



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

STUDY GUIDE



MAY 10, 1869: TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD COMPLETED

Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more



THE U.S. RAILROAD

Setting the Stage

America's first steam locomotive made its debut in 1830, and over the next two decades railroad tracks linked many cities on the East Coast. By 1850, some 9,000 miles of track had been laid east of the Missouri River. During that same period, the first settlers began to move westward across the United States; this trend increased dramatically after the discovery of gold in California in 1849. The overland journey—across mountains, plains, rivers and deserts—was risky and difficult, and many westward migrants instead chose to travel by sea, taking the six-month route around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, or risking yellow fever and other diseases by crossing the isthmus of Panama and then traveling via ship to San Francisco.

In 1845, the New York entrepreneur Asa Whitney presented a resolution in Congress proposing the federal funding of a railroad that would stretch to the Pacific. Lobbying efforts over the next several years failed due to growing sectionalism in Congress, but the idea remained an exciting one. In 1860, a young engineer named Theodore Judah identified the infamous Donner Pass in northern California (where a group of westward emigrants had become trapped in 1846) as an ideal location for constructing a railroad through the formidable Sierra Nevada mountains. By 1861, Judah had enlisted a group of investors in Sacramento to form the Central Pacific Railroad Company. He then headed to Washington, where he was able to convince congressional leaders as well as President Abraham Lincoln to endorse his plan; Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act into law the following year.

Cover Photo: Joining the tracks for the first transcontinental railroad, Promontory, Utah, Terr., 1869

MAY 10, 1869

TRANSCONTINENTAL

RAILROAD COMPLETED



Golden Spike mural at the U.S. Capitol Building / Washington, DC. At the connection of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads in Promontory, Utah, two locomotives meet and two men shake hands before a group of workers. Oil on canvas. EverGreene Architectural Arts, 1993-1994.

On this day in 1869, the presidents of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads meet in Promontory, Utah, and drive a ceremonial last spike into a rail line that connects their railroads. This made transcontinental railroad travel possible for the first time in U.S. history. No longer would western-bound travelers need to take the long and dangerous journey by wagon train, and the West would surely lose some of its wild charm with the new connection to the civilized East.

Since at least 1832, both Eastern and frontier statesmen realized a need to connect the two coasts. It was not until 1853, though, that Congress appropriated funds to survey

several routes for the transcontinental railroad. The actual building of the railroad would have to wait even longer, as North-South tensions prevented Congress from reaching an agreement on where the line would begin.

One year into the Civil War, a Republican-controlled Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act (1862), guaranteeing public land grants and loans to the two railroads it chose to build the transcontinental line, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific. With these in hand, the railroads began work in 1866 from Omaha and Sacramento, forging a northern route across the country. In their eagerness for land, the two lines built right past each other, and the final meeting place

had to be renegotiated.

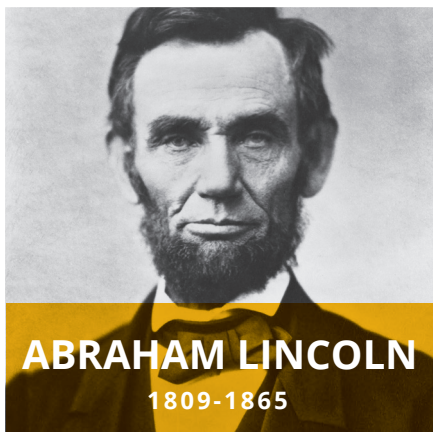
Harsh winters, staggering summer heat, Native American raids and the lawless, rough-and-tumble conditions of newly settled western towns made conditions for the Union Pacific laborers—mainly Civil War veterans of Irish descent—miserable. The overwhelmingly immigrant Chinese work force of the Central Pacific also had its fair share of problems, including brutal 12-hour work days laying tracks over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. On more than one occasion, whole crews would be lost to avalanches, or mishaps with explosives would leave several dead.

For all the adversity they suffered, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific workers were able to finish the railroad—laying nearly 2,000 miles of track—by 1869, ahead of schedule and under budget. Journeys that had taken months by wagon train or weeks by boat now took only days. Their work had an immediate impact: The years following the construction of the railway were years of rapid growth and expansion for the United States, due in large part to the speed and ease of travel that the railroad provided. □

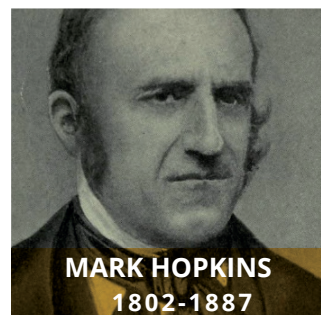
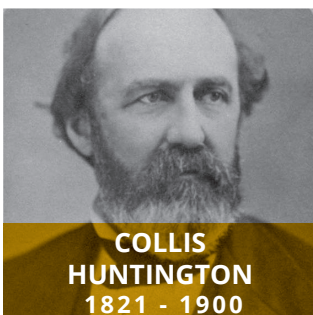
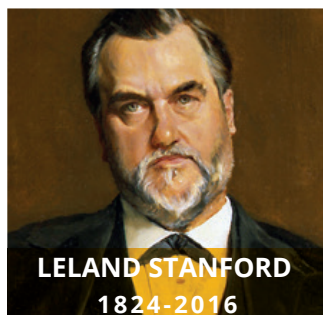
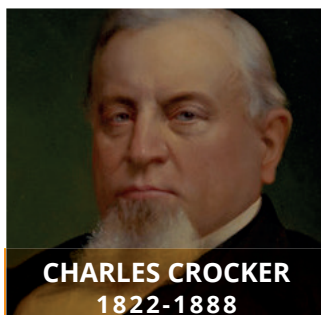
DID YOU KNOW?

On April 28, 1869, Central Pacific workers laid 10 miles and 56 feet of track in just one day, working from 5am to 7pm, in response to a bet made between the heads of the dueling Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. In total, the workers laid down 4,462,000 pounds of materials, including 28,500 ties; 3,520 rails (weighing more than 550 pounds each); 55,080 spikes; and 14,050 bolts.

PEOPLE TO KNOW



Abraham Lincoln, a self-taught lawyer, legislator and vocal opponent of slavery, was elected the 16th U.S. president in November 1860, shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War. Lincoln proved to be a shrewd military strategist and a savvy leader: His Emancipation Proclamation paved the way for slavery's abolition, while his Gettysburg Address stands as one of the most famous pieces of oratory in American history. In April 1865, with the Union on the brink of victory, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth; his untimely death made him a martyr to the cause of liberty, and he is widely regarded as one of the greatest presidents in U.S. history.

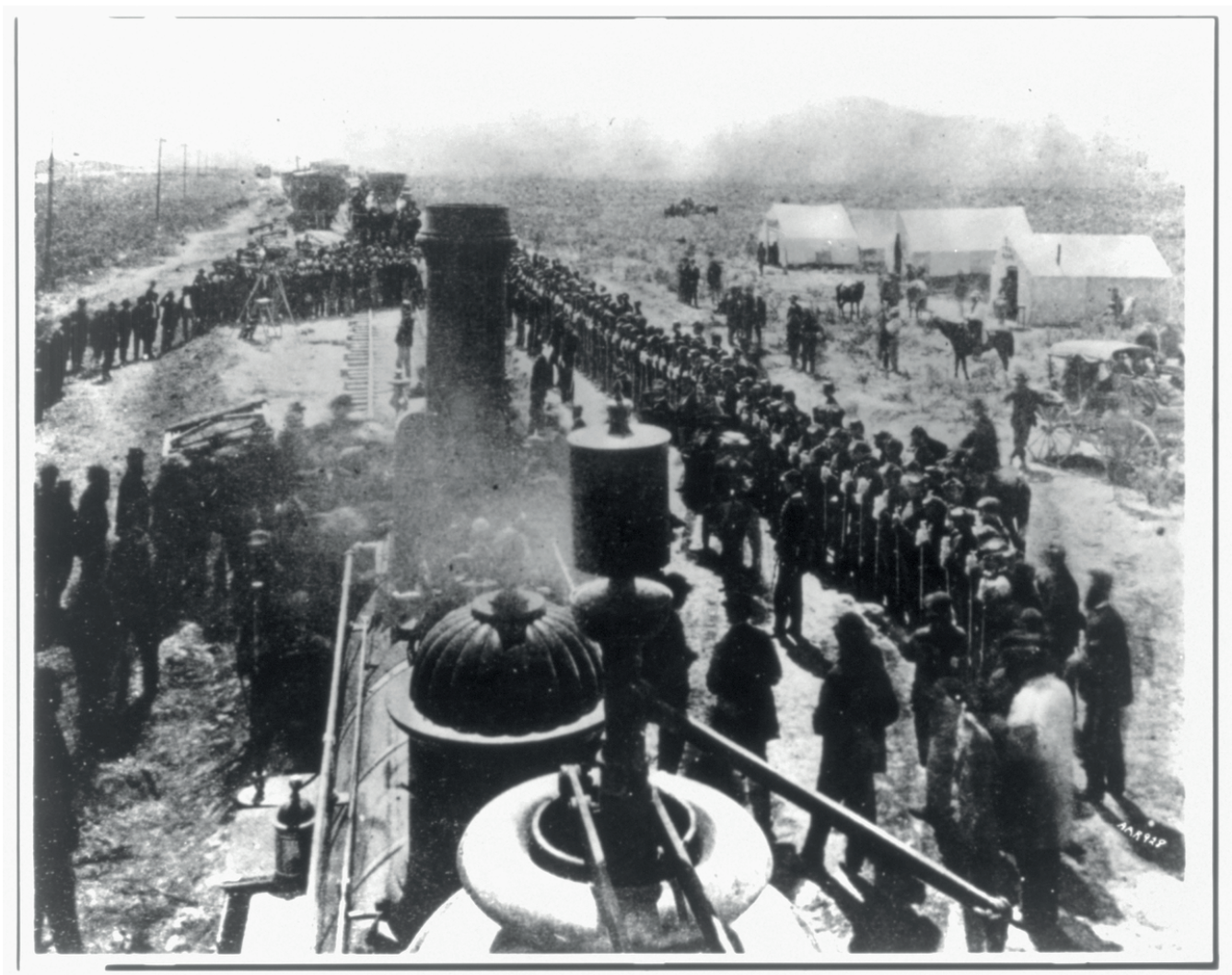


The Central Pacific railroad was run by what became known as the "Big Four": Charles Crocker; Leland Stanford; Collis Huntington; and Mark Hopkins. All were ambitious businessmen with no prior experience with railroads, engineering or construction. They borrowed heavily to finance the project, and exploited legal loopholes to get the most possible funding from the government. To extract as much profit as possible from the project, they created construction companies and then essentially hired themselves to perform the work, ensuring a healthy profit. While Huntington was tasked with raising money, handling supplies and liaising with the federal government, Crocker took charge of the construction. It was Crocker who began hiring Chinese laborers after he struggled to keep workers on the job. By early 1867, some 14,000 Chinese were toiling in brutal conditions in the Sierra Nevada mountains. After completing the transcontinental railroad, the Big Four went on to build the Southern Pacific railroad system, which stretched to Arizona by 1877.

SEE IT

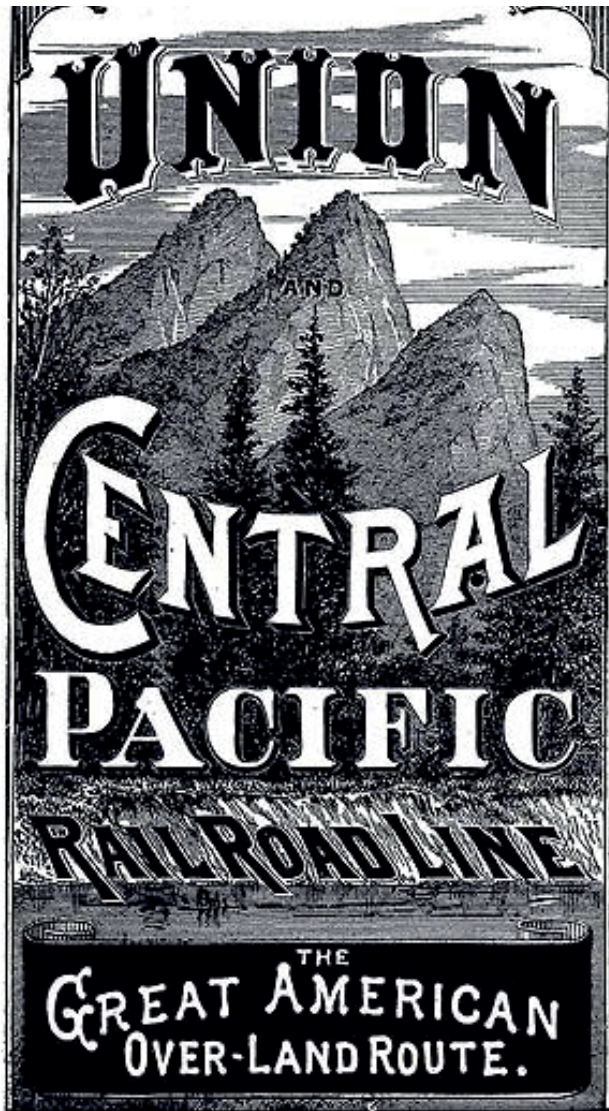


1883 Map showing the new transcontinental route of the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad and its connections. G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co; Atlantic and Pacific Railroad Company; Chicago & Pacific Railroad.



Ceremony at "Wedding of the Rails," May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah

SEE IT



TAKE THE
Only Direct Route,
THE OLD RELIABLE

UNION AND CENTRAL
PACIFIC R.R. LINE
OMAHA

SAVE 24 HOURS TIME
—AND—
FIVE HUNDRED MILES IN DISTANCE TO
San Francisco
AND ALL POINTS ON THE PACIFIC COAST.

SPEED! COMFORT!! SAFETY!!!
Steel Rails,
MILLER PLATFORMS, AIR BRAKES

J. W. MORSE, Gen'l Pass. Agent, THOS. L. KIMBALL, Ass't Gen'l Manager. UNION PACIFIC R.Y., Omaha, Nebraska. 2-2-81 - 636 Jan.	T. H. GOODMAN, Gen'l Pass. and Ticket Agt., A. N. TOWNE, General Superintendent. CENTRAL PACIFIC R. R. San Francisco, Cal.
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Composited digital restoration of engraved cover illustrations from the 1881 Timetable and Map of the Union and Central Pacific Railroad Line "The Great American Over-Land Route" By Central Pacific Railroad; Union Pacific Railroad Rand, McNally & Co., Printers and Engravers, Chicago (original engravings)



Central Pacific railroad locomotive, 1869

CONCURRENT EVENTS



AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In the spring of 1861, decades of simmering tensions between the northern and southern United States over issues including states' rights versus federal authority, westward expansion and, most importantly, slavery exploded into the American Civil War (1861-65). After the election of the anti-slavery Republican Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860, seven Southern states seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America; four more joined them after the first shots of the Civil War were fired in April 1861. Four years of brutal conflict followed, in which neighbor was pitted against neighbor and in some cases, brother against brother. By the time it ended in Confederate surrender in 1865, the Civil War proved to be the costliest war ever fought on American soil, with some 620,000 of 2.4 million soldiers killed, millions more injured and the population and territory of the South devastated.



DYNAMITE

In 1867, Swedish chemist and engineer Alfred Nobel invented dynamite, a powerful explosive used in mining and in the construction of roads, railways and canals. Nobel discovered how to make a powerful--but extremely dangerous and unstable--new explosive called nitroglycerin safer to handle. Nobel found that by mixing nitroglycerin with a substance called kieselguhr, it became much safer to use. He called the resulting compound dynamite after the Greek word for power, "dynamis." In addition to inventing other, even more powerful explosives, Nobel held more than 350 patents and owned some 90 ammunition and explosives factories. Upon his death, he directed that his sizeable fortune be used to fund the Nobel prize, now considered to be the world's most prestigious award, in the fields of physics, chemistry, literature, medicine and peace.



SUEZ CANAL

After 10 years of construction plagued by labor disputes and a cholera outbreak, the Suez Canal opened to navigation in November 1869. The canal, which connected the Red and Mediterranean seas, would become one of the most heavily trafficked shipping lanes in the world. Before the opening of the canal, goods had to be shipped over land or by sea around the southern tip of Africa. Today, more than 300 million tons of goods pass through the Suez Canal every year.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Transcontinental railroad commemorative stamp, 1944

- 1 How would you describe what the completion of the transcontinental railroad meant for America?
- 2 How would you compare the transcontinental railroad to other major innovations, like the development of the automobile or the internet?
- 3 Do you think railroads are still important in today's America?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



The Driving of the Last Spike by Thomas Hill, 1881

WORKING ON THE RAILROAD

Ask students to research the living conditions of railroad workers and the dangers associated with railroad work. Then, have them create a persona based on what they learn about the backgrounds of most railroad workers and write several journal entries in that persona's voice that describe a day in the life of a railroad worker.

MEETING AT PROMONTORY POINT

The nailing of the last golden spike uniting the two railroads at Promontory Point, Utah, was a highly symbolic moment in U.S. history. Ask students to research the celebration that followed. Then, have them imagine they were a newspaper reporter on the scene and write a newspaper article describing the event and what changes the railroad might bring to America.

DEAR HISTORY

Ask students to choose an innovation from the last 50 years that has shaped their daily lives. Then, ask them to write a letter to a student from the 1860s, explaining the innovation, how they use it and how it has changed everyday life in America. Ask students to make specific comparisons between advancements and changes that occurred as a result of the transcontinental railroad and the modern innovation they choose.

RESOURCES

Video: The Transcontinental Railroad

<http://www.history.com/topics/inventions/transcontinental-railroad/videos/transcontinental-railroad>

Text: The Pacific Railroad Act

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/five/railact.htm>

Image: Original version of the Pacific Railway Act

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=32>

Exhibit: America on the Move, Smithsonian Institution

<http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>