400 km and the State network expands considerably in 1909 by the takeover of the lines until then conceded to the Western Company (Normandy and Brittany). This proliferation of lines, many of which are not profitable, drives many companies to a difficult financial situation, requiring a greater State intervention in the management of the railways. Until 1883, the participation of the State was intended only to cover the expenses provided during the study of projects, overruns being borne by dealers. The agreements of the Freycinet Plan, in 1883 between the State and the companies establish a system virtually opposite from the previous, since only the overheads are now the responsibility of the State.

### The railway crisis

The war of 1914 compromises the financial recovery that was initiated. To the important damages suffered by the rail facilities are added the increases of fares inherent to inflation, largely above to those that were authorized successively for the rates. In 1920, all networks were deficient. The 1921 Convention, which establishes technical cooperation and financial solidarity between networks, failed to put an end to the growing deficit of the companies (37 billion end 1936, or 328,9 billion translated into 2000 francs, around 65,40 B\$), because of the economic recession of the years 1929-1931, aggravated by the appearance of a competitor: the transport of passengers by road.

The culmination of such a development is the nationalization of the railways in 1937.

### The inter-war period

1933, Revision of the railroad convention of 1921

1934, The Doumergue national union government decides to fix a temporary quota by statutory way, by forbidding any new activity, the road and river transports of travellers and goods for the account of others. Furthermore, by an amendment of 1933 to the convention of 1921, the compulsory obligations for railroad companies were relieved for a more narrow control of their management by the State.



The evolution of the French railroads up to 1860

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