

A Brief History of the Route

On July 1, 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act directing the Central Pacific (CPRR) and the Union Pacific (UP) Railroads to build the first transcontinental railroad.

In January 1863 CPRR began constructing eastward from Sacramento following a route surveyed by civil engineer Theodore Judah to cross the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains.

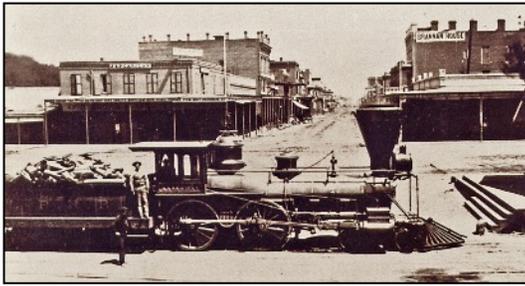
UP laid its first rail in Omaha, Nebraska Territory in July 1865, heading west over mostly level ground. Meanwhile, extreme weather conditions and rocky terrain made the CPRR's mountain construction costly and slow. On some days progress was measured in just feet and inches.

Adding to the hardship was a severe shortage of workers needed to handle this incredibly hard labor. With no machines to help, all work was done with hand tools and strong backs. The railroad needed 4,000 men, but early on only about 800 were available. Chinese laborers were hired and soon were toiling alongside Irish workers on this historic effort. Cultural differences plagued the two very diverse groups, but crew supervisors were able to handle most disagreements that arose.

After five years of grueling work to crest the Sierra, the CPRR's first through train crossed over Donner Summit from Sacramento to Truckee in June 1868. Snowsheds were added over tracks near the summit to prevent snow buildup in fierce winter storms.

Construction now moved quickly on more level countryside. Nearing the end of the line, CPRR crews laid an unprecedented 10 miles and 56 feet of track in less than 12 hours on April 28, 1869.

The CPRR and UP met at Promontory Summit, Utah on May 10, 1869. The Transcontinental Railroad was complete! With the pounding of the last spike passengers and freight could travel overland in a mere seven days instead of months by wagon.

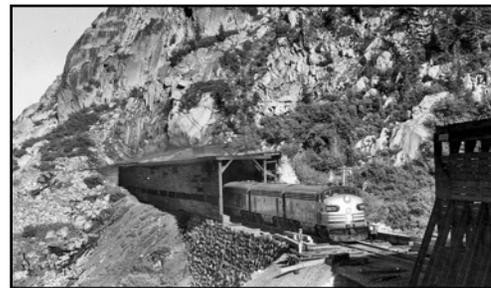


*Early CPRR
Locomotive at
Sacramento*



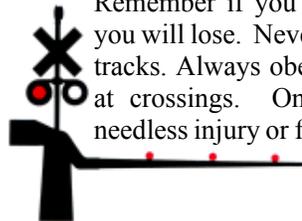
Bloomer Cut

*Long Ravine
Trestle
& Bridge*



Wooden Sierra Snowsheds near Summit

Safety First: Railroad/Public Safety is important to both you and the train crew. Remember if you have a tie with a train you will lose. Never walk on the railroad's tracks. Always obey the signs and signals at crossings. Only you can prevent a needless injury or fatality involving a train.



May 2014

The Donner Pass Route

The Original Transcontinental
Railroad's Sierra Crossing
(Constructed 1863-1868)

Route of Amtrak's California Zephyr

Open this brochure and learn about the railroad route that conquered the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1868.

150 years ago our nation needed a transcontinental railroad to move people and goods with ease. Building the railroad, though, was an arduous task, and cost more than a hundred lives. Yet this unimaginable work was completed in only five years.

Blood and sweat poured into the rail bed along the route as workers toiled to tunnel through granite, lay track and move mountains to build a dream.

Enjoy this look back at the Trans-Continental Railroad's Historic Donner Pass Route.

Presented by
Placer-Sierra Railroad
Heritage Society



*Preserving Railroad History
on the Donner Pass Route*



Points of Interest

Sacramento (MP088) Just a few yards from the depot the first ties and track were laid for the Central Pacific Railroad. Now the area is home to the world renowned California State Railroad Museum and the wonderfully restored Old Sacramento.

Arcade Creek Bridge (MP 096) Congress designated this point as the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains where the railroad grade starts its ascent.

Roseville (MP106) Named for the abundant wild roses that carpeted the area. Roseville's first railroad yard opened in 1907. Today the town boasts the largest rail facility on the West Coast, now under Union Pacific Railroad ownership.

Rocklin (MP111) The city is named for its many rock quarries which supplied building materials for many important structures as far away as San Francisco. CPRR facilities were housed there before the railroad relocated to Roseville in 1908. After the move, sad residents held a funeral for the abandoned roundhouse.

Newcastle (MP120) End of the line from June 1864 until construction proceeded eastward in May 1865. Once a packing and shipping point for fruit grown in the foothills.

Bloomer Cut (MP123 Westbound) This deep cut was a major engineering achievement, and testimony to the strength and determination of the laborers. Once considered the "Eighth Wonder of the World," it remains literally unchanged since its completion in 1865.



MP143.5
Track 1

**MP denotes Milepost Rail Miles from Oakland.
Milepost signs on either side of the tracks
help mark progress along the route.**

Auburn (MP124) Now the Placer County Seat, tracks reached here in May 1865.

Colfax (MP142) Named for Speaker of the House (later Vice President) Schuyler Colfax, the town arose shortly before tracks reached here in Sept. 1865. It housed major freight activities and fruit packing. The Nevada County Narrow Gauge RR connected Colfax with mining districts at Grass Valley and Nevada City.

Long Ravine (MP145) Originally crossed by a 450 foot trestle and a 428 foot wood truss bridge. Today two steel bridges cross the ravine and Interstate 80.

Cape Horn (MP146) Chinese laborers helped carve a roadbed around this steep mountainside overlooking the American River far below.

Gold Run (MP153) Hydraulic mining nearly undermined the railroad tracks that traverse the ridge. Heavy erosion damage from this mining practice is still visible.

Dutch Flat (MP155) A once-thriving mining town a mile below the tracks. The Dutch Flat-Donner Lake wagon road provided movement of goods and people over the summit until the railroad was completed.

Towle (MP157) Nothing remains of the company town that supported Towle Brothers Company's extensive lumber operations and 30-mile narrow gauge logging railroad. Towle was home to the West's first pulp mill.

Emigrant Gap (MP171) Here the railroad crosses the ridge from the American River drainage to the slopes of the Bear River. Early emigrant wagon trains crossed this same ridge on their difficult journey to the Sacramento valley. Most of the route from here to the summit was once protected by **snow sheds**, structures built to cover tracks to prevent snow buildup. Referred to by railroaders as "Railroading in a Barn."

Norden (MP192) Was a major operations center and support for train crews located entirely within snow sheds. A covered turntable turned 'helper' locomotives for their return down the hill. Skiers were dropped off within the sheds to access nearby Sugar Bowl ski area. Today only a small portion of the snow sheds remains.

"Big Hole" Tunnel 41 (MP193) Donner Summit was originally crossed in Tunnels 6, 7 & 8 and extensive snowsheds. A second track was built in 1924, crossing the summit 132 feet lower in 10,300 foot Tunnel 41.

Truckee (MP206) Trains from Sacramento reached Coburn's (Truckee) in June 1868. It has long served as a staging area for crews and equipment removing snow over the summit. The Tahoe Branch once connected Truckee by rail with Lake Tahoe 15 miles to the south.

Boca (MP214) Ice that was harvested here provided cooling for freight cars carrying fruit to Eastern markets.

Verdi (MP230) Site of the first CPRR and Wells Fargo train robbery. Over \$40,000 in gold coins were stolen.

Reno (MP241) Originally the connecting point for the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, serving the silver mine regions near Virginia City, Nevada.