



TITLE

THE CHINESE AND THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD: APPRECIATING THEIR ACHIEVEMENT 150 YEARS LATER

GRADE LEVEL: MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

DISCIPLINE: U.S. History, Civics

TOPIC: Immigration, Labor History; Westward expansion.

STANDARDS: Educating for American Democracy: Theme 2: Our Changing Landscape. UCLA Public History Initiative: United States History Content Standards Era 6: The Development of Industrial America; Standards 2, 3: Massive immigration after 1870.

OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to:

- Create a fuller, more complete picture of the building of the transcontinental railroad and the important role Chinese workers played in its construction.
- To provide insight into the lives of the Chinese workers: how they lived and worked to overcome both cultural and physical obstacles to help build one of the most monumental engineering achievements in American history.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- The building of the transcontinental railroad is one of the most monumental engineering feats in American history and served to unite the east and west coasts of the nation. How did the railroad get built?

KIT INCLUDES:

- . Background Reading for Educator
- . Academic Readings
- . Historical Sources
- . PowerPoint Slides
- . Video Links
- . Activities

FINAL ASSESSMENT TYPE:

- . Comparative Essay: "In many ways, the Railroad was the Internet of the 19th century."
- . James Meigs, Editor-In-Chief, Popular Mechanics.
- . *Essay question:*
- . What do you think of the comparison James Meigs makes of the Transcontinental Railroad to the internet?
- . In what ways is he correct and how are the two events different in their impact?

MATERIALS NEEDED:

. All materials are embedded within the lesson

CLASSROOM HOURS NEEDED:

90 minutes or 2 class periods

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BACKGROUND:

Ever since Lewis and Clark set out to determine what the U.S. actually acquired from the Louisiana Purchase (1803), Americans dreamed of ways to expand and connect the eastern and western regions of the country. Development of the railroads and the creation of rail networks during the 1830s and 1840s shortened travel and promoted rapid commercial development east of the Mississippi. Further acquisitions of Texas and other formerly Mexican territory on the west coast spurred interest in the 1840s to build a continuous rail line extending to the West Coast. Perhaps such a railroad could help to diminish the sectionalism that was threatening the stability of the nation. However, the 1850s saw sectionalism grow ever stronger. As the debates over slavery intensified. Nonetheless, in 1862, after the civil war had begun, president Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific railway act that set in motion the plan for building the first transcontinental railroad: two companies, the central Pacific starting in Sacramento, California, and the Union Pacific, starting on the Iowa-Nebraska border, would work towards each other.

Work on the railroad was sporadic until the end of the civil war. Then efforts increased rapidly and the need for labor became intense. Charles Crocker, one of the “big four” railroad developers who co-founded the central Pacific railroad, at first opposed suggestions of hiring Chinese workers, but became convinced that, indeed, a plan to bring Chinese workers over from China could prove beneficial - after all, hadn't the Chinese built a great wall? In 1865 about 4,000 Chinese were employed on the railroad; in 1868, it is estimated as many as 12,000 were working at one time. Overall, perhaps as many as 20,000 Chinese workers helped build the transcontinental railroad over the duration of its construction.

In 2021, the Donner Summit Tunnel was designated by the department of the interior and the national park service as being in danger of being lost, the first step towards recognition of the tunnels as a national historic landmark (NHL). Historic and archaeological work is ongoing to further that goal.

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ACTIVITIES:

- 1) Introduce the subject with the first [four slides](#): May 10, 1869 “Done,” followed by the 3 images of the joining of the two railroad tracks.

Have students do a close study of each photo. This can be done with a small group getting one photo each or as a whole class exercise. For guidance on how to analyze photos, go to the National Archives for photo analysis worksheet: [Archives Photo Analysis Worksheet](#)

- 2) Discuss as a class: All photos are about one fact - the railroads were joined that day - but what story does each one tell? How are they the same and different?

- 3) As further background, explore the intersection of cultural geography and history, have students investigate the reasons why Chinese had come to the United States in the first place.

-What was going on in China at the time of the first migrations to the United States?

-Why would the Chinese choose America over other places?

- 4) What work did the Chinese do when they first came? How were they received by people who were already here? Several of the Resources listed at the end are useful for this activity; however, one, below, addresses these questions more directly: New York Times, Great Job on the Railroad. Now Go Back to China

- 5) Have students create a timeline of the building of the railroad from the time of Lincoln’s signing of the Act to its completion at Promontory, Utah.

- 6) Using other photos from the slide show, have students research information about the living conditions (work camps) and work obstacles faced by workers to build the railroad. Specifically, bridges and tunnels (and the use of explosives), weather conditions, competition with the opposing railroad, and substandard wages (the Chinese staged a brief but important strike in 1867) all posed major challenges. The Resource List gives websites from which students can conduct much of the research, e.g. the FAQs from the Stanford University Chinese Railroad Workers Project website provides accurate information and attempts to filter out legend from what the historical and archeological evidence reveals.



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ASSESSMENT OPTION:

To take the lesson beyond completion of the activities above, consider the following:

For further research and areas to explore (see resources below), look into these questions:

- 1) Once the railroad work was completed, what happened to all the workers?
- 2) Because so few Chinese women were able to come to the U.S., what do you think the consequences were for the Chinese who were already here?
- 3) In 1882, the U.S. instituted the Chinese Exclusion Act which denied entry to the U.S. for most Chinese and denied citizenship for those already here. Find out why this law came about and what positions were taken as the legislation was being debated.
- 4) What were some of the consequences of the Chinese Exclusion Act?
- 5) What work is being done today to preserve the stories and the historical evidence of the work done by the Chinese workers on the transcontinental railroad?

RESOURCES:

[Linda Hall Library, History of Railroad Technology The Transcontinental Railroad - Linda Hall Library](#)

[Transcontinental Railroad - Construction, Competition & Impact - HISTORY](#)

[PBS: The American Experience: Reports from the End of Line Transcontinental Railroad: Reports from the End of the Track | American Experience | Official Site | PBS](#)

[New York Times, "Great Job on the Railroad. Now Go Back to China"](#)

[Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum Dot.Dot.Dot., Golden Spike Ceremony - Transcontinental Railroad](#)

[Legacy: U.S. Forest Service: The Summit Tunnel, the most stunning achievement of the building of the TCR, as seen through the eyes of one of the descendants of a Chinese railroad worker Legacy](#)

["Racists Kicked My Chinese Ancestors Out..." - The Washington Post](#)

[Chinese Historical Society of America, Work of Giants](#)

[NBC News, "Thousands Gather to Reclaim Chinese Workers History"](#)

[Pacific Link, Lesson Plans](#)

[Curriculum Projects - The Transcontinental Railroad: Transforming California and the Nation](#)

[California Through My Lens](#)

[Chinese Railroad Workers Project of North America](#)

[Shoshi Parks, Smithsonian Magazine, Jan. 12, 2022](#)

[What Archaeologists Are Learning About...](#)