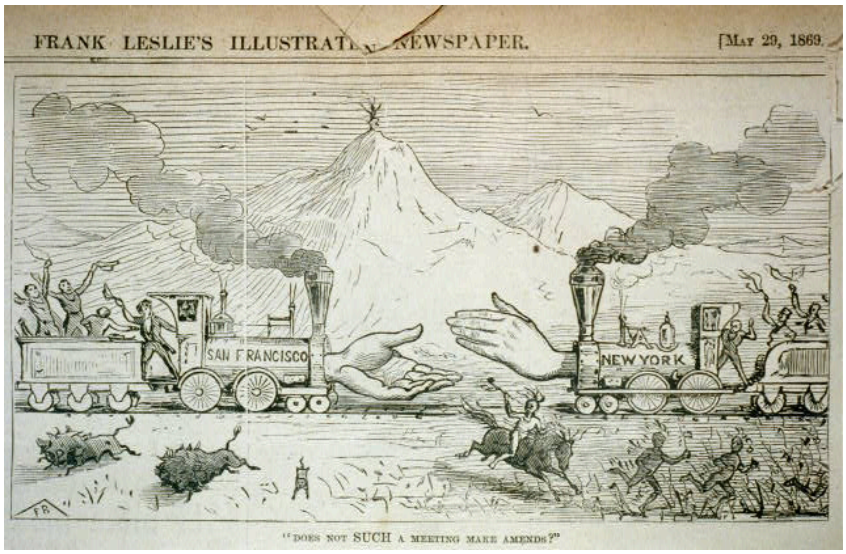
Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad

guides.loc.gov/this-month-in-business-history/may/completion-transcontinental-railroad

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Frank Beard. *"Does not such a meeting make amends?"*. May 29, 1869. Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division..

By connecting the existing eastern U.S. rail networks to the west coast, the Transcontinental Railroad (known originally as the "Pacific Railroad") became the first continuous railroad line across the United States. It was constructed between 1863 and 1869.

The idea of a railroad that went from the east coast to the west didn't start when building began. It is a story made up of a series of events and filled with the people and companies that made it happen—here are just a few of note:

> One of the early and most prominent people making the case for a transcontinental railroad was Asa Whitney. In 1849 he published his ideas on the idea of a railroad that began in Chicago and went to California. There were many others who also joined the chorus. In 1852 Theodore Judah was the chief engineer for the newly formed Sacramento Valley Railroad. He undertook a survey to find a manageable route through the high and rugged Sierra Nevada and in 1856 presented his plan to Congress.
> Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 on July 1, 1862, and the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) and the Union Pacific Railroad were authorized by Congress.
> One group of people that often get excluded from the discussion, but whom contributed much to the building of railroad were the thousands of Chinese workers. There was resistance to hiring them but eventually CPRR hired many to work on the railroad, but pay and treatment for them was not the same as it was for white workers. On June 24th, 1867 all Chinese railroad workers from Cisco to Truckee stopped work demanding higher wages and reduced work days. This protest lasted a week, but work continued and ultimately thousands of Chinese laborers died building the railroad. The Department of Labor inducted Chinese Railroad Workers into their Hall of Honor.

The rail line, also called the Great Transcontinental Railroad and later the "Overland Route," was predominantly built by the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California (CPRR) and Union Pacific (with some contribution by the Western Pacific Railroad Company) over public lands provided by extensive US land grants.

The railroad opened for through traffic on May 10, 1869, when CPRR President Leland Stanford ceremonially drove the gold "Last Spike" (later often referred to as the "Golden Spike") at Promontory Summit in Utah.

But the story of the railroads in the United States, and these two companies in particular, was really just getting started. The original Union Pacific, entangled in the Crédit Mobilier scandal and hit hard by the financial crisis of 1873, was eventually taken over by the new Union Pacific Railway in 1880 with its major stockholder being Jay Gould. It continued on, eventually becoming Union Pacific Railway. Central Pacific also went through changes including consolidation with the Western Pacific Railroad and the San Francisco Bay Railroad Co. under the name "Central Pacific Railroad Co." In 1885 it was leased to Southern Pacific and three years later the ICC listed it as non-operating. In 1899 it was reorganized as Central Pacific Railway and in 1959 it merged into Southern Pacific.

Print Resources

The following materials link to fuller bibliographic information in the Library of Congress Online Catalog. Links to digital content are provided when available.

The Chinese and the Iron Road : Building the Transcontinental Railroad by Gordon H. Chang (Editor); Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Editor)
Call Number: HD8039.R3152

ISBN: 9781503608290

Published/Created: 2019-04-30

Chinese workers made up a large contingent of workers building the railroad - this is their story.

Empire Express : Building the First Transcontinental Railroad by David Haward Bain
Call Number: HE2751 .B24 1999

ISBN: 067080889X

Published/Created: 1999-11-01

A history of the transcontinental railroad. Includes extensive Notes and Bibliography sections.

Nothing Like It in the World : The Men who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, 1863-1869 by Stephen E. Ambrose
Call Number: TF23 .A48 2000

ISBN: 0684846098

Published/Created: 2000-08-29

Table of contents
Sample text
This is the story of the men who built the transcontinental railroad -- the investors who risked their businesses and money; the enlightened politicians who understood its importance; the engineers and surveyors; and the Irish and Chinese immigrants, the defeated Confederate soldiers, and the other laborers who did the work on the tracks.
A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific by Asa Whitney
Call Number: HE2763 1849j

Published/Created: 1849

One of the earliest and most notable examples making the case for an overland route.

Select Committee on Establishment of Railroad and Telegraphic Communication between the Atlantic States and the Pacific Ocean. Pacific railroad and telegraph by United States Congress. House.
Call Number: HE2705.I856 A3

Published/Created: 1856

A report by Congress on the necessity to connect the east and west coast with a railroad and telegraph lines as a way to maintain the US position on the Pacific coast, particularly in light of the discovery of gold.

Railroaded : The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America by Richard White
Call Number: HE2751 .W55 2011

ISBN: 9780393061260

Published/Created: 2011-05-31

The transcontinental railroads of the late nineteenth century were the first corporate behemoths. Their attempts to generate profits from proliferating debt sparked devastating panics in the U.S. economy. Their dependence on public largess drew them into the corridors of power, initiating new forms of corruption. Their operations rearranged space and time, and remade the landscape of the West. As wheel and rail, car and coal, they opened new worlds of work and ways of life. Their discriminatory rates sparked broad opposition and a new antimonopoly politics. With characteristic originality, range, and authority, Richard White shows the transcontinentals to be pivotal actors in the making of modern America. But the triumphal myths of the golden spike, robber barons larger than life, and an innovative capitalism all die here. Instead we have a new vision of the Gilded Age, often darkly funny, that shows history to be rooted in failure as well as success.—*Publisher's description*

Villard : The Life and Times of an American Titan by Alexandra Villard De Borchgrave; John Cullen
Call Number: HG172 .D4 2001

ISBN: 0385486626

Published/Created: 2001-03-20

Henry Villard was one of the most remarkable and important figures to shape the tumultuous history of nineteenth -century America. A preeminent Civil War journalist, an industrialist, and a financial maverick, his courage, perseverance, and farsightedness made him the equal of such titans of his day as J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. Penniless and not speaking a word of English, Villard emigrated in 1853 from Germany at the age of eighteen, leaving behind the privileges and expectations of his affluent, stifling parentage. Within five years of arriving on American soil, he had mastered the language and was covering the events of the day for the nation's top newspapers. Villard reported firsthand on the Lincoln-Douglas debates and later, from the front lines of the Civil War, filed graphic, hard-hitting reports that earned him the admiration of the newspaper community. His circle of acquaintances included President Lincoln, General Grant, and the famed abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, whose daughter he married. When the Civil War ended, Villard's penchant for risk-taking and adventure and his uncanny business acumen led him to become a restless innovator, breaking new ground in many areas. In journalism, he launched the first news syndicate in the United States; in the world of finance, he was a pioneer of venture capitalism and one of the first to employ the leveraged buyout. He catapulted himself into presidency of the Northern Pacific Railroad and shared with Thomas Edison the vision of an electrified nation. His investment in Edison's electrical enterprises eventually paved the way for Villard to mastermind the consolidation of what is now known as the General Electric Company. In 1883, triumphantly driving the last spike himself, he completed the nation's second transcontinental railroad. Later that year a financial panic nearly ruined him, but within a few years he made a phenomenal comeback based on his faith in Edison and the future of electricity. Throughout his life, Villard's unfailing ability to impart his convictions to others, his talent for meeting the right people and gaining their confidence, enabled him to conquer adversity. Drawing on unpublished letters, Henry Villard's German and English memoirs, and many other sources, Alexandra Villard de Borchgrave's and John Cullen's fast-paced, absorbing biography vividly re-creates Villard's times and tells the rags-to-riches story of a German immigrant who made major contributions to his adopted homeland.—*Publisher's description*

Library of Congress Digital Resources

The following resources created or digitized by the Library of Congress can be used to find out more about the railroad as well as the events of the day.

1867 Sierra Strike: Chinese Worker's Pay Stand
This "This Month in Business History" entry details a strike by Chinese workers on the railroad.

Century of Lawmaking

This collection is currently being upgraded. When it is complete some of this content will be part of Congress.gov. See the blog post for inform about the upgrade.

The project includes the Journals of the House of Representatives (1789-1875) and the Senate (1789-1875), including the Senate Executive Journal (1789-1875); the Journal of William Maclay (1789-91); the debates of Congress as published in the Annals of Congress (1789-1824), the Register of Debates (1824-37), Congressional Globe (1833-73), and Congressional Record (1873-75); the Statutes at Large (1789-1875); the American State Papers (1789-1838); and congressional bills and resolutions for selected sessions beginning with the 6th Congress (1799) in the House of Representatives and the 16th Congress (1819) in the Senate.

Chronicling America, Historic American Newspapers

This is a project with digitized newspapers from around the United States. This is a good resource for what was going on in the United States at the the time the Transcontinental Railroad was built as well as articles looking at the bigger railroad industry. Searching on Central Pacific / Pacific Railway, Union Pacific, officer names, and sometimes places along the line could allow for tracing the construction and retrospective stories and other interesting content like this map in the New-York Tribune (January 18, 1867)

Digital Image Collections

Find photographs and prints in the Library of Congress collection.

Railroad Maps, 1828-1900

The Library of Congress has many railroad maps including those related to the Transcontinental Railroad. This is a cartographic perspective on the transcontinental railroad. It is part of the large collection of railroad maps held by the Library.

Railroads: Sources for Historical Research

This is a guide from Business Reference staff with resources for those interested in researching the larger industry but does include a specific section related to the Transcontinental Railroad that has even more resources. There are also some general resources and history as well a section with resources that devoted to particular individuals like Vanderbilt, Gould, Hill, and others.

Topics in Chronicling America – Golden Spike, 1869

Newspaper & Current Periodical staff created a guide containing selected articles from the Library of Congress' Chronicling America project as well as searching suggestions to find additional material.

Internet Resources

These freely available online resources provide additional information on the topic.

"Building the Transcontinental Railroad: How 20,000 Chinese Immigrants Made It Happen" External This link opens in a new window

This is a short piece on the Chinese workers that were working on the railroad project.

"Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Transcontinental Railroad" This link opens in a new window

This was a post from 2019 from the National Archives. It is a good way to get to material in the Archives' collection.

Chinese Labor and the Iron Road This link opens in a new window

The is something about the Chinese workers from the National Park Service.

The Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers External This link opens in a new window

This is a a short video from PBS about the Chinese workers.

Digitized newspapers (from Veridian) External This link opens in a new window

This source has links to digital repositories of newspapers (formerly Elephind).

Electronic Resources Online Catalog (Library of Congress) This link opens in a new window
The subscription resources marked with a padlock are available to researchers on-site at the Library of Congress. If you are unable to visit the Library, you may be able to access these resources through your local public or academic library.
A search for articles in the following business and historical newspaper databases will produce relevant results.
Some recommended databases are:
- America's Historical Newspapers, 1690-1922
- America: History & Life
- Annals of American History
- Early American Imprints, Series I Evans 1639-1800
- History Commons
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers

"Financing the Transcontinental Railroad" External This link opens in a new window
This article provides some information how the railroad was financed.

Geography of Chinese Workers Building the Transcontinental Railroad External This link opens in a new window
This is a "A virtual reconstruction of the key historic sites" from the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) at Stanford University.

History and the Census: The Transcontinental Railroad This link opens in a new window
This is a Census Bureau piece on the railroads with some numbers and statistics.

The Impact of the Transcontinental Railroad External This link opens in a new window
This is a short PBS piece on the impacts of the railroad.

Legacy and the story of the Chinese railroad workers This link opens in a new window
The May 21 capture is the archived USDA page that features a video on the Chinese workers on the railroad.

Online Exhibit – Transcontinental Railroad External This link opens in a new window
This online exhibit was created by the Linda Hall Library with support from the BNSF Burlington Northern Santa Fe Foundation. There is a brief history of building the railroad, general information on the history and technology of nineteenth-century railroads, and full text access to the library's collection of 19th century railroad periodicals.

Promontory External This link opens in a new window
American Archive of Public Broadcasting is a project between the Library of Congress and GBH in Boston to preserve for posterity the most significant public television and radio programs of the past 60 years. The Promontory program chronicles the history leading up to, and the event of, the railheads of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads connecting at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory in May of 1869.

Transcontinental Railroad External This link opens in a new window
This is a piece on the building of the railroad from history.com editors.

The Transcontinental Railroad External This link opens in a new window
This is a PBS Ken Burns in the Classroom about the railroad that includes links to a few short videos.

"The Transcontinental Railroad" This link opens in a new window
This is an essay that is part of the Library of Congress digitized railroad map collections.

The Transcontinental Railroad and the Asian-American Story External This link opens in a new window
This is a story from the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum.

Union Pacific External This link opens in a new window
The company's website has historical resources and information on Union Pacific provided by Union Pacific. The site also includes the online project "The Great Race to Promontory."

Union Pacific Historical Society External This link opens in a new window
This looks at all things Union Pacific. The organization's archives are held at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Search the Library's Catalog

Additional works on this topic in the Library of Congress may be identified by searching the Library of Congress Online Catalog under appropriate Library of Congress subject headings. Choose the topics you wish to explore from the following list of headings and type or copy and paste the term into the search box on the Subject Browse page. Select Library of Congress Subject Headings from the Source drop down menu. You will be able to view a list subject headings with links to item records and related terms to expand your research. Not all of the relevant subject headings have been included, but the ones below should be a good start. For additional assistance, please Ask a Librarian.

Central Pacific Railroad Company--History
Pacific railroads--Early project
Railroads--United States--History
Union Pacific Railroad Company--History