



[Transcontinental Railroad](#)

In A Nutshell

On 10 May 1869, a final golden spike was hammered into the first American transcontinental railroad, a project that had cost hundreds of millions of dollars and required years of labor from tens of thousands of men. Connecting the Union Pacific (UP) with the Central Pacific (CP) was the single greatest feat of engineering in U.S. history, the culmination of dreaming, planning, building, and scamming on an unprecedented scale. The men who built the railroad lived one of the biggest stories of the nineteenth century, and their work would remake the American West, bind the country together economically and culturally, and redefine for many the very scope of human enterprise.

The transcontinental railroad was a powerful symbol of American ambition and ability, and in a story that runs from the highs of the West's great mountain ranges to the lows of the century's biggest financial scandal, we can learn a lot about the nature of American progress and where that progress was leading the country.

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Brain Snacks - Trivia

Violence was a fact of life in the Hell on Wheels towns that followed the Union Pacific's end of track. During the Hell on Wheels heyday of Cheyenne, Wyoming, gunfights were so common that the local paper took to running a column called "Last Night's Shootings." Surely one of the more bizarre items among the collections of American Museums is the scalp of the Englishman William Thompson that rests at the Union Pacific Railroad Museum in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Thompson was a telegraph repairman on a UP handcar that was derailed and ambushed by a group of Cheyenne. Thompson, shot in the arm and clubbed to the ground, kept quiet and still as his scalp was removed and then dropped by one of the Cheyenne attackers. Thompson managed to grab the scalp and eventually make his way back to a station for help. He arrived in Omaha with his scalp in hand, hoping in vain to have it surgically re-attached.

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