



The WILD WEST

People and Events That Shaped
the American West

From Omaha to Oakland: The Transcontinental Railroad

The Transcontinental Railroad was the first mass-transit project to connect the Eastern United States with the new West. As settlers began exploring the West, talk of starting a national rail service began, but politicians couldn't agree on a route, and were having trouble finding an easy way for the train to pass through the mountains of California. It was engineer Theodore Judah who finally found a safe passage through the Sierra Nevada. After that, the Gold Rush heated up and the idea of building an east-to-west railroad became a major goal. In 1862, President Lincoln approved funding for the building of a transcontinental railroad. Workers began building at both ends of the track and met in Promontory Point, Utah. The project was finished on May 10th, 1869, and workers celebrated by joining the two sets of track with a golden spike.

Though it made the settlement of the West much easier and more attractive, it did so at the expense of many people. The building of the railroads forced many Native Americans to move or change their way of life, and several of the laborers were Chinese and Irish immigrants who were paid unfairly low wages for their hard work. The topic remains the source of heated debate to this day.

Fun Fact:

Modern highway Interstate-80 follows most of the transcontinental railroad's original route.

If you were in charge of deciding the transcontinental railroad's route, what would it look like? Where would the major stops be? Draw the tracks on the map and list your reasons for choosing the route on the lines below.


