**Transcontinental Railroad (1862)**

In 1862, the Pacific Railroad Act chartered the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific Railroad Companies, and tasked them with building a transcontinental railroad that would link the United States from east to west. Over the next seven years, the two companies would race toward each other from Sacramento, California on the one side and Omaha, Nebraska on the other, struggling against great risks before they met at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

**EARLY PLANS**

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](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/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](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/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 traveling via ship to [San Francisco](http://www.history.com/topics/san-francisco).

In 1845, the [New York](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/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 a potent 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](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/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](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/washington), where he was able to convince congressional leaders as well as President [Abraham Lincoln](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/abraham-lincoln), who signed the Pacific Railroad Act into law the following year.

**TWO COMPETING COMPANIES**

By the terms of the bill, the Central Pacific Railroad Company would start building in Sacramento and continue east across the Sierra Nevada, while a second company, the Union Pacific Railroad, would build westward from the Missouri River, near the Iowa-[Nebraska](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/nebraska) border. The two lines of track would meet in the middle (the bill did not designate an exact location) and each company would receive 6,400 acres of land (later doubled to 12,800) and $48,000 in government bonds for every mile of track built. From the beginning, then, the building of the transcontinental railroad was set up in terms of a competition between the two companies.

In the West, the Central Pacific would be dominated by 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 funds from the government for their planned track construction. Disillusioned with his partners, Judah planned to recruit new investors to buy them out, but he caught yellow fever while crossing the Isthmus of Panama on his way east and died in November 1863, soon after the Central Pacific had spiked its first rails to ties in Sacramento. Meanwhile, in Omaha, Dr. Thomas Durant had illegally achieved a controlling interest in the Union Pacific Railroad Company, giving him complete authority over the project. (Durant would also illegally set up a company called [Crédit Mobilier](http://www.history.com/topics/credit-mobilier), which guaranteed him and other investors risk-free profits from the railroad’s construction.) Though the Union Pacific celebrated its own launch in early December 1863, little would be completed until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

**DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES**

After General Grenville Dodge, a hero of the Union Army, took control as chief engineer, the Union Pacific finally began to move westward in May 1866. The company suffered bloody attacks on its workers by Native Americans–including members of the Sioux, Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes–who were understandably threatened by the progress of the white man and his “iron horse” across their native lands. Still, the Union Pacific moved relatively quickly across the plains, compared to the slow progress of their rival company through the Sierra. Ramshackle settlements popped up wherever the railroad went, turning into hotbeds of drinking, gambling, prostitution and violence and producing the enduring mythology of the “Wild West.”

In 1865, after struggling with retaining workers due to the difficulty of the labor, Charles Crocker (who was in charge of construction for the Central Pacific) began hiring Chinese laborers. By that time, some 50,000 Chinese immigrants were living on the West Coast, many having arrived during the Gold Rush. This was controversial at the time, as the Chinese were considered an inferior race due to pervasive racism. The Chinese laborers proved to be tireless workers, and Crocker hired more of them; some 14,000 were toiling under brutal working conditions in the Sierra Nevada by early 1867. (By contrast, the work force of the Union Pacific was mainly Irish immigrants and Civil War veterans.) To blast through the mountains, the Central Pacific built huge wooden trestles on the western slopes and used gunpowder and nitroglycerine to blast tunnels through the granite.

**DOWN THE HOME STRETCH**

By the summer of 1867, the Union Pacific was in [Wyoming](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/wyoming), having covered nearly four times as much ground as the Central Pacific. The Central Pacific broke through the mountains in late June, however, and the hard part was finally behind them. Both companies then headed towards Salt Lake City, cutting many corners (including building shoddy bridges or sections of track that would have to be rebuilt later) in their race to get ahead.

By early 1869, the companies were working only miles from each other, and in March the newly inaugurated President [Ulysses S. Grant](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/ulysses-s-grant) announced he would withhold federal funds until the two railroad companies agreed on a meeting point. They decided on Promontory Summit, north of the Great Salt Lake; some 690 track-miles from Sacramento and 1,086 from Omaha. On May 10, after several delays, a crowd of workers and dignitaries watched as the final spike was driven linking the Central Pacific and Union Pacific. Telegraph cables immediately went out to President Grant and around the country with the news that the transcontinental railroad had been completed.

**Actual Law:**

**CHAP. CXX. — *An Act to aid in the Construction of a Railroad and Telegraph Line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the Government the Use of the same for Postal, Military, and Other Purposes.***

**Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled**