

Central Pacific began construction in Sacramento on January 8, 1863 and the UP began its portion of the line in Omaha on December 2, 1863. The initial construction efforts at both ends were quite limited. The Civil War caused a variety of problems for the railroads. It sent supply rates soaring, severely limited available labor and material and dried up capital investment potential. By February 1864, only 18 miles of rail had been laid in California and none were laid westward from Omaha until the spring of 1865. The adverse conditions of the time forced the railroads to request further assistance from the government, a request that was granted in the form of the Act of 1864. This act virtually doubled the resources available to the companies and insured the project's completion (Athearn 1976:31; Utley 1960:14).

Between the years 1864 and 1869 a total of 1,775 miles of rail was laid, linking the continent with a band of steel. This effort was the largest single engineering and construction project undertaken in the U.S. to that time. The logistical, engineering, and financial tasks laid before these railroad companies were enormous.

The U.S. Government offered lucrative incentives, in the form of land grants, rights-of-way and first-mortgage government bonds (Galloway 1989:61). Despite the financial encouragements, however, these covered only about half of the capital necessary to build the Pacific Railroad. Because of this, private investment capital was critical to maintain the solvency of both the UP and CP Railroads. Both companies devised the means to solve this dilemma by creating a number of indirectly held companies, which carried out the construction work, but were not legally controlled by the Federal legislation, which directed the efforts of the two main railroad companies (Riegel 1926:75-76; Carman and Mueller 1926:326-341).

Construction of the transcontinental line was fraught with exceptionally difficult obstacles that sorely taxed the technological capabilities of the day. The CP spent four years surmounting the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The company faced the necessity of constructing large fills, bridging deep canyons with trestles, and cutting through solid granite for 15 separate tunnels (Galloway 1989:145-150). The CP did not reach Reno, Nevada until June 19, 1868. Reno lay 154 miles from the beginning of track in Sacramento. The 536-mile distance from there to Promontory Summit in northern Utah, however, was completed in less than 11 months (Galloway 1989:160).

The UP crews did not experience the same types of obstacles as the CP, but they too encountered great hardships. Track laying in the Platte River Valley of Nebraska was relatively easy, but the surveyors and construction workers soon encountered stiff opposition from Sioux and Cheyenne Indian war parties. Major skirmishes occurred in Nebraska and Wyoming between 1865 and 1867 (Dodge 1965; Sabin 1919:236-240; Grinnell 1956:263-268; Davis 1894: 141). The UP crews also encountered some difficult terrain in the Laramie Mountains and, especially, in Echo and Weber canyons in Utah (Utley 1960:34-35).

As both railroads approached Utah, it was well understood that negotiations needed to be completed with Brigham Young, President of the Mormon Church and former Governor of the Utah Territory, in order to complete the route. Young's desire was to see the railroad descend Weber Canyon and veer south to Salt Lake City and around the south end of the Great Salt Lake