



The story of America's first 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. The first train passed through the Donner Pass summit tunnel on June 18, 1868, and thanks to advance work, the first train arrived in Reno the next day. 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, including this location at Battle Mountain, Nevada, and then through northwest Utah to meet the UP on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, henceforth binding the nation. The CP was absorbed into the Southern Pacific over time, starting with a lease in 1885 and finally a full merger in 1959, and in 1996 the SP was absorbed into the UP.

The mining center of Austin was founded in 1862 as part of a silver rush reputedly triggered by a Pony Express rider whose horse kicked over a rock. By summer 1863, Austin and the surrounding Reese River Mining District had a population of over 10,000. In 1871, the Manhattan Silver Mining Company had consolidated most of the claims and in 1874 proposed a controversial railroad project to the Nevada legislature. Overriding the Governor's veto, the legislature authorized a \$200,000 bond to subsidize a 92-mile, narrow gauge railroad from the CP (1869) at Battle Mountain (this location) to Austin, under the condition that the project must be completed in five years. The Nevada Central Railroad wasn't even started until 4 1/2 years later, when NC brought in General James H. Ledlie, a former Union officer in the Civil War to get things going. The crews went to work desperately, only to bring the line within 2 miles of the Austin with less than a day left before the deadline. As the story goes, an emergency meeting of the Austin Town Board extended the town limits by two miles and the last rails were laid by torchlight just minutes before the midnight deadline on February 9, 1880. The NC operated for half a century, but by the middle 1930's most of the mines were shut down and the line was abandoned in 1938.

Southward view of the CP (1869), now UP, at Battle Mountain. The northern terminus of the NC (1881n) was in the flat area between the tracks and the restaurant, but all traces of the NC are now gone. The NC alignment approached Battle Mountain from the south-southwest, then turned left, to the northwest, where it ran parallel to the CP and where passengers and freight transferred between narrow and standard gauge trains.



Southward view of the CP (1869), steps from the previous location. A single track goes through Battle Mountain. The northern terminus of the NC (1880n) was in the flat area to the right.



Traces of old foundations at the northern terminus of the NC (1880s) at Battle Mountain. The CP (1869), now UP, is at the top left.



Northwestward view of a siding on the CP (1869), 100 feet northwest of the previous location. The flat topography is on the floodplain of the Humboldt River, which supports some agriculture. The Western Pacific (1909) is 5 miles northeast of here, on the north side of the Humboldt River.