

Time

By Heather Cox Richardson

I often say that 1883 is my favorite year in history because of all that happened in that pivotal year, and one of those things is the way modernity swept across the United States of America in a way that was shocking at the time but that is now so much a part of our world we rarely even think of it...

Until November 18, 1883, railroads across the United States operated under 53 different time schedules, differentiated on railroad maps by a complicated system of colors. For travelers, time shifts meant constant confusion and, frequently, missed trains. And then, at noon on Sunday, November 18, 1883, railroads across the North American continent shifted their schedules to conform to a new standard time. Under the new system, North America would have just five time zones.

Fifteen minutes before the time of the shift, the telegraph company Western Union shut down all telegraph lines for anything but the declaration of the new time. It identified the moment the new time went into effect in telegraph messages to local railroad offices and to the jewelers known in cities for keeping time. In offices that got the message, men had their timepieces in their hands and ready to reset when the chief operator shouted "twelve o'clock!"

In Boston the change meant that the clocks would move forward about 16 minutes; in New York City, clocks were set back about four minutes. For Baltimore the time would move forward six minutes and twenty-eight seconds; in Atlanta it went back 22 minutes.

The system was a dramatic wrench for the rural United States, bringing it into the modern world. Uniform time zones had been proposed by pioneering meteorologist Cleveland Abbe, who developed the U.S. system of weather forecasting. Having joined the United States Weather Bureau as chief meteorologist in 1871, he recognized that predicting the weather required a nationally coordinated team and worked with Western Union to collect information about temperature, wind direction, precipitation, and sunset times from across the country.

Coordinating that information required keeping time across all the stations he had set up. To do so, Abbe divided the United States into four time zones, each one hour apart, and in 1879 he suggested those zones might smooth out the chaos of the railroad systems, each trying to coordinate schedules across a patchwork of local times. Railroad executives, who were concerned that if they didn't do something, the government would, listened to Abbe, and by 1883 they had concluded to put his new system in place.

Members of the new professional class who traveled by train from city to city were on board because they thought the need to regularize train schedules was imperative. But standard time was controversial. In the United States, people had operated entirely by the rhythms of the sun until the establishment of factories in New England in the 1830s,

and most people still lived by those rhythms, their local time adjusting to solar time according to their geographical location.

Telling the time by sundial and history not only was custom, but also was understood as following God's time. The idea of overriding traditional timekeeping because of the needs of the modern world seemed positively sacrilegious. "People...must eat, sleep and work...by railroad time," wrote a contributor to the *Indianapolis Daily Sentinel*. "People will have to marry by railroad time.... Ministers will be required to preach by railroad time.... Banks will open and close by railroad time; notes will be paid or protested by railroad time."

The mayor of Bangor, Maine, vetoed an ordinance in favor of standard time, saying it was unconstitutional, that it changed the immutable law of God, that the people didn't want it, and that it was hard on the working men because it changed day into night. Those planning for a switch to standard time tried to ease fears by providing that Americans would operate on both local time and standard time, with both times represented on clocks.

On November 18, no one quite knew what the dramatic wrench into the future might mean.

What did it mean to gain or lose time? Many people expected "a sensation, a stoppage of business, and some sort of a disaster, the nature of which could not be exactly ascertained," a *New York Times* reporter recorded. As the great moment approached, people crowded the streets in front of jewelers to see the "great transformation."

They were disappointed when, after all the buildup, the future arrived quietly.

The *New York Times* explained: "When the reader of THE TIMES consults his paper at 8 o'clock this morning at his breakfast table it will be 9 o'clock in St. John, New Brunswick, 7 o'clock in Chicago, or rather in St. Louis—for Chicago authorities have refused to adopt the standard time, perhaps because the Chicago meridian was not selected as the one on which all time must be based—6 o'clock in Denver, Col. and 5 o'clock in San Francisco. That is the whole story in a nut-shell."

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Notes:

Chicago Daily Tribune, "At Noon today Most of the Railroads Will Discard the Old and Adopt the New," November 18, 1883, p. 12.

Boston Daily Globe, "Modern Joshuas: They Make Clocks, If Not the Sun, Stand Still," November 19, 1883, p. 5.

Boston Daily Globe, "At the Railroad Stations, At the Churches," November 19, 1883, p. 5.

Washington Post, "New Time in Other Cities," November 18, 1883, p. 1.

Chicago Daily Tribune, "Standard Time," November 19, 1883, p. 1.

Indianapolis Daily Sentinel, November 21, 1883, p. 4, Quoted in Ian R. Bartky, *Selling the True Time: Nineteenth-Century Timekeeping in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 144.

New York Times, "Time's Backward Flight," November 18, 1883, p. 3. <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5748>

Robert E. Riegel, "Standard Time in the United States," *American Historical Review* 33 (October 1927): 84–89.