

John Work Garrett Biography

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Biography

The American railroad magnate John Work Garrett (1820-1884) made the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad a major line and dominated its affairs for almost 30 years.

John W. Garrett was born in Baltimore, Md., on July 31, 1820. After some college work he joined his father's mercantile firm. During the 1850s the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad extended its tracks westward and in 1852 reached Wheeling, Va., on the Ohio River. When this process created financial difficulties, a stockholders' committee was convened. Garrett's impressive analysis as a member of the committee resulted in his election as president of the railroad in 1858.

Garrett's railroad was a fundamental factor in the eventual Union triumph in the Civil War, because it straddled both Union and Confederacy territories and connected Washington, D.C., with the surrounding area. The railroad profited enormously from the wartime increase in its volume of freight and passengers.

Garrett's major effort after the war was aimed at linking Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York by rail, thereby making the Baltimore and Ohio one of the four leading railroads serving the most vital, industrialized section of the country. He succeeded. Although in the process he employed some dubious competitive practices, his actions were probably not as reprehensible as those of his worst competitors.

A severe and prolonged depression began in 1873, and there was intensified pressure to reduce costs. Labor costs (in this essentially nonunion era) were the most vulnerable to downward pressure, so Garrett tried cutting wages (rather than dividends), simultaneously increasing the amount of work expected from his laborers. In response, the workers struck. The stoppage began on the Baltimore and Ohio in July 1877 and then spread, ultimately involving many railroads. The strike was marked by unprecedented violence; President Rutherford B. Hayes used Federal troops to end it by force. Since labor conditions were improved afterward, the strike was not a complete failure for the workers. Garrett, aged by the strike, died on Sept. 26, 1884, in Deer Park, Garrett County, Md.