



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. On September 1, 1865, the CP opened to Colfax (this location), 54 miles from and more than 2,000 feet higher than Sacramento. 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 on May 10, 1869, the CP met the UP at Promontory Summit, Utah, with an honorary golden spike that henceforth bound the nation.

The Nevada County Narrow Gauge Railroad was incorporated on April 4, 1874, to build and operate a 3-foot narrow gauge line from Colfax (this location) on the CP (1869) mainline to access post-Gold Rush mining operations and also timber resources around Grass Valley and Nevada City. In January 1875, construction of the NCNG began from the Colfax depot (this location) and headed northeast, parallel to the CP, then turned north across the Bear River through Chicago Park, a fruit and grape growers colony, and then continued into Grass Valley and finally the terminus at Nevada City, where the first train arrived May 20, 1876. The 23-mile narrow gauge line included two bridges, two tunnels, and five trestles to negotiate the mountainous route. Improvements were made in the 1910's and by 1912, the NCNG was running four mixed trains daily. The last train ran on May 29, 1942, after which the line was salvaged for wartime steel.

Northeastward view of the Colfax depot, built in 1905 for the NCNG. The CP (now UP) tracks are on the left. This was the southern terminus of the NCNG, which ran on the other side of the depot, today's Railroad Avenue.





This re-purposed SP passenger car is across Railroad Avenue from the Colfax depot. The viewer is standing on the former alignment of the NCNG on Railroad Avenue.



Southwestward view of the double-track CP (1869), 2,000 feet northeast of the Colfax depot. Note the short spur to the right with a parked track maintenance vehicle. According to topo maps from 1887 and 1932, the NCNG ran parallel to the CP (SP in 1887) on the road to the left (southeast), where the truck is driving; that road is appropriately called Narrow Gauge Road.



Northeastward view of the CP (1869), same location as previous. The short spur in the previous photo switches to the mainline on the far left. The NCNG ran in the dirt area in the far right distance, where the CP alignment curves to the left. At that curve, the NCNG (1876) alignment keeps going straight and is covered by today's Interstate 80, which follows the NCNG for 1.5 miles before the NCNG alignment turns north and crosses the Bear River. Confusingly, Narrow Gauge Road turns with the CP alignment and runs 600 feet west of the NCNG.



Northeastward view of the CP/SP/UP, 1.5 miles northwest of the Colfax depot. The curve in the distance is the beginning of the first of two large horseshoe bends needed to negotiate Cape Horn, a bedrock ledge that was probably the CP's second biggest physical obstacle (the biggest being Donner Summit). Just around the bend, at the north tip of the first horseshoe bend, is where the NCNG crossed the CP to head northwest to Nevada City.