



Marker Text

Former Narrow Gauge Railroad

Tracklayers building narrow gauge railroad connecting Great Lakes at Toledo, Ohio, with Mississippi River reached this point October 1, 1880. In 1887, 2,000 men converted 206 miles of this to standard gauge railroad in 11 hours.

Railroad Construction

A significant part of America's rail system in the 19th century was 18,000 miles of 3-foot-wide narrow gauge railroad in 44 states. Most subsequently converted to 4-foot, 8½ inch standard gauge.

Report

The nature of records relating to narrow gauge rail lines in the U.S. makes verification of the marker text very difficult. Newspaper articles indicate that the narrow gauge railroad track referenced in the marker text did connect Toledo, Ohio to the Mississippi River.¹ The relative lack of data regarding present-day narrow gauge railroad track compared to "[class 1](#)," or standard/heavy rail lines suggests that the final statement on the marker is also accurate. Research was conducted using designated Marker Review sources, and no primary sources were located to definitively support the remainder of the marker text:

- The use of the phrase "this point" in the text implies that the rail line reached the spot, or general area, where the marker currently stands. The distance between Marion, Indiana and Kokomo, Indiana is approximately 30 miles. The *Kokomo Saturday Tribune* dates the completion of the track to the station at Kokomo to December 31, 1880.² A secondary source, *The Nickel Plate Story*, asserts that "tracklayers reached Marion on October 1,"³ but this information is not supported with a citation by the author and no primary sources were found to support the date.
- According to three primary sources, a 206-mile section of the narrow gauge line from Toledo, OH to Frankfort, IN was converted to standard gauge in June of 1887, but the remaining details are inconsistent and cannot be confirmed. A New York Times article (reprinted from a Toledo paper) states that 2,000 men worked from 4:30am to noon (7.5 hours). A local paper from Frankfort reported that the conversion was completed by a "nearly 2,500 men reported that they "went to work at 5 o'clock Sunday morning." The Frankfort Crescent further explained that "to-night [Sunday night] trains with the new equipment were rolling over the new 4 feet 8 ½ inches of track."⁴ The train departure, though, is not indicative of a completion time, only of a railroad schedule.
- Precise statistics pertaining to the U.S. railroad system are not available because collection of railroad-related data was not regularly conducted until 1880. Further, the data gathered in early records is based on information provided by "officers and employees long in service." The U.S. Department of Commerce and the Bureau of the Census qualify their statistics, saying that "the figures for any year are [...] understatements" for a variety of reasons.⁵ The two federal agencies report that there were 102,805 miles of railroad track of all gauges in the United States during the nineteenth century.⁶ Railroad historian, George W. Hilton, asserts that narrow gauge lines were not constructed in the U.S. until 1871,⁷ and that less than 17,000 miles were assembled by 1900, with the number reaching 18,022 by 1910.⁸ Hilton's figures are based on



his own survey of historical records from railroad companies throughout the U.S. As with the federal figures, it is difficult to rely solely on these figures due to the potential for inconsistencies in data recording and methodology from one company to the next, though read as estimates they are helpful. Neither the primary nor the secondary sources available at the time of this review specify the exact gauge of the track recorded—narrow gauge rails were created in multiple widths. As a result, confirmation that there were 18,000 miles of 3-foot-wide track is impossible.

- Based on the estimates available, it is difficult to support the assertion that narrow gauge rails made up a “significant part” of the American railroad system, as 17,000-18,000 miles of narrow gauge track was a mere 15-16% of the over 100,000 miles of track in the U.S. at the time. Regarding the breadth of the narrow gauge phenomenon, the marker claims 44 states possessed narrow gauge track. Hilton dedicates a chapter of his work to the history of each state’s narrow gauge railways, 45 in total.⁹ No primary document outlines the spread of the narrow gauge railway to support either viewpoint, but this secondary source calls into question the figure on the marker.

In summary, the text of the marker is too specific, given the relative uncertainty of statistics relating to narrow gauge railroad lines and their subsequent conversion. Regardless of the inconsistent figures, the construction and subsequent conversion of a narrow gauge railroad through Indiana illustrates a national and regional shift in transportation, industry, and technology.

Learn More

To learn more about narrow gauge railroads, IHB staff recommends George Hilton’s [American Narrow Gauge Railroads](#), which is considered a definitive reference on the topic by railroad enthusiasts.

Wikipedia’s entries provide a [worldwide context](#) for the topic, [an overview](#) of American non-standard tracks, and [visual representations](#) of track gauges used in the U.S. and worldwide over time and are a useful jumping-off point for exploring this topic.

If you are interested in a specific narrow gauge rail line, IHB also recommends public libraries, historical societies, and [railroad museums](#) in the region where the railroad is located.

¹ “Widening of the Narrow Gauge R.R.,” *Kokomo Dispatch*, June 23, 1887; “Rail Road Items,” *Frankfort Crescent*, June 29, 1887; George W. Hilton, *American Narrow Gauge Railroads* (Stanford, CA, 1990), 473-75.

² “It’s Finished,” *Kokomo Saturday Tribune*, January 1, 1881.

³ John A. Rehor, *The Nickel Plate Story* (Milwaukee, 1965), 126.

⁴ “Widening of the Narrow Gauge R.R.,” *Kokomo Dispatch*, June 23, 1887; “Rail Road Items,” *Frankfort Crescent*, June 29, 1887; “A Great Property Saved: A Railroad Rescued from the Wreckers,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1887.

⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce and Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, Vol. II (Washington D.C., 1975), 724.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 732.

⁷ Hilton, *American Narrow Gauge Railroads*, 20.

⁸ Hilton, 88-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*