



The most famous place and time in western railroad history are Promontory Summit and May 10, 1869, which is the official place and time of the meeting of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific rails and the driving of the Golden Spike of America's first transcontinental railroad. Promontory Summit is on the crest of the Promontory Mountains, one of those many north-south trending mountain ranges in the Great Basin. The railroad across Promontory Summit remained in continuous use until 1904, when SP completed its 103-mile Lucin Cutoff across Great Salt Lake. The last regularly scheduled transcontinental passenger train to pass through Promontory Station was on Sunday September 18, 1904, and SP abandoned the route over the Promontory Mountains with an "unspiking" ceremony on September 8, 1942.

Westward view of the abandoned UP grade about 10 miles east of Promontory Summit. The Promontory Mountains are in the distance.



Both the UP and CP were under contract with the U.S. Government to construct the transcontinental railroad and each were paid by the mile. It wasn't until after the construction crews passed each other, working in opposite directions, that the meeting point was established at Promontory Summit. Meanwhile, the crews of both companies constructed parallel grades on the steep eastern slope of the Promontory Mountains, requiring significant earthwork as shown in this photograph. The Central Pacific grade, which is the higher of the two, soon became the grade when the operational juncture between the CP and UP was established at Ogden. The UP (lower) grade was abandoned in 1870, a year after it was built.



These mesas near Promontory could be mistaken for railroad grades, but they are actually ancient wave-cut shorelines of Lake Bonneville, the Pleistocene (ice age) lake of which Great Salt Lake is a remnant.



About a half mile of track is preserved at Promontory Summit under the auspices of the Golden Spike National Historic Site, which receives about 45,000 visitors a year (though there was exactly one visitor when I visited on a rainy October day). The Site has replicas of steam locomotives, re-enactments of the famous completion ceremony, and auto tours and hiking trails exploring the grade. In this eastward view of the preserved track, the car in the distance is at the east end of the track, the switch in the distance is the west leg of a turning wye that leads to a shop area (out of sight to the right), the building with a windmill is a historic structure on the far side of the wye, and the closer switch creates parallel tracks (former mainline and siding) that extend about a quarter mile to the west (next photo). The turning wye was used to turn helper engines after assisting the climb up to Promontory Summit.



Eastward view at same location as previous. The mainline on the right is the track used for the meeting-of-the-locomotives re-enactments (see below satellite image that has the locomotives meeting and seating area). The siding on the left (just south of satellite image) goes past the visitor center, which was likely the site of Promontory Station.

