



There were two Western Pacific railroads, both of which are in this satellite view of Lathrop, California. Also in this view is the starting point of the mighty Southern Pacific Railroad. The first WP was formed in December 1862 by a group associated with the San Francisco & San Jose Railroad (1864) to build a railroad connecting San Jose to Sacramento with the plan that the first transcontinental railroad would follow the WP from Sacramento to San Jose and then the SF&SJ to San Francisco. In October 1864, the Central Pacific Railroad assigned all its rights under the Pacific Railway Act to the WP for the route between Sacramento and San Jose, including land grants. In 1866, the first twenty miles from San Jose had been completed when funding problems halted construction. Part of the difficulty was that federal land grants were not available where Mexican land grants had previously been made.

By 1867 the CP determined that the route via San Jose to San Francisco was too long and that it would be better to change to a route to Oakland and from there use ferries from the CP's Oakland Pier to San Francisco. The CP bought the WP and construction started again in the spring of 1867. The railroad was completed through this location (labeled as the 1869 WP) and in 1869 arrived at San Leandro, where it joined the local San Francisco & Alameda Railroad (not shown separately on the map). The first transcontinental train to reach San Francisco Bay arrived at the SF&A's Alameda Pier on September 6, 1869, and the passengers took the SF&A ferry to San Francisco. Two months later the rail connection to the local San Francisco & Oakland Railroad (not shown separately on the map) was in place and the transcontinental trains now ran through Oakland instead of Alameda. In 1870, the WP was absorbed into the CP. By 1879, the CP had built shorter routes from Sacramento to the north San Francisco Bay and the WP's route via Altamont Pass became a secondary route between the East Bay and the San Joaquin Valley.

In September 1868, while the CP was building its part of the first transcontinental railroad in Nevada and Utah, the CP owners (known as the Big Four: Charles Crocker, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and C. P. Huntington) purchased the Southern Pacific Railroad. However, to build the southern transcontinental survey from southern California to El Paso, Texas, the SP did not bring supplies to southern California by ship and build the line east from there as the CP was doing for the central transcontinental survey. Instead, the SP first built the Tehachapi Pass route to southern California, which was completed to Los Angeles in 1876, then kept going to El Paso and points east, thus dominating Southwest railroading for more than a century. The entire SP story started here in Lathrop where, on December 31, 1869, the SP commenced its first construction project at the wye in the western part of the satellite image. Note that within the existing wye there is a grade for an older, smaller wye, which could be the original WP-SP wye built in 1869.

In 1903, a new Western Pacific Railroad was formed to build a line between Oakland and Salt Lake City, which was completed in 1909. The WP (1909) route through Sacramento, Oakland, and San Jose closely parallels the original WP (1869), including this location at Lathrop, where the tracks are a mile apart. This part of the 1909 WP used the existing Alameda & San Joaquin Railroad, which had been built around 1895.

We'll explore the wye where the SP started its long (1869-1996) and storied history from Lathrop; the numbers on the above image correspond to the following numbered locations.



1.

Southward view of the first WP (1869). The old siding to the right is sloped so cars could roll down onto the siding. This siding could date from the time of the smaller (original?) SP wye, whose abandoned grade is in the brush to the left (west). When I visited Lathrop I hadn't looked at a satellite image so I didn't know to look in the brush for the old wye – next time!



1.

Southward view of the first WP (1869) at same location as previous. The old siding is in the brush to the right, barely visible. A newer but rusty siding is in the foreground.



1.

Northward view at same location as previous; the switch in the foreground is the same switch as in the previous photo. A UP train is on the north branch of the SP (1876) wye.



1.

Northward view a few steps south of the previous location with the same the switch and old siding in the foreground and the same UP train in the distance.



2.

Southward view of the WP (1869) mainline, which is bolted track, and the southern branch of the SP wye in the center distance.



3.

Southward view of the WP (1869) mainline, which is welded track with clips and changes to bolted in the middle distance, and the northern branch of the SP wye to the left. Barely visible in the distance is the north end of the newer siding.



3.

Same location as above, looking north at the crossover from the north branch of the SP wye, which becomes a second track on the WP (1869) alignment north at least to Stockton.





Westward view of the western tip of the SP wye. The front of the train is on the switch for the wye, which joins the two curved tracks of the wye, both bolted. The track to the left, with a switch in front of the train, is a spur to a junkyard (AMG Resources on the satellite image).