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Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900

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Land Grants

The second half of the nineteenth century was the era of railroad land grants. Between 1850 and 1872 extensive cessions of public lands were made to states and to railroad companies to promote railroad construction.^[18] Usually the companies received from the federal government, in twenty- or fifty-mile strips, alternate sections of public land for each mile of track that was built. Responsibility for surveying and mapping the grants fell to the U.S. General Land Office, now the Bureau of Land Management. Numerous maps of the United States and individual states and counties were made which clearly indicated the sections of the granted land and the railroad rights-of-way.

Land grant maps were frequently used by land speculators to advertise railroad lands for sale to the public. As early as 1868 most western railroads established profitable land departments and bureaus of immigration, with offices in Europe, to sell land and promote foreign settlement in the western United States. Consequently, the Library's collections also include some foreign-language maps aimed at both the immigration already on the East Coast and the prospective one in Europe.

Competition between speculators may have led to the idea of the distortion of railroad maps to emphasize one state, area, or line to the advantage of the advertiser. This idea, derived from the government land grant maps, may have been perpetuated by the mapping of the Illinois Central Railroad after it was granted land along its path in 1850. In John W. Amerman's book entitled *The Illinois Central Rail-Road Company Offers for Sale Over 2,000,000 Acres Selected Farming and Wood Land* (New York, 1856) appears an "Outline map of Illinois" which emphasizes the Illinois Central Railroad by a heavy black line, with stations placed evenly along the line to give the illusion of proximity of towns along the lines. This practice of manipulating scale, area, and paths of railroads became common practice in advertising maps of the 1870s and early 1880s and in railroad timetable maps.