

# California: State History Discovery Journal

## Transcontinental Railroad

### Transcontinental Railroad Timeline

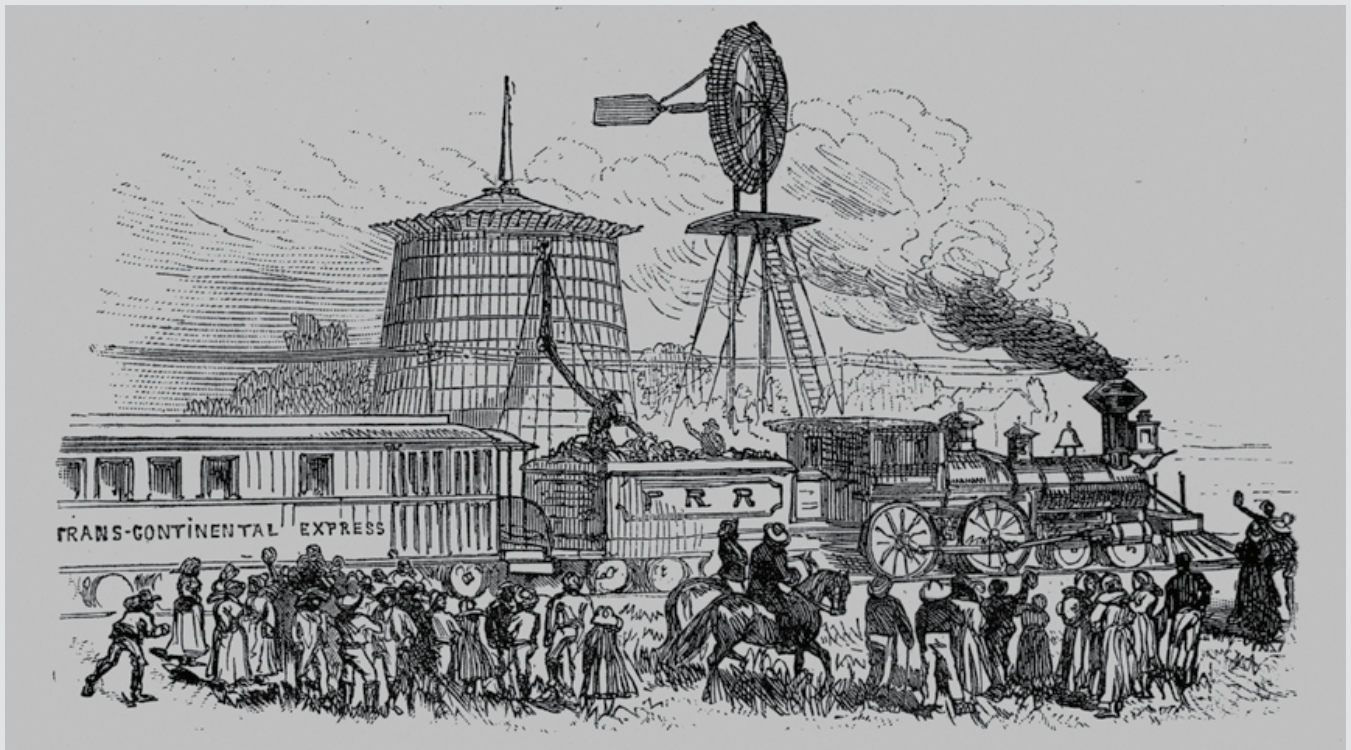
<b>January 1845</b>	Asa Whitney proposes the idea of a transcontinental railroad to Congress; he came up with the idea after a visit to China convinced him of its necessity
<b>1849</b>	Whitney publishes <i>A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific</i> , a book with maps and proposed routes, intended to promote the idea to the general public
<b>September 9, 1850</b>	California is admitted to the Union as the thirty-first state
<b>July 1860</b>	Theodore Judah, an engineer inspired by Asa Whitney, surveys the Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and identifies it as an ideal route for the railroad
<b>June 28, 1861</b>	Central Pacific Railroad Company is founded by Theodore Judah and “The Big Four” – Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Charles Crocker, and Leland Stanford
<b>July 1, 1862</b>	President Lincoln signs the 1862 Pacific Railroad Act, promising 6,400 acres of land and \$48,000 in government bonds for each mile of railroad built
<b>January 8, 1863</b>	Central Pacific breaks ground in Sacramento at a ceremony presided over by newly-elected Governor Leland Stanford, who also sits on the board of the Central Pacific Railroad Company
<b>November 2, 1863</b>	Theodore Judah dies after contracting Yellow Fever in Panama, on his way to New York City in search of new investors
<b>January 1865</b>	Central Pacific Railroad Company hires its first Chinese workers
<b>April 14, 1865</b>	President Lincoln is assassinated
<b>July 10, 1865</b>	Union Pacific lays its first track in Omaha, Nebraska
<b>June 25, 1867</b>	Chinese workers for Central Pacific go on strike, demanding equal pay to whites, shorter hours, and better working conditions
<b>June 18, 1868</b>	First passenger train crosses the Sierra Nevada
<b>April 8, 1869</b>	Meeting point at Promontory, Utah decided upon by Congress
<b>May 10, 1869</b>	Final “Golden spike” is laid in Promontory, Utah; Transcontinental Railroad opens for traffic

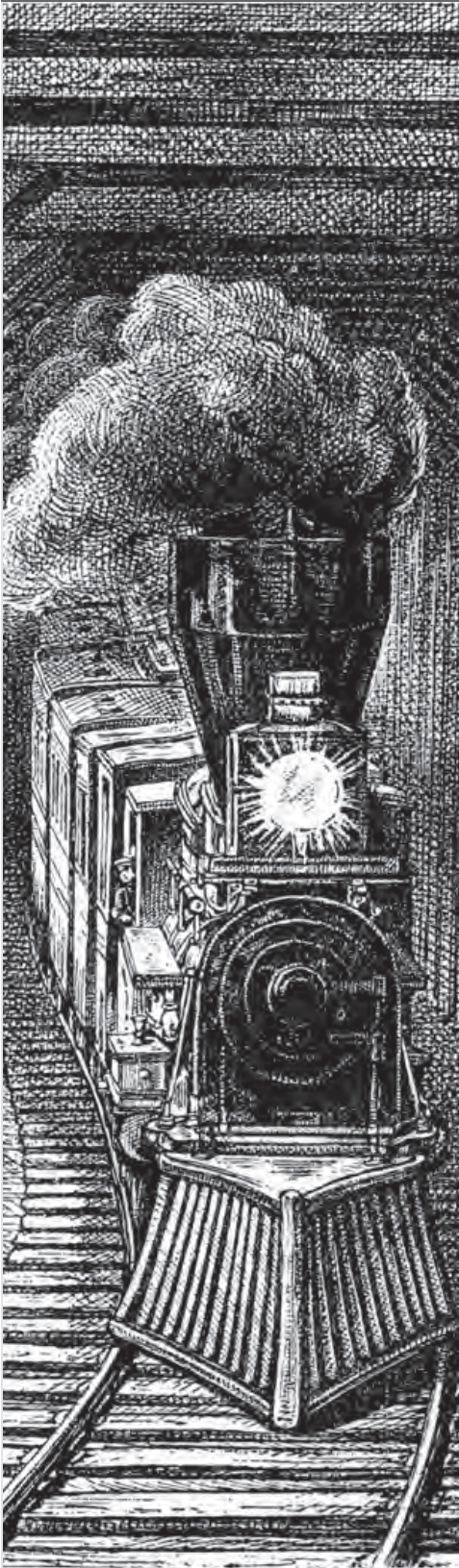


## Company Competition



	Central Pacific	Union Pacific
Major Figures	“The Big Four” – Leland Stanford, Collis Potter Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker	President – John Adams Dix Vice President – Thomas Clark “Doc” Durant
Track route/direction	Sacramento, California to Promontory, Utah / West to East	Omaha, Nebraska to Promontory, Utah / East to West
First track laid	January 1863	July 1865
Major source of labor	Chinese immigrants	Civil War veterans, Mormons, Irish immigrants
Biggest obstacles	Ragged terrain of the Sierra Nevada mountains; harsh weather	Native American raiding parties (Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes)
Total track built	690 miles	1,086 miles





## Brief History of the Transcontinental Railroad

Completed in 1869, the Transcontinental Railroad stands to this day as one of the most impressive engineering feats of the modern era. The idea for the railroad dates as far back as the 1840s, when New York businessman Asa Whitney developed the concept after an exhausting and tiresome journey between the East Coast of the United States and China. Instead of having to sail all the way around South America, as Whitney had done aboard his boat, the *Oscar*, his vision of a transcontinental railroad would dramatically shorten the journey, allowing someone to travel by rail from the East Coast all the way to the Pacific Ocean in a matter of days instead of months. Prior to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, overland travel between the two coasts took five to six months and cost more than \$1,000 per passenger (equivalent to \$15,000 today). By 1870, the same trip took less than a week and cost only \$100 (\$1,700 today).

From the beginning, the project faced numerous obstacles. Some were natural, including harsh

weather conditions and the treacherous terrain of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Others were human, ranging from corruption and internal feuds to deadly raids by Native American tribes. Despite the odds, the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, only seven years after the passage of the Railroad Acts in 1862. In the end, the Transcontinental Railroad would span a total of 1,776 continuous miles, linking the Midwest to the Pacific Ocean. Land grants and funding for the project were given to the two largest and most powerful railroad companies at the time: Central Pacific Railroad Company and the Union Pacific Railroad Company. In 1863, Central Pacific began work on the western section of the line, starting from Sacramento, California. Two years later, Union Pacific broke ground on the eastern section, from Omaha, Nebraska. Construction continued at breakneck speeds over the remaining decade, as the two companies furiously raced to outpace each other. At last, on May 10, 1869, the two companies met each other at Promontory, Utah, where the final “golden” spike was laid.





## Major Figures of the Central Pacific Railroad Company

### Theodore Judah

- Formed the Central Pacific Railroad Company in 1861 with a group of investors (“The Big Four”) in Sacramento
- Identified the Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains as a suitable location for a railroad
- After some disputes and disagreements with his partners, he decided to return to New York to recruit new investors to buy them out
- Died in November 1863 after contracting Yellow Fever while crossing the Isthmus of Panama en route to New York



### The Big Four: A group of East Coast businessmen with no prior experience in railroads or construction

**Leland Stanford** – New York native; served as Governor of California from 1861-62; became president of Central Pacific upon the death of Theodore Judah in 1863; later in life, founded Stanford University with his wife Jane, in 1885

**Collis Potter Huntington** – Connecticut native; lobbyist and vice president of Central Pacific; raised funds and purchased supplies for the company in New York; negotiated the end point of the railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah with Grenville Dodge, the chief engineer of Union Pacific

**Mark Hopkins** – New York native; the most adventurous of The Big Four; left New York for California in 1849 during the Gold Rush; gained a reputation for thriftiness and eventually became Secretary of Central Pacific; he was a staunch abolitionist and early organizer for the Republican Party in California

**Charles Crocker** – New York native; Supervisor of Construction; proposed the idea of hiring Chinese immigrants as workers; shortly after completion of the railroad, he voluntarily asked his partners to buy him out of the company and took a long vacation in Europe with his family



*Leland Stanford*



*Collis Huntington*



*Mark Hopkins*



*Charles Crocker*

## Chinese Immigrants

The initial workforce of the Central Pacific Railroad Company was made up of a mixture of Civil War veterans (both Union and Confederate), German and Irish immigrants, and freed slaves. By 1865, the company was facing severe labor shortages due to workers abandoning their jobs because of the harsh conditions, low pay, and the lure of gold and silver mining opportunities nearby. To fill the gap, Central Pacific turned to Chinese immigrants, many of whom had arrived in California more than a decade prior during the Gold Rush. Despite initial prejudices and doubts about their ability to handle the physical demands of the job, the Chinese quickly proved themselves to be reliable and tireless workers. In less than one year, 80 percent of Central Pacific's workforce was made up of Chinese laborers, and by 1867, there were a total of 14,000 Chinese immigrants working on the railroad.

Working conditions for the Chinese workers were perilous, and because they had very few opportunities to seek work elsewhere, they were often forced into conditions and situations far more dangerous than those experienced by their white co-workers. To make matters worse,

the Chinese workers had to pay for their own lodging, food, and tools. In June 1867, more than 5,000 Chinese workers went on strike in California, which was one of the largest labor stoppages in the history of the country at that time. The demands of the strikers included equal pay to their white counterparts and better working conditions and hours. Central Pacific's response was swift and ruthless. Superintendent Charles Crocker cut off all their access to food and supplies, effectively shutting down the strike.

Despite the setbacks and unfair treatment, many Chinese immigrants would return to California after the railroad's

completion. Decades of social exclusion and legal discrimination would follow, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned all further immigration from China and denied citizenship to Chinese immigrants already living in the country. Immigration from China would not be allowed again (and citizenship finally granted to Chinese immigrants) until 1943, when anti-Chinese sentiments declined during World War II. Today, Chinese Americans have had a major role in shaping the culture of the United States, and of California in particular, ranging from culinary contributions to major innovations in technology and industry.





## California Zephyr

Today, you can still ride part of the Transcontinental Railroad on Amtrak's passenger rail line, *California Zephyr*. The entire line runs daily between San Francisco and Chicago, and follows the original route of the Transcontinental Railroad from Sacramento to Winnemucca, Nevada, before switching over to a different, newer route.



## Activities & Questions



*After its completion, many bridges and miles of track had to be replaced due to shoddy construction. What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of having the two companies compete and race against each other?*

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## Activities & Questions *continued*



*Take a look at this iconic photo showing the chief engineers, Grenville Dodge of Union Pacific and Samuel Montague of Central Pacific, surrounded by their workers at Promontory, Utah. Based on what you've read and what you know about the composition of each company's workforce, who do you notice is missing? And why do you think this is the case?*

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# Transcontinental Railroad



When deciding on the route of the track, engineers for Central Pacific and Union Pacific had to take into consideration private property and the conditions of their land grants. If you could build the Transcontinental Railroad anywhere you wanted to, where would you put it? Which cities and states would you want it to travel through and why?

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Using the map below, draw your own new transcontinental route using the information you outlined above.

