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Why was the Transcontinental Railroad Built?

It was — for a nation of farmers, mechanics, tradesmen, shopkeepers and business opportunists — a grand national act: (a) politically, (b) financially, (c) in its engineering feats and (d) in the extent of its construction. The undertaking required deep government commitment and all the technological “now how” built up to the mid-19th century. It also contributed to the pushing aside of dozens of sovereign Native American tribes from their ancestral lands.

This “western road,” pointing across the Missouri River— a thousand miles west of the Eastern seaboard — ending at Sacramento, California (1,776 miles), truly opened up the heart of the American continent. It is the best example of 19th century America’s insatiable appetite for opportunity, settlement and the exploitation of America’s immense natural resources.

The title of 1862 Pacific Railway Act — which started the railroad — signed by President Abraham Lincoln, indicates the act was “to aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line... to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the government the use of the same for postal, military, and other purposes...” Enacted in the midst of the Civil War (1861-1865), the Transcontinental Railroad was envisioned as both a practical and symbolic means of maintaining the Union; and to bind the USA to its furthest state of California, and to take hold, and gain access, to all its western territories.

For American business, it was to gain market access to the Western United States; but even more so, to gain access to Asia and India. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (same year as the Transcontinental Railroad was completed) ostensibly met this need, making ocean journeys much shorter between the North Atlantic and Indian Oceans. However, the railroad opened up the American West, for tens of thousands of settlers, farmers, ranchers, shopkeepers and business people. It was also to move military personnel and equipment, and to make more rapid the US Postal services (which took months for delivery in the mid-19th century).

The story involved two private-corporate builders: the Central Pacific Railroad established in California in 1861, and Union Pacific Railway established through the 1862 Pacific Railway Act. The starting document for the building of the Transcontinental Railroad — the 1862 Pacific Railway Act — is now on display at the Utah State Capitol, from May 3rd to June 24, 2019. As are two of the ceremonial spikes used at Promontory and the mallet used to tap in those spikes.



For its time the Transcontinental Railroad was a bold, innovative public – private partnership, which included gifting of public lands (175 to 200 million acres were granted) and the offering of federal loans, with the loan amounts varying on the severity of the terrain.

It was to aid in the expansion — so far as 19th century Euro-Americans saw it — of Republican Democracy and Christianity. It was also sadly a vehicle for pushing aside dozens of sovereign Native American tribes from their ancestral lands, discounting them as “not equal to,” and thus expendable to the United States’ “Manifest Destiny” aspirations.

The Transcontinental Railroad also met the needs of tens of thousands of land hungry easterners and immigrant farmers, shopkeepers, tradesmen (as well as speculators, investors and emerging American corporations), wanting to place their imprint on the American wilderness.

This big American transportation project came to its conclusion on May 10, 1869 (some seven years after it started) here in the Utah Territory, Box Elder County, on Promontory Summit with the last spikes set in place (there were four spikes used in the 1869 ceremony) in a Laurel wood railroad tie, thus completing the project, and binding one end of the continent to the other. The Transcontinental Railroad did live up to most of its promises. What took a thousand dollars and two to six months in travel time, now took \$65 and five to ten day of travel. It also contributed to the settlement of the American West, bringing goods and services and business opportunities to tens of thousands of Americans.

TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD NUMBERS AND FACTS:

NUMBERS	FACTS
Travel time before 1869: Three to six months by walking, wagon, stagecoach and/or sea voyage	First in the World: The United States’ Transcontinental Railroad was the first in the world.
Travel time after 1869: five to ten days	Other Names: The railroad was originally known as the Pacific Railroad and the Overland Route.
Travel costs before 1869: \$250.00 to \$1,500.00 (fully equipped wagon and funds needed along the way)	Railroad Surveys: The US Congress mandated and paid for five surveys across the continent, conducted from 1853 to 1855, to explore, document and determine the best routes. The results were published in 1861.
Travel costs after 1869: \$65.00 to \$150.00	Following Old Trails: Over 50% of the railroad’s path followed the Oregon, California and Mormon overland immigration routes. And most of these



	routes were previously Native American trails.
Starting Date: July 1st, 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act.	Where Was it to End? The Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, 1864 and 1866 did not designate an exact location for the meeting place for the two railroads. Promontory was designed one month before the event by a congressional act, signed by President U.S. Grant.
Completion Date: May 10, 1869, at the "Last Spike" ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory.	How Was the Railroad Built?: It was built by: (1) human hands (with shovels, picks, rods, handcarts and wheel barrels); (2) by animal power (horses, oxen and mules with carts, wagons and scrappers); (3) by explosives (mostly black powder but later nitroglycerin); and (4) by machine power (locomotives and railroad cars transporting supplies, equipment and laborers)
Total Time: "Start to Finish": 6 Years, 10 Months, 1 Week, and 3 1/2 Days (2,505 days).	How it was financed? The railroad was a public-private venture, financed by land grants (10 then 20 square miles for every mile of track laid, in an alternating pattern), government railroad bond (or loans) and by private investment.
Starting Dates for the Central Pacific Railroad (Sacramento, California): Established in June 28, 1861, construction started on January 8, 1863 and the first rail is laid in October 1863	The Use of Private Contractors: The actual construction of the railroad was not executed by the Central Pacific or the Union Pacific but by contractor companies (most of whom were owned by the principals of the two companies).
Starting Dates for the Union Pacific Railroad (Council Bluff, Iowa): established, July 1, 1862, constructions started December 1863, first rail is laid July 1865 (after the Civil War had ended and thousands of former troops started looking for employment)	Was It Really Across the Continent? The May 10, 1869 completed railroad did not actually extend from coast to coast, this occurred on August 15, 1870. An unbroken line from coast to coast occur on March 25, 1873 when the Union Pacific constructed a bridge over the Missouri River in Omaha, Nebraska.
Total Number of Miles of Track Laid from Council Bluff, Iowa to Sacramento, California: 1,776 miles (1,868 to 1,907-miles have also been reported)	Go Back and Clean It Up: The May 10, 1869 completion ceremony of the Transcontinental Railroad tied the two road together; however, both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific spent years rebuilding, straightening and correcting what was "completed" too quickly to qualify for the land grants and bond (loan) payments.
Total Number of Miles of Track Laid by the Union Pacific	Old West Frontier: Temporary "hell on wheels" towns, set up as the railroad was built did in fact



Railroad: 1086 – through the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains)	exist and many workers were harmed or killed, in these temporary American frontier towns.
Total Number of Miles of Track Laid by the Central Pacific Railroad: 690 – through the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range and what was then called “the Great American Desert” (Nevada and Eastern Utah)	Ten Miles in One Day: On April 28, 1869, while only fourteen miles from Promontory Summit, the Central Pacific Railroad set a record of laying 10 miles of track, using thousands of Chinese workers and scores of Irish workers.

ESTIMATED LABORERS WORKING ON THE ROAD

(Includes turnover and attrition)

Chinese:	15,000 – 25,000
Irish:	10,000 – 12,000
Members, Latter-day Saints:	3,000 – 4,000
Civil War Veterans:	2,000 – 3,000
African Americans	Uncertain
Native Americans	Uncertain
Other nationalities (German, Italians, etc.)	500 – 1,000