



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 Cobre, 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 Nevada Northern Railway was built in 1906 to access the Nevada Consolidated Copper Company's porphyry copper deposits near Ely, Nevada. Construction began at the CP mainline (which was SP-owned in 1906) at Cobre, Nevada (this location), and proceeded southward. The railroad's symbolic completion included a Copper Spike ceremony in Ely. The 140-mile line was an easy build because its course runs north-south, as do the valleys between the north-south-trending normal-fault mountain ranges. The NN used two valleys, the Goshute and Steptoe valleys, which are separated by low hills at Currie that required just a few curves to negotiate. As a subsidiary of Nevada Consolidated, the primary purpose of the NN was the haulage of copper ore and mining equipment, but other freight traffic was also carried and the railroad operated a daily passenger train between East Ely and Cobre until 1941. The mines closed around 1980 and the NN suspended all operations in 1983. In 1996, the BHP Nevada Railroad acquired the NN and hauled copper ore concentrate from BHP's concentrator at Riepetown (a few miles west of Ely) to Shafter, Nevada, where the NN (1906) crosses the Western Pacific (1909). The BHP ceased operations in 1999. The tracks are still present, but the only usable trackage is several miles of track around Ely, which is used for today's Nevada Northern Railway heritage railroad, and a few miles of track south of Shafter (WP [1909] crossing), where the UP stores some cars.

Southeastward view of the CP (1869) at Cobre, Nevada. During the period 1901-1903, the SP re-aligned several stretches of the CP (1869) route, including the crossing of the Pequop Range west of Cobre, but the trackage at and 2 miles northwest of Corbe are on the original CP alignment. The CP (1869), now UP, is double tracked in this area, but America's first transcontinental railroad is still single track in parts of northern Nevada. The switch at the far right is the single connection to the NN (1906). The building in the center distance is Cobre; the building is an engine house and will be a point of reference in subsequent photos.



Northwestward view of the CP (1869), same location as previous. The track on the far left with the “D” (derail) switch is the siding for the NN (1906) and is connected to the mainline via the switch in the previous photo. The dirt area behind the “D” switch is the abandoned NN alignment, which once connected to the NN siding near the northwest end of the siding, barely visible in the distance. This is a strange connection – it makes a switchback, the only one I’m aware of in the Southwest that is not for climbing a grade. Trains leaving the CP/SP mainline via the switch in the previous photo first head northwest on the NN siding (the far left track in this view), then “switch back” via a now-gone switch near the end of the NN siding to head southeast (toward Crobre) along the now-abandoned grade behind the “D” switch. The hills in the left distance are part of the Pequop Range.



Southwestward view of the CP (1869), now UP, and the Pequop Range, same location as previous. The NN (1906) siding is lower than and behind the mainline tracks. Note the old foundations just left of center.



Northward view of the abandoned NN (1906) grade in the foreground and curving to the right just beyond the first telephone poles toward the NN siding (note the same "D" switch as before on the far left). The NN trackage connecting the NN with the CP/SP was removed sometime after NN passenger service to Cobre ended in 1941.



Northward view of the abandoned NN (1906) grade in the foreground and the CP/SP mainline in the upper right and extending to the left distance (northwest), a few hundred feet southeast of the previous location.



Southeastward view of the abandoned NN (1906) grade and an old foundation, same location as previous. Note the same engine house as in the first photo and another building, a handcar shed, just left of the pole – that's Cobre.



Southeastward view of the abandoned NN (1906) grade, 300 feet southeast of the previous location. The CP/SP/UP is in the upper left, where it turns 90 degrees, from northwest-southeast west of Cobre (e.g. as in first photo) to northeast-southwest east of Cobre.



Southeastward view of the abandoned NN (1906) grade at Cobre. The track removal ends at this small bridge 1,600 feet southeast of the former connection to the NN siding; thus, 1,600 feet of track was removed.





Northwestward view of the current end-of-track of the NN (1906) at Cobre. Same small bridge as previous photo. In the foreground, note the first split in the track as it enters the NN facilities at Cobre, which include two buildings, sidings, and a turning wye.



Northeastward view of the NN's handcar shed at Cobre. The CP/SP/UP mainline is behind the shed. The track in the foreground is one of two tracks after the split in the previous photo; the second track is just behind viewer. Note the rails in front of the shed and perpendicular to the track; I've seen this before but I don't know what it's for.



Another northeastward view of the handcar shed at Cobre. There are two NN tracks; the track in front of the shack is the NN (1906) mainline; the track in the foreground is veering away from the mainline and is splitting via a switch to form another track, both of which lead to the engine house.



The NN spur to the engine house. The second track to the engine house runs just east of the building and re-joins the NN mainline farther south.



Northwestward view of the NN mainline; the engine house is out of sight to the left. The right (northeast) track at this switch is a siding for the north branch of the Cobre turning wye (the siding rejoins the mainline between the two branches of the wye). The CP (1869), now UP, is in the right distance.



Westward view of the north branch of the turning wye. The yellow soil is iron oxide indicative of tailings used to repair the fill grade at this location and a few others around Cobre.



Northeastward view of the tip of the Cobre turning wye, where the two branches meet. There is another 350 feet of track beyond the tip and another 200 feet of track-less grade beyond that, much more than needed to turn an engine and tender; the wye turned trains. The CP/SP/UP is in the upper left distance, where it turns 90 degrees, from northwest-southeast west of Cobre (e.g. as in first photo) to northeast-southwest east of Cobre.



Northward view of the end-of-track at the east end of the Cobre turning wye (foreground), 1,200 feet east of the NN (1906) mainline. The CP/SP/UP is in the distance.





Westward view of the end-of-track at the east end of the Cobre turning wye, 1,500 feet east of the engine house (visible in upper left). The Pequop Range is in the distance.



Now we are on the south branch of the Cobre turning wye looking northwestward at the south branch (foreground) and the north branch of the of the wye (middle distance).



Northward view of the south branch of the Cobre turning wye (foreground), a few steps southwest of the previous location. The CP/SP/UP mainline is in the distance and the north branch of the wye is barely visible on this side of the mainline.



Now we are back at the NN (1906) mainline at Cobre looking northwestward at the NN mainline on the left and siding for the north branch of the wye on the right. The tracks are just starting to converge toward the viewer. Note the unvegetated yellow tailings and the same engine house as before.





Southward view of the NN (1906), a few steps south of the previous location. The NN mainline is in the left foreground, with its switch to the siding for the north branch of the wye. The south branch of the wye is coming in from the left mid-distance. The track on the right leads back to the engine house and joins the NN mainline, now a single track, in the sagebrush ahead.



Northwestward new of the NN (1906), a few steps south of the previous location, where the track that leads back to the engine house (visible in the distance) joins the NN mainline, now a single track.



Northward view of the NN (1906), a few steps south of the previous location. The NN single-track mainline is on the left and the switch for the track that leads back to the engine house (the switch in the previous photo) is barely visible below and just to the right of the engine house. The curved track to the right is the south branch of the turning wye.



Southwestward view of the NN (1906) mainline on the right and the south branch of the Cobre turning wye in the foreground.





Southward view of the connection between the NN (1906) mainline on the right and the south branch of the Cobre turning wye on the left. The two tracks converge to a single track that leads southward out of Cobre. This location is 1,700 feet south of the end-of-track at the north end of Cobre.



Northward view of the NN (1906), one mile south of Cobre. The distant hills are part of the Toano Range.



Southward view of the NN (1906), same location as previous, where a fill grade carries the line southward toward Ely, 140 miles down the line.