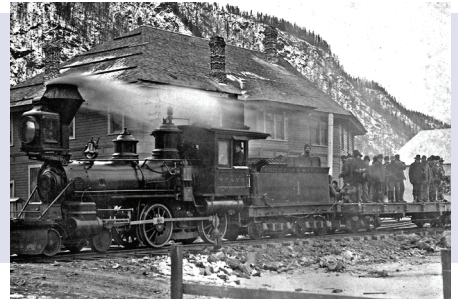


THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD

The Transcontinental Railroad and Collective Perseverance

Lesson Length: 45 Minutes

Grade Levels: Recommended for high school grades, though elementary and middle school teachers may be able to incorporate concepts from this lesson plan into their teaching



Overview

In this lesson, students examine the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad and the individuals who made it possible, including engineer Theodore Judah, the “Big Four” of the Central Pacific Railroad, and thousands of immigrant laborers. Students analyze how collective perseverance allowed Americans to complete a project many believed was impossible. They evaluate both the economic benefits and the human costs of the railroad’s construction. Through this example, students consider how long-term goals require sustained effort, cooperation, and sacrifice.

Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze the roles of government policy, private entrepreneurs, and immigrant labor in constructing the Transcontinental Railroad.
- Evaluate how collective perseverance among planners, financiers, and workers shaped the project’s completion.
- Explain how large infrastructure projects can produce economic growth while also creating significant social consequences.
- Evaluate a primary source within its historical context.
- Apply the concept of perseverance to collaborative goals in their own lives.

Historical Background

Before the railroad, travel from the East Coast to California could take several months by wagon across the continent or by ship around South America or through Panama. The discovery of gold in California in 1848 intensified demand for faster transportation and communication with the West Coast.

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railway Act, authorizing federal loans and large land grants to private companies to build a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to California. Construction began in 1863. The act also paired the railroad with a transcontinental telegraph line, further integrating communication across the continent.

Two companies built toward each other:

- The Central Pacific Railroad, associated with Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford, and Charles Crocker, built eastward from Sacramento.
- The Union Pacific Railroad built westward from Omaha, Nebraska.

The Central Pacific faced the enormous challenge of crossing the Sierra Nevada mountains, tunneling through granite and working in deep winter snow. Approximately 12,000 Chinese laborers—who made up a large majority of the Central Pacific workforce at peak construction—performed much of the dangerous blasting and tunneling work.

On May 10, 1869, the two rail lines met at Promontory Summit, Utah, where officials drove the ceremonial “Golden Spike.” The completed railroad reduced cross-country travel from months to roughly a week and transformed commerce, communication, and migration across the continent.

Primary Source

Leland Stanford, president of the Central Pacific Railroad, wrote to President Andrew Johnson in 1865:

“The greater portion of the laborers employed by us are Chinese, who constitute a hardworking, industrious class, performing a large share of the most difficult labor in the construction of the railroad.”

Teacher Note: This statement reflects contemporary recognition of Chinese workers’ contributions, while also leaving open questions about working conditions, wages, and public acknowledgment.

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Lesson Flow (45 Minutes)

Warm-Up (5 minutes)

Quick-write: “Would you attempt something most people believe is impossible? Why or why not?”

Historical Context (10 minutes)

Teacher presentation covering:

- Gold Rush and westward movement
- Pacific Railway Act and federal support
- Transcontinental telegraph
- Engineering challenges of the Sierra Nevadas
- Composition of the labor force, especially Chinese workers
- The Golden Spike ceremony

Primary Source Analysis (10 minutes)

Students annotate Stanford’s 1865 statement, identifying:

- What he emphasizes about Chinese workers
- Why he may highlight industriousness in a letter to the president
- What he leaves unaddressed about working conditions
- How recognition and reality may differ in historical memory

Small Group Discussion (10 minutes)

Students choose one perspective (Judah or a Chinese worker) and complete:

“Perseverance in this person’s situation meant...”

Whole-Class Discussion (10 minutes)

Discussion focuses on:

- National integration and economic change
- Benefits and costs of infrastructure
- Historical complexity
- How perseverance can be admirable even when outcomes are mixed
- Ways students can practice collective perseverance in civic life

Guiding Questions

Walk-In-The-Shoes

Choose one perspective:

You are Theodore Judah in the early 1860s.

- What keeps you pushing forward when most people believe the project is unrealistic?
- What risks do you take in seeking federal support and persuading investors and Congress?

You are a Chinese laborer blasting tunnels in the Sierra Nevada.

- What daily dangers do you face on steep cliffs, in tunnels, and in winter storms?
- Why might you continue despite low pay, harsh conditions, and discrimination?
- What does perseverance look like in your situation?

Observation

- Why was a transcontinental railroad considered especially important after the California Gold Rush?
- What role did federal land grants and government loans play in making the project possible?
- What geographic obstacles made construction especially difficult in the Sierra Nevadas?
- What does Stanford’s statement reveal about who performed the most dangerous labor and how that labor was publicly described?

Discussion

- How did the railroad change the American economy and strengthen national unity? Who benefited first from its completion?
- What costs did Chinese workers bear during construction, and what consequences did Native Americans experience as railroad expansion accelerated settlement and resource extraction?
- Can a project be both a major national achievement and a source of injustice at the same time? Explain your reasoning.
- How should historians weigh economic growth against human cost for different groups when evaluating large infrastructure projects, including the individual voluntary decisions by workers to work in dangerous conditions?
- What long-term goal in your life requires perseverance with others—on a team, in a family, or in your community?

Research Base and Source Documentation

Legislative and Government Sources

- National Archives, Pacific Railway Act - <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/pacific-railway-act>
- U.S. Senate Historical Overview of the Pacific Railway Act - <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/PacificRailwayActof1862.htm>

Chinese Labor and Historical Scholarship

- Utah Education Network primary source collection - <https://www.uen.org/transcontinentalrailroad/downloads/G7ChineseWorkersontheTCRR.pdf>
- Stanford University coverage of Chinese railroad workers - <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2019/04/giving-voice-to-chinese-railroad-workers>
- Chinese and the Iron Road (Stanford University Press excerpt) - <https://www.sup.org/books/asian-american-studies/chinese-and-iron-road/excerpt/introduction-excerpt>

Economic and Historical Context

- U.S. Census historical overview - <https://www.census.gov/about/history/stories/monthly/2023/may-2023.html>