

last spike of transcontinental railroad

last spike of transcontinental railroad marks a pivotal moment in American history, symbolizing the completion of the first railroad to connect the East and West coasts of the United States. This historic event, which took place on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, represented not only a monumental engineering feat but also a significant milestone in the economic and social development of the nation. The transcontinental railroad revolutionized transportation, commerce, and communication, facilitating westward expansion and accelerating the growth of industries. Understanding the circumstances leading to the last spike, the challenges faced during construction, and the lasting impact of this achievement provides valuable insight into American progress during the 19th century. This article explores the background, construction, the ceremonial driving of the last spike, and the legacy of the transcontinental railroad's completion.

- Historical Background of the Transcontinental Railroad
- Construction Challenges and Solutions
- The Ceremony of the Last Spike
- Economic and Social Impact
- Legacy and Commemoration

Historical Background of the Transcontinental Railroad

The idea of a railroad linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts had been discussed since the early 19th century, emphasizing the need for faster travel and communication across the vast American continent. Before the railroad, cross-country travel was time-consuming, dangerous, and costly, relying on stagecoaches, wagons, or sea voyages around South America. The concept gained momentum after the California Gold Rush of 1849, which increased the demand for reliable transportation to the West Coast.

Legislative and Political Support

The Pacific Railway Act, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, provided federal support for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. This legislation authorized the Union Pacific Railroad to build westward from Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific Railroad to build eastward from Sacramento, California. The government incentivized the project by granting land and loans to the companies involved.

Companies Involved

The two primary companies responsible for the construction were:

- **Union Pacific Railroad:** Tasked with building tracks westward, employing many Civil War veterans and Irish immigrants.
- **Central Pacific Railroad:** Responsible for constructing eastward tracks, relying heavily on Chinese immigrant laborers.

Construction Challenges and Solutions

Building the transcontinental railroad was an unprecedented engineering undertaking that faced numerous natural, technical, and labor-related challenges. The construction teams had to overcome difficult terrain, harsh weather, and logistical obstacles to complete the rail line.

Geographical and Environmental Obstacles

The railroad route spanned deserts, mountains, and plains, each posing unique difficulties. The Central Pacific had to navigate the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains, requiring extensive tunneling and the construction of bridges. Meanwhile, the Union Pacific encountered the vast Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, dealing with supply shortages and hostile encounters.

Labor Force and Working Conditions

The workforce was diverse but faced grueling working conditions, low wages, and danger. Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific side endured hazardous work in extreme weather, while Union Pacific workers, including many Irish immigrants, contended with attacks and accidents. Despite these hardships, the laborers demonstrated remarkable resilience and efficiency.

Engineering Innovations

Several engineering techniques and technologies were developed or refined during construction, including:

- The use of nitroglycerin for blasting tunnels.

- Innovative bridge-building methods.
- Efficient track-laying processes.

The Ceremony of the Last Spike

The culmination of the transcontinental railroad project was commemorated by the driving of the last spike, also called the "Golden Spike," on May 10, 1869. This event symbolized the physical and symbolic joining of the two railroads, a moment of national pride and unity.

Location and Significance

The last spike was driven at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, where the tracks of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific met. This location was chosen for its central position and accessibility, despite its remote and challenging environment.

The Golden Spike Ceremony

The ceremony was attended by railroad executives, dignitaries, and workers who gathered to witness the historic event. Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad and former California governor, famously drove the final spike into a pre-drilled hole with a silver hammer. The spike itself was made of 17.6-karat gold and symbolized the value and significance of the achievement.

Communication and Public Reaction

Telegraph signals were sent simultaneously to the East and West coasts, announcing the completion of the railroad to a nation eager for news. The event was widely celebrated in newspapers and public forums, marking a transformative moment in American history.

Economic and Social Impact

The completion of the transcontinental railroad and the driving of the last spike had profound economic and social consequences, reshaping the United States in multiple ways.

Acceleration of Westward Expansion

The railroad facilitated the rapid settlement and development of the Western United States by providing reliable transportation for settlers, goods, and resources. Towns and cities sprang up along the route, fostering regional economies and encouraging migration.

Boost to Industry and Commerce

The railroad enabled faster movement of raw materials such as coal, timber, and minerals, supporting burgeoning industries. It also opened new markets by connecting producers and consumers across vast distances, thereby increasing trade and economic integration.

Impact on Native American Communities

While the railroad brought progress, it also had adverse effects on Indigenous peoples. The expansion led to displacement, loss of hunting grounds, and conflicts as settlers encroached on Native American territories.

Legacy and Commemoration

The last spike of the transcontinental railroad remains a powerful symbol of American ingenuity, determination, and transformation. Its legacy is preserved through historical sites, monuments, and ongoing scholarship.

Preservation of Promontory Summit

Today, Promontory Summit is maintained as a National Historic Site, featuring a visitor center and reenactments of the last spike ceremony that educate the public about this landmark event.

Cultural Representations

The story of the transcontinental railroad and the last spike has been depicted in literature, film, and art, reflecting its enduring place in the national consciousness and identity.

Influence on Modern Transportation

The railroad set the foundation for modern transportation infrastructure in the United States, influencing subsequent railway construction, interstate commerce, and technological advancements in travel networks.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the 'Last Spike' of the Transcontinental Railroad?

The 'Last Spike' refers to the final spike driven to complete the first transcontinental railroad across the United States, symbolizing the connection of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads on May 10, 1869.

When and where was the Last Spike of the Transcontinental Railroad driven?

The Last Spike was driven on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit in Utah Territory.

Who drove the Last Spike of the Transcontinental Railroad?

Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad, famously drove the ceremonial Last Spike.

Why was the Last Spike significant in American history?

The Last Spike marked the completion of the first railroad linking the eastern and western United States, revolutionizing transportation, commerce, and the expansion of the American frontier.

What materials were used for the Last Spike of the Transcontinental Railroad?

The ceremonial Last Spike was made of 17.6-karat gold, symbolizing the importance of the event, while the actual construction spikes were iron.

How did the Last Spike impact the economy of the United States?

By completing the transcontinental railroad, the Last Spike facilitated faster movement of goods, people, and resources across the country, boosting trade and economic growth.

Are there any famous photographs or artifacts related to the Last Spike event?

Yes, one of the most iconic photographs shows Leland Stanford driving the Last Spike, and the original golden spike is preserved and displayed at Stanford University.

What role did the laborers play in the construction leading up to the Last Spike?

Thousands of laborers, including many Chinese and Irish immigrants, worked under challenging conditions to lay tracks from both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads leading up to the Last Spike.

How did the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad affect Native American communities?

The railroad accelerated westward expansion, leading to displacement, loss of lands, and significant cultural and economic impacts on Native American communities.

Additional Resources

1. *Nothing Like It in the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869*

This book by Stephen E. Ambrose offers a detailed narrative of the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, focusing on the challenges faced by the workers and engineers. It highlights the determination and innovation that made the railroad possible, providing rich historical context. Ambrose's storytelling brings to life the monumental effort behind the last spike.

2. *The Great Railroad Revolution: The History of Trains in America*

Authored by Christian Wolmar, this book explores the broader impact of the railroad in shaping America, culminating in the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. It delves into the technological advancements and political struggles involved. The last spike event is presented as a pivotal moment in uniting the country.

3. *Union Pacific: The Reconfiguration*

This work chronicles the history of the Union Pacific Railroad, one of the key companies involved in the transcontinental project. It covers the construction period leading up to the driving of the last spike and the subsequent growth of the railroad network. The book provides insight into the corporate and labor dynamics of the era.

4. *Driving the Last Spike: The Transcontinental Railroad and Its Golden Spike Ceremony*

Focusing specifically on the final act of the railroad's completion, this book examines the historical significance of the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory Summit. It discusses the political symbolism and cultural impact of the event. The narrative includes firsthand accounts and photographs from the time.

5. *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad*

David Haward Bain's book provides a comprehensive history of the Transcontinental Railroad's construction, from its inception to the last spike. It highlights the diverse groups of workers, including Chinese laborers, and the immense challenges they faced. The book paints a vivid picture of the monumental achievement in American history.

6. *The Last Spike: The Great Railroad Linking the East and West*

This title offers an in-depth look at the final moments of the Transcontinental Railroad project, focusing on the individuals who participated in the last spike ceremony. It explores the engineering

feats and political negotiations involved. The narrative emphasizes the railroad's role in transforming the American West.

7. Rails Across America: The Making of the Transcontinental Railroad

This book explores the broader context of railroad expansion in America, culminating in the historic linking of the continent. It includes detailed descriptions of the construction process and the significance of the last spike. The work also addresses the environmental and social changes brought by the railroad.

8. The Golden Spike: The Story of the Transcontinental Railroad

Geoffrey C. Ward's book narrates the story of the Transcontinental Railroad with a focus on the symbolic Golden Spike. It covers the political maneuvering, engineering challenges, and personal stories of those involved. The book captures the excitement and historical importance of the railroad's completion.

9. Building the Iron Road: The Transcontinental Railroad and Its Legacy

This book examines the engineering and human endeavor behind the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, culminating in the driving of the last spike. It also discusses the railroad's lasting effects on American society, economy, and landscape. The narrative includes perspectives from workers, engineers, and politicians.

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