THE STORY OF THE FIRST AMERICAN TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

AN EDUCATIONAL TOOLKIT
PROVIDED BY THE UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD MUSEUM
This resource, developed by the Union Pacific Railroad Museum, is a comprehensive guide for telling the story of the first American transcontinental railroad. In addition to bringing to life this important achievement in American history, this kit allows students to examine firsthand historical resources, including:

- A foldout poster, depicting the most iconic photograph from the completion of the transcontinental railroad, Andrew J. Russell’s “East Meets West.” Rendered from the only remaining print made before the glass plate negative cracked, this photograph is part of the Union Pacific Railroad Collection, housed at the Union Pacific Railroad Museum.

- 10 stereo card reproductions, from the Union Pacific Railroad collection, documenting the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. These cards, originally produced between 1866 and 1869, bring the past to life in 3-D, capturing the adventure and excitement of building the transcontinental railroad.

- Plastic stereo card viewer. To experience the 3-D effect, fold down the nose piece on the plastic lenses and place it firmly against the bridge of your nose. Holding a card in one hand, move it toward and away from your eyes until the image focuses into one, 3-D picture.
BUILDING AMERICA

The completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869, has had an enduring impact on the growth of the United States. Traveling from the East to Pacific Coast, previously a dangerous trip with many hardships that took as long as six months, was reduced to just seven days’ time. Water stops marked the route every 25 miles – the distance a steam locomotive could travel before needing to refill. And each station held the opportunity for a new community to grow, for immigrant families to settle and for commerce to flourish.

Today, nearly everything that American families and businesses depend on is carried on trains – raw materials such as lumber and steel to construct homes and buildings; chemicals to fight fires and improve gas mileage; coal that generates more than half of our country’s electricity needs; produce and grain for America’s food supply; and even finished goods such as automobiles and TVs. After 150 years, Union Pacific now serves a global economy and more than 7,300 communities across 23 states.

Student Reading

Grades 4-6

Grades 5-8

National Standards for History

Grades 3-4
5A.1 & 8.B. 4 & 6
www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/standards-for-grades-k-4

Grades 5-12
Era 4 Expansion and Reform (1801-1861). 4A.2.1-3, 4E.1 & 4
www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards

Additional Resources

www.uprrmuseum.org
The Union Pacific Railroad Museum official website. For more in-depth information and activities.
www.up.com
Union Pacific’s official website.
www.nps.gov/gosp
The Golden Spike National Historic Monument.
www.ourdocuments.gov
U.S. National Archives. For printer-friendly version of the 1862 Pacific Railway Act.
memory.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/rrhtml/rrhome.html
Railroad map collection.
www.cprr.org
Central Pacific Railroad Museum. For resources and discussions about the construction of the transcontinental railroad.
Opening the West, Land of Opportunity

Discovery of gold in California not only created a market for transcontinental traffic, it also significantly changed the American public’s attitude. The West was no longer considered a wasteland; instead it was seen as the land of opportunity. People began traveling and settling beyond the Mississippi River, in territories that stretched to the Pacific Coast.

In 1853, Congress passed an act providing for the survey of possible railroad lines from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. At least five routes were explored, but unfortunately, an increasing rift between the Northern and the Southern states rendered agreement on a route impossible.

In 1859, Abraham Lincoln traveled to Council Bluffs, Iowa, to inspect land in his possession. While there, he was introduced to Grenville Dodge, a young railroad engineer, who was completing surveys west of the Missouri River for the M&M Railroad (Rock Island Railroad). As they talked, Lincoln became more and more convinced that the route proposed by Dodge, beginning in Council Bluffs and following the Platte River Valley through Nebraska, was the best path west for the transcontinental railroad.

As part of the Pacific Railway Acts of 1862 and 1864, both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific were given alternating sections of land to sell along the transcontinental route to fund part of the construction. The white squares are government land reserved for homesteaders under the Homestead Act (1862). Colored squares designate land that Union Pacific owned or sold.
Recruiting Laborers in Race to Construct the Route

Central Pacific broke ground in Sacramento, Calif., in January 1863. Union Pacific began construction at the Missouri River in Omaha, Neb., in December 1863. Competition swelled between the railroads’ construction crews as they raced to finish first.

In 1865, the Central Pacific Railroad faced a severe labor shortage. Many of the men hired to build the railroad worked only as far as the gold mines and then went their own way. Continuously looking to grow its forces, the Central Pacific hired Chinese workers against the wishes of many crews and supervisors, but when the first group proved to be efficient and hardworking they reversed their opinions. In fact, the Chinese crews were largely responsible for Central Pacific forging through the Sierra Nevadas.

Nearly two years after breaking ground, Union Pacific track crews had only reached the outskirts of Omaha. Not until the end of the Civil War in 1865 were there finally enough laborers to make significant progress. The Union Pacific workforce, largely made up of Irish Americans, was supplemented by organized and disciplined veterans from the Civil War, including railroad engineer Grenville Dodge, now a military general, who joined the effort in 1866.

As the two companies approached Utah’s Great Salt Lake during the spring of 1869, there was no consensus as to exactly where the railroads should meet. On April 8, 1869, Union Pacific’s Grenville Dodge and Central Pacific’s Collis P. Huntington convened in Washington D.C. and with the Treaty of Hooper’s House agreed the meeting point would be at Promontory Summit, Utah.
Union Pacific and Central Pacific Meet, Uniting the Nation

At noon on May 10, 1869, the “golden spike” ceremony began with approximately 600 people in attendance. Positioned nose to nose at the end of the last rail were the Central Pacific’s Jupiter locomotive and the Union Pacific’s No. 119. A bottle of champagne was broken over the laurel tie, while a telegraph went out across the nation with the simple message: “Done.” The transcontinental railroad was complete.

At that instant, in Promontory Summit, Utah, coast-to-coast travel time was reduced from four to six months to only seven days, having an instrumental impact on the growth and development of the United States. The seven years of physically demanding and dangerous work, to which many laborers lost their lives, led to the uniting of the nation. Union Pacific had built 1,086 miles of railroad lines from Omaha, Neb., conquering the Rocky Mountains, and Central Pacific had built 690 miles from Sacramento, Calif., prevailing through the rugged Sierra Nevadas.

The transcontinental railroad was started in the midst of a war that divided America, but its completion marked a connection between the East and West coasts that defined the United States as a single nation.

3-D Images Market Railroad

The construction of the transcontinental railroad required financial backers, and the finished railroad would need customers. Both Union Pacific and Central Pacific leaders realized that photography could be a vital tool to entice settlers and investors. Scenes from the Great West soon became a favorite fixture in most 19th century parlors. The most popular form of parlor photography were stereo cards printed with dual images that when viewed through a special viewer, would create a single 3-D picture.

In 1864, Central Pacific hired Alfred A. Hart to photograph the building of its railroad over the imposing Sierra Nevadas in California and beyond. Union Pacific Vice President Thomas Durant commissioned Andrew J. Russell to photograph Union Pacific’s 1868 crossing of the Continental Divide. Hart and Russell produced an unprecedented pictorial record of one of the world’s most extraordinary construction projects; a work that brought sweeping social change at a pace never seen before in history.

Map of the completed transcontinental route showing the land grants for both railroads. Date: circa 1870
Alfred A. Hart, Scene near Summit tunnel, eastern slope of Western Summit, 1866

Alfred A. Hart, Scene at Truckee, [Calif.], 154 miles from Sacramento, 1868

Alfred A. Hart, Shoshone Indians looking at Locomotives on Desert, 1868

Andrew J. Russell, *Dale Creek Bridge from the South*, 1868

Andrew J. Russell, *Laying Track, [Wyo.]*, 1868