



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. In 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 intervening flat valleys of northern Nevada, including this location at Elko, and then through northwest Utah to meet the UP on May 10, 1869, at Promontory Summit, Utah, henceforth binding the nation. The Southern Pacific leased the CP (1869) in 1885 and eventually absorbed the line into the SP.

In 1909, the Western Pacific Railroad's Feather River Route was completed between Oakland, California, and Salt Lake City, Utah, via Beckwourth Pass, to compete with the SP's (original Central Pacific [1869]) route over Donner Pass. While significantly longer and more difficult, the WP's crossing of the Pacific Crest at Beckwourth Pass is about 2,000 feet lower than the CP (1869) Donner Pass Route (elevation about 7,000 feet). The WP's Feather River Route was expensive to build with numerous tunnels and even a loop, but once over Beckwourth Pass the WP, like the CP 40 years earlier, had relatively clear sailing across northern Nevada and into Utah. In central Nevada, the WP (1909) followed the CP (1869) very closely as both took advantage of the transportation corridor provided by the Humboldt River. In 1959, the CP (1869) was completely absorbed into the SP, in 1982 the WP (1909) was absorbed into the UP, and in 1996 the SP was absorbed into the UP. Today, both lines are UP.

Westward view of the WP (1909) on the left (south) and the CP (1869) on the right (north) at the Elko Amtrak depot. During the period 1901-1903, the SP re-aligned several stretches of the CP (1869) route, but the alignment through Elko was unchanged -- until the 1980's. Prior to the 1980's, Elko's CP/SP station was located downtown at 684 Railroad Street and the WP station was 1,600 feet to the south at the corner of 3rd and Silver streets. The two lines were operated in a directional running setup; westbound trains used the CP/SP track and depot and eastbound trains used the WP track and depot. In the 1980's, both railroad tracks were relocated one mile south of the downtown area and the original depots demolished. The current "depots" are actually plexiglass Amtrak shelters built in 1984; westbound trains still use the north track and shelter (CP/SP) and eastbound trains use the south track and shelter (WP).



Eastward view of the CP (1869) on the left (north) and the WP (1909) on the right (south) at the Elko depot (same location as previous). Although both lines are now UP and, at this location, both tracks are on new alignments built in the 1980's, outside of town the north and south tracks connect to the CP (1869) and WP (1909) alignments, respectively. I'm not sure why the CP (1869) has concrete ties and the WP (1909) has wooden ties.



Southward view of the Amtrak depot at Elko, which consists of two plexiglass shelters. The shelter for westbound trains (on the CP/SP trackage) is partly visible in the upper left and nearer the viewer; the shelter for eastbound trains (on the WP trackage) is visible just to the right of the first shelter and farther from the viewer.

