



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. 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, henceforth bounding the nation.

By far the biggest challenge for the CP was the crossing of the Sierra Nevada and the Pacific Crest via a summit tunnel at Donner Pass. The glaciated, pristine granite at the pass formed a solid wall that had to be penetrated with hand tools, animal power, and explosives. Adding to the challenge, heavy snows slowed and stopped winter work during the winters of 1865-66 and 1866-67. During the latter winter, to keep things moving while slowly carving a railroad grade through the mountains, Charles Crocker (the CP's overall construction manager and one of the "Big Four" owners of the CP) directed the tremendous undertaking of hauling and sledging three locomotives, forty cars, and material for 40 miles of track over 28 miles of mountain trails over Donner Pass and down into the Truckee River canyon, where light snow made grading and track work possible. The CP followed the Truckee River eastward from Truckee (this location) and the first locomotive from Truckee crossed the California-Nevada state line in December 1867 as work on Donner Pass continued. The first train passed through the 1,659-foot Donner Pass summit tunnel on June 18, 1868, and the following day the road was opened through Truckee (this location) to Reno, Nevada. 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 and northwest Utah to meet the UP less than year later.

Westward view of the Truckee station, built in 1900 by the Southern Pacific Railroad after the original CP-built depot, built in 1869, burned. Today, the station serves as Truckee's transit hub, Amtrak station, the Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce and Visitor's Center, as well as several private shops. Adjacent to the building is an old SP caboose (visible at far left) that houses the Truckee Railroad Museum with images, artifacts, and stories related to the first transcontinental railroad and logging railroads.

