

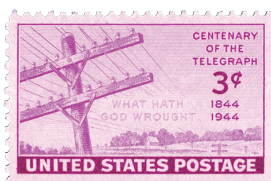
This Day in History... April 12, 1862

The Great Locomotive Chase

On April 12, 1862, a group of Union sympathizers stole a Confederate train, setting off a high-speed pursuit that lasted nearly eight hours. The event, later known as the Great Locomotive Chase, unfolded along a single rail line but revealed just how critical transportation had become in the Civil War.

Railroads were vital to both sides. They moved troops, weapons, and supplies quickly across long distances. The Confederacy, however, had fewer tracks and locomotives than the North. This made certain routes especially important. One of the most critical was the Western & Atlantic Railroad, which ran between Atlanta, Georgia, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Supplies traveled north along this line to support Confederate forces.

Union planners saw an opportunity. Civilian scout James J. Andrews proposed a mission to disrupt the railroad. His plan was to seize a train, destroy sections of track, burn bridges, and cut telegraph lines. If successful, Chattanooga could be isolated and Confederate supply routes weakened. Andrews recruited 24 Union volunteers. They wore civilian clothes and traveled south in small groups to avoid suspicion.



During the chase, Andrews's men cut telegraph wires, but many lines had multiple circuits or could be quickly reconnected—allowing operators to restore communication faster than expected and continue relaying updates ahead of the stolen train.



The General was displayed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

The consequences were serious. James Andrews was tried as a spy and executed. Several of his men were also executed, while others were imprisoned. In 1863, some of the surviving raiders became the first recipients of the Medal of Honor, recognizing their brave actions during the heroic mission.

Although the raid failed to destroy the railroad, it showed how vulnerable supply lines could be. It also demonstrated the growing importance of railroads and telegraph systems in modern warfare.

After the war, *The General* was repaired and returned to service. It operated until 1891 before being preserved. Photographer E. Warren Clark helped save the locomotive for display at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Over time, *The General* became a well-known historical artifact. It appeared at exhibitions and fairs before finding a permanent home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Its story later reached a wider audience through the 1926 silent film *The General*, starring Buster Keaton, which recreated the dramatic chase.



From the 1994 Locomotives Issue

Their target was *The General*, a locomotive built in 1855 by William Hudson. On April 12, 1862—one year after the attack on Fort Sumter—the train left Atlanta at 4:00 a.m. Andrews and his men boarded at different stops along the route.

The plan came together at Big Shanty, Georgia. The train stopped for breakfast, and there was no telegraph office nearby. This meant no quick warning could be sent. While conductor William Fuller and his crew stepped away, Andrews and his raiders uncoupled the locomotive and three boxcars. In broad daylight, they stole the train and headed north.

As they moved up the line, the raiders cut telegraph wires and tried to damage the track. Their goal was to slow any pursuit and prevent communication ahead. But Fuller reacted immediately. He and two others began chasing the train on foot, running nearly two miles before finding a handcar.

Fuller continued the pursuit by taking control of available locomotives along the route. The chase became more intense when he took command of *The Texas* at Adairsville. Because of how the engines were positioned, *The Texas* ran in reverse for much of the chase. Even so, Fuller pushed forward at high speed.

Andrews attempted to stop him. His men dropped railroad ties onto the tracks and released boxcars behind them. One was set on fire in an effort to damage a bridge. Each time, Fuller's crew cleared the obstacles and continued.

Communication proved just as important as speed. South of Calhoun, Fuller encountered a young telegraph operator. He pulled him aboard and wrote a warning message. At the next stop, the operator jumped off and sent the alert ahead to Chattanooga. Confederate forces were now prepared.

After traveling about 87 miles, *The General* began to lose steam. The raiders had used too much fuel and could not keep their speed. Near Ringgold, Georgia, the locomotive came to a stop. Andrews and his men fled on foot but were captured within days.



19 of Andrews's men received the Medal of Honor.



Buster Keaton's 1926 film The General closely followed the real train chase but shifted the story to a Confederate perspective and added comedic elements. It's considered one of the greatest silent films ever made.

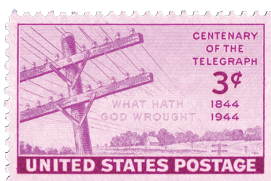
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