

This Day in History... May 10, 1869

Transcontinental Railroad Completed

On May 10, 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed with the driving of the golden spike at Promontory Summit, Utah. Completing the Transcontinental Railroad is widely considered one of the greatest accomplishments of the 19th century!

Talks about a railroad spanning America began as early as 1832, when Dr. Hartwell Carver suggested one from Lake Michigan to Oregon. Congress began to seriously consider the idea in the late 1840s, following the discovery of gold in California.

In the early 1850s, Secretary of War (and future Confederate president) Jefferson Davis directed a series of Pacific Railroad Surveys to explore possible routes. Their extensive research produced 12 volumes on the nature and native people of the west. This research also led to the Gadsden Purchase, which acquired land in the future states of Arizona and New Mexico along the proposed route.

By 1856 the House of Representatives had formed a Select Committee on the Pacific Railroad and Telegraph. They declared that, "The necessity that now exists for constructing lines of railroad and telegraphic communication between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of this continent is no longer a question for argument; it is conceded by every one. In order to maintain our present position on the Pacific, we must have some more speedy and direct means of intercourse than is at present afforded by the route through the possessions of a foreign power."

By the early 1860s, it was agreed that the railroad was necessary, but as the nation was embroiled in the slavery debate that would soon send them into Civil War, no one could agree if the eastern terminus should be in a Northern or Southern city. Talks stalled when the war began. However, in 1862 President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act. This act gave the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies the responsibility of creating a transcontinental railroad route, roughly following the 42nd parallel from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California. Railroad lines in Chicago were to be extended to meet the new railroad in Omaha.

The Union Pacific Railroad Company began heading west from Council Bluffs, Iowa, while the Central Pacific built eastward from Sacramento, California. For their efforts, Congress granted these railroad companies large tracts of land and millions of dollars in loans. The Central Pacific began work on their end of the railroad on January 8, 1863. Located thousands of miles from the eastern manufacturing centers, they had a long wait for their supplies, which were transported by ship around South America's Cape Horn or across the Isthmus of Panama. Construction on the Union Pacific Railroad didn't begin until after the end of the war, in July 1865.

As secretary of War, Jefferson Davis oversaw early research into the railroad.



When the war ended, many Army veterans worked for the Union Pacific along with Irish immigrants. Labor was hard to find in the West, but Chinese immigrants diligently pushed the railroad over the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Finally, on May 10, 1869, the tracks of the two railroads met at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory. California Governor Leland Stanford had the honor of driving the final golden spike. The hammers and spike used in the ceremony were wired to the telegraph line so that each strike could be heard as a telegraph "click" across the nation (though the hammer didn't register). The ceremonial golden spike was then removed and replaced with an ordinary iron spike and a telegraph was sent out simply stating, "DONE." Celebrations immediately broke out at telegraph stations around the country. The 1,776-mile transcontinental railroad was complete. The journey that once took six months or more was now down to just one week.

This historic achievement marked the first time a railroad had spanned across the entirety of North America. The transcontinental railroad did a great deal to speed the settlement and industrial growth of the US. By the end of the 1800s, the US had five transcontinental rail lines. The "Pacific Railroad," as it was first called, opened the west to trade, travel, and settlement. It marked the end of dangerous stagecoach and wagon journeys. Towns seemed to appear overnight along the route.

While the original engines from 1869 were scrapped in the early 1900s, Golden Spike National Historical Park commissioned detailed replicas of the two famous locomotives. They star in the park's daily "Golden Spike" ceremony reenactments. Since little was known about the colors of the original engines, the colors of the replicas were an educated guess. Later, a newspaper was found



Stamp issued on the 75th anniversary of the Golden Spike ceremony.



President Lincoln approved construction of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1862.



These stamps were issued in 2019 to mark the 150th anniversary of the railroad.

describing the trains as they appeared on May 10, 1869. So, when it was time for the replicas to get fresh paint, new historically accurate colors were applied. Golden Spike National Historical Park continues to share the story of the Transcontinental Railroad with thousands of visitors each year.

Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316

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