The history of railroad development in North Carolina dates back to the 1820s with a proposal by Joseph Caldwell to build a “Central Rail Road” from the coast to the mountains, and a proposal by Governor James Iredell, Jr. to build an experimental railroad from Fayetteville to Campbellton on the Cape Fear River. Caldwell, first president of the University of North Carolina, presented his ideas in a collection of articles entitled *The Numbers of Carlton* in 1828. Iredell’s plan was merely a suggestion; however, it took on greater significance when Governor John Owen recommended in his *Message* to General Assembly of 1829 that the railroad should extend from Fayetteville to the Yadkin River. A steam engine demonstration was set up in Fayetteville in early 1830, and by the end of the year, the General Assembly granted a charter to the Fayetteville Rail Road Company to build the experimental railroad to Campbellton.

The course of railroad development in North Carolina was altered by unexpected events: much of Fayetteville was destroyed by fire on 29 May 1831, and on 21 June 1831, the State House in Raleigh caught fire. An ambitious plan for a railroad that would extend from Wilmington to Morganton via Fayetteville emerged in the Cape Fear Region, and an experimental railroad was built in Raleigh to move stone for the rebuilding of the State House. By early 1833, the Cape Fear & Yadkin Rail Road had failed to meet the required subscriptions to maintain its charter. Investors from Wilmington, who had subscribed liberally to the stock of this company, were disappointed. They approached the citizens of Raleigh with the idea of building a turnpike that would connect the port of Wilmington with the Capital. The editor of the *Raleigh Register* printed a response prior to a convention on internal improvements held in July of 1833 that suggested an alternative to Wilmington’s turnpike scheme. A railroad could be built from Raleigh to Waynesborough and include branch lines to Wilmington and New Bern. The idea matured in the months following the convention, and the Wilmington & Raleigh Rail Road Company was incorporated during the 1833-34 session of the General Assembly.

In 1833, the Petersburg Rail Road was completed to Blakeley, North Carolina. Built to facilitate the transport of produce from the Roanoke Canal to the Virginia commercial center of Petersburg, it was soon followed by the competing Portsmouth & Roanoke Rail Road, completed to the Weldon Toll Bridge on the Roanoke River in 1837. The Greensville & Roanoke Rail Road, a branch of the Petersburg Rail Road extending from Hicksford (Emporia, VA) to Wilkes’ Ferry on the north bank of the Roanoke, was incorporated in 1833 to intercept river commerce before it entered the Roanoke Canal. The parity between the two Virginia commercial towns ended when the Portsmouth & Roanoke Rail Road gained control over the Weldon Toll Bridge across the Roanoke River to Weldon. The purchase of this bridge proved to be an enormous drain on the company’s resources. The Petersburg countered by lowering its fares.

During 1834, an explosive public exchange erupted between the Board of Internal Improvement’s central committee and a committee representing the citizens of Wilmington over a report authored by the Board’s representative, Gavin Hogg. The report downplayed the commercial potential of the port, and advanced other proposed railroads – the Central Rail Road – over the Raleigh to Wilmington line. The Wilmington committee attacked the board’s findings. Throughout the summer of 1834, the *Raleigh Register* published a series of angry exchanges between the Wilmington committee and Gavin Hogg. When the Wilmington & Raleigh Rail Road approached the General Assembly at year’s
end to amend their charter, the bill was tabled to the next session. However, in 1835, the Wilmington & Raleigh Rail Road secured amendments to allow the route of the railroad to be changed. The main route would extend from Wilmington to Halifax, there to join with the Halifax & Weldon Rail Road. The latter was incorporated in 1833 for forming a connection to the Virginia railroad via the Weldon Toll Bridge. The Wilmington & Raleigh was also allowed to operate a steamboat line that offered regular service from Wilmington to Charleston, and retained the privilege of constructing a branch line between Waynesborough and Raleigh. In 1837, the state subscribed to two-fifths of the stock of the Wilmington & Raleigh, and the Halifax & Weldon merged with the company. The company operated a stagecoach line between the southern and northern divisions of the road that was discontinued with completion of the railroad in early 1840.

The Raleigh & Gaston Rail Road was incorporated in 1835, chartered under a private act to ensure its quick passage in the General Assembly. This would later prove to be a serious error. The route of the railroad would extend from Raleigh to the site of old Gaston on the Roanoke River. There the company would build a bridge and make connection with the Greensville & Roanoke Rail Road. The directors of the railroad anticipated that another planned railroad, the Raleigh & Columbia Rail Road, would form an interior route to South Carolina; however, this railroad never materialized. In 1838, the State of North Carolina endorsed bonds for the Raleigh & Gaston so that the railroad could be completed. By 1840, it was operational along its full extent, but within a few years, its receipts could not keep up with its expenses. The General Assembly authorized the foreclosure on the mortgage of the Raleigh & Gaston during the 1844-45 Session, and thereafter it became a state owned railroad until reorganized under a new charter in 1850.

The economic health of the Wilmington & Raleigh Rail Road during the 1840s was only slightly better than the Raleigh & Gaston. While the former remained solvent, it was unable to declare a dividend. Part of the problem was the method of construction employed on this as well as the other early railroad: strap-iron wooden rails. The entire superstructure of the road consisted of wooden rails set into wooden sills and topped with a thin bar of iron. This type of construction, though inexpensive, deteriorated rapidly. By the late 1840s, all of the early railroads needed to be rebuilt with heavy iron rails to remain in operation.

By 1849, the General Assembly had approved the charter of the North Carolina Railroad. The railroad would extend from Goldsboro to Charlotte, supported by a two-thirds investment on the part of the state. In the same year, the state approved the mortgage of the Wilmington & Raleigh for the rebuilding of the railroad in heavy iron. Work on another railroad extending from the port of Wilmington to the South Carolina railroads, the Wilmington & Manchester, commenced in January of the same year. The Wilmington & Manchester would be completed in 1854, and the Wilmington & Raleigh’s steamboat line discontinued. The North Carolina Railroad was completed in 1856. By the start of the Civil War, the Atlantic & North Carolina Railroad would be completed from Goldsboro to the port of Morehead City; the Wilmington, Charlotte & Rutherford Railroad would be completed halfway to Charlotte; and the Western North Carolina Railroad would extend west from Salisbury through Statesville.

Railroad development in North Carolina during the post-Civil War era commenced with scandal and terminated with the consolidation of the early railroads into several large corporate entities. By 1868, Republicans had gained a majority in the North Carolina General Assembly. A group of railroad speculators, most notable among was George W. Swepson, lobbied and bribed legislators to pass bills for bond appropriations without any safeguards that protected the interests of the state. Many of these railroad projects were investment schemes designed with little concern for the competition of railroads.
The 24 May 1873 edition of the *New York Times* details how the $8,878,000 antebellum debt for internal improvements was elevated to $36,681,467 during Reconstruction, an astronomical amount in those times. This event contributed to the resurgence of the Democratic Party in North Carolina.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the major railroads of North Carolina had been consolidated into three great interstate rail systems: the Southern Railroad, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, and the Seaboard Coastline Railroad. This was accomplished through lease agreements and mergers. The North Carolina Railroad was leased to the Southern Railroad in 1896, through remaining a corporate entity to this day. The Wilmington & Manchester was merged into the Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta, and later the Wilmington & Weldon merged into the Atlantic Coastline. The state’s stock in the Wilmington, Charlotte & Rutherford was sold to the Carolina Central Railroad in the early 1870s, becoming part of the Seaboard Coast Line system.

The next reorganization of the railroads occurred following the end of World War II and the beginning of the automotive age, as railroads consolidated and abandoned less productive lines. Passenger service on the Seaboard Coast Line from the former railroad center of Wilmington ended on 1 March 1968. By the 1980s, the former rail corridors still in use were operated by CSX and Norfolk Southern. The State of North Carolina has preserved some of the abandoned rail corridors in anticipation of resumption of service.

**Railroads, 1833**

Petersburg Rail Road

**Railroads, 1840**

Greensville & Roanoke
Petersburg Rail Road
Portsmouth & Roanoke
Raleigh & Gaston
Wilmington & Raleigh

**Railroads, 1860**

Atlantic & North Carolina
Atlantic, Tennessee & Ohio
Charlotte & South Carolina
North Carolina
Petersburg Rail Road
Raleigh & Gaston
Roanoke Valley
Seaboard & Roanoke
Western North Carolina
Western Rail Road
Wilmington, Charlotte & Rutherford
Wilmington & Manchester
Wilmington & Weldon
Railroads, 1882

Asheville & Spartanburg
Atlantic & Charlotte Air Line
Atlantic & North Carolina
Atlantic, Tennessee & Ohio
Cape Fear & Yadkin Valley
Carolina Central
Charlotte, Columbia & Augusta
Cheraw & Salisbury
Chester & Lenoir
East Tennessee & Western North Carolina
Elizabeth City & Norfolk
Midland North Carolina
Milton
North Carolina
North Carolina Midland
North Western North Carolina
Oxford & Henderson
Petersburg Railroad
Raleigh & Augusta Air Line
Raleigh & Gaston
Richmond & Danville
Scotland Neck
Seaboard & Raleigh
Seaboard & Roanoke
State University
Western North Carolina
Washington & Jamesville
Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta
Wilmington & Weldon