



The story of America's transcontinental railroad is legend. In 1853, Congress authorized surveys of potential routes for the "Pacific Railroad," which were completed in 1855 and identified a Northern Pacific, a Central Pacific, and two Southern Pacific routes. The 1862 Pacific Railway Act chose the Central Pacific route due to gold in northern California, silver in northern Nevada, and the absence of Southern Congressmen -- due to the Civil War -- to advocate for a Southern Pacific route, which would have been a much easier build. The Act specified two railroad charters: the Union Pacific Railroad would build railroad and telegraph lines west from the eastern shores of the Missouri River at Council Bluffs, Iowa, and would meet the Central Pacific Railroad and telegraph line built eastward from the navigable waters of the Sacramento River in California. On January 8, 1863, grading for the CP commenced at "K" Street at the waterfront of the Sacramento River and the first rails were laid later that year. The CP crossing of the Sierra Nevada required 15 tunnels, the most difficult being the summit tunnel at Donner Pass, and other engineering feats. During the winter of 1866-67, to keep things moving while slowly carving a railroad grade through the mountains, the CP undertook the tremendous task of hauling and sledging three locomotives, forty cars, and material for 40 miles of track over 28 miles of mountain trails over Donner Pass and down into the Truckee River canyon, where light snow made grading and track work possible. The CP followed the Truckee River eastward from Truckee to Reno, Nevada (this location) so, thanks to the advance work, the first train arrived in Reno on June 19, 1868, the day after the first train passed through the Donner Pass summit tunnel. Reno was born and a town was staked out by the CP. From Reno, the CP had relatively clear sailing as it wound its way around the normal-fault mountain ranges and across the flat alluvial valleys of northern Nevada and northwest Utah to meet the UP less than year later, on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, henceforth binding the nation. Over time, the CP was absorbed into the Southern Pacific, and in 1996 the SP was absorbed into the Union Pacific. In 2007, as part of Reno's the ReTRAC project, the CP/SP/UP tracks were sunken below grade and in some places underground for about a mile in downtown Reno.

Southwestward view of the CP (1869) at downtown Reno, where the railroad grade is about 20 feet below the ground surface. The building to the left (southeast) of the tracks is the Reno depot. The first of several wooden depots was built by the CP in 1869, but they all burned down. The current stucco depot was built by the SP in 1926 and was also used by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. The station was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012.



In 1850, Mormon emigrants on their way to the California Gold Rush discovered gold in Nevada (then part of the Utah Territory) and by 1858 prospectors were permanently camping in the area around what is now Virginia City. In 1859, gold was found with bluish chunks of silver ore, which was later identified as the first silver from what became the Comstock Lode. Virginia City grew to over 20,000 people. However, the costs to transport ore down to the mills and to transport lumber and supplies back to the mines made only the highest grade ores financially viable. Enter William Sharon, Nevada agent for the Bank of California, which owned many low-grade mines through forecloses. He planned a railroad to run from Virginia City to the mills along the Carson River and ending at the state capital, Carson City. Ground was broken on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad in February 1869, the first track was laid in September 1869, and the first passenger train pulled into Virginia City in February 1870. This route, isolated from the national rail network, covered 21 miles, gained 1,575 feet of elevation, and had curves to make 17 full circles in the 14 miles from the Carson River to Virginia City. The V&T grade featured seven tunnels and an 85 foot tall, 500 foot long trestle. In late 1872, the V&T extended the line from Carson City to Reno (this location) to connect with the CP and the national rail network. This connection completed the V&T mainline, which ran up to 45 trains per day at the peak of operations in 1876 - 1877. By 1924, the V&T was no longer profitable and in 1938 went into receivership and dismantled the Carson City-Virginia City line. In 1950 the V&T abandoned the entire line. In the 1970's, some of the old lines were rebuilt by private investors and today the privately owned Virginia & Truckee Railroad Company operates a 14-mile heritage railroad south from Virginia City.

Northeastward view of the SP depot at downtown Reno; this is the other side of the same depot in the previous photo. The V&T tracks ran through the paved area in the foreground and ended just west of the depot. Passengers from Virginia City and the capital Carson City would disembark the V&T in the paved area and walk through the building to SP trains to anywhere. Today, the V&T grade is completely obliterated in Reno.



In 1880, the Nevada & Oregon Railroad was planned to build a narrow gauge line from the CP transcontinental line at Reno (this location) to the Columbia River at The Dalles to service cattle ranches and farms in northeastern California and eastern Oregon. Survey and grading work began in December 1880 and in October 1882 the N&O reached Oneida, California, 30 miles from Reno. In April 1884, a bank took full control of the railroad and spent the next few years improving the line and building up business. In 1885, the N&O was renamed the Nevada & California Railroad (I don't know if or how this relates to the SP's N&C) and completed another 50 miles of narrow gauge line north to Amadee in 1890. In 1893, the name of the railroad was changed to the Nevada-California-Oregon Railroad, known colloquially as the "Narrow, Crooked and Ornerly" railroad, which reached Lakeview, Oregon, in 1912, where building ended.

In 1917, with the purpose of accessing Reno traffic, the Western Pacific Railroad purchased the portion of the N-C-O south of the crossing point of the two roads at Herlong; on the SWRRH Map, this purchase corresponds to the N&O (1882n) and the southern two-thirds of the N&C (1890n). The WP realigned and standard-gauged the trackage between Beckwourth Pass and Reno, including dual-gauge track to allow N-C-O narrow gauge trains to continue to Reno. Of the 33 miles of the WP Reno Branch, two segments aggregating 15.5 miles are on the former narrow gauge grade and the remaining 17.5 miles are new grading, but the alignment at and north of Reno did not change. By 1928, the SP had converted the N-C-O to standard gauge and the WP standard-gauged the dual-gauge Reno Branch.

Westward view of the CP (1869) at its current connection with the N&O (1882n), now both UP, 4,000 feet east of the Reno depot (previous photo) in downtown Reno, marked by the distant tall buildings. The N&O once had a full wye at its junction with the CP, but the western branch of the wye is gone. The track that heads to the right from this switch is a 2,700-foot siding that leads to the east branch of the wye, so this switch is the current version of the CP-N&O connection.



Southwestward view of the CP (1869), represented by the two distant tracks with concrete ties, in the center of the 2,700-foot siding, represented by the track with wooden ties in the foreground. The white retaining wall is the east end of the ReTRAC lowering of the grade through downtown Reno.



Southeastward view of the N&O (1882n), later the N&C, N-C-O, WP, and UP, here with concrete ties. This track continues to the 2,700-foot siding; the CP is just beyond the blue umbrellas.



Northward view of the N&O (1882n), later the N&C, N-C-O, WP, and UP, a few steps north of the previous location. The west branch of the wye once connected to the east branch at this location. The N-C-O depot is now a brewery just to the left of this intersection, but I didn't know to look for it when I visited. The red roof in the upper left corner of this photo is the N-C-O depot.



Southeastward view of the N&O (1882n), now the UP Reno Branch, 2.3 rail miles north of the previous location, as the alignment winds its way up out of the Truckee River valley. This curve is more than 180 degrees and winds almost completely around this apartment complex. The concrete ties extend only to the outskirts of Reno.