

Geography and History Activity

Transcontinental Railroads: Settling the West

By the mid-1800s, the Canadian and U.S. governments were eager to expand and claim the riches in their western territories. The trip across the overland trails followed by settlers could take four to six months, however, and were treacherous on foot or by wagon. Even on the East Coast, a stagecoach trip between large cities, such as Montreal and Toronto, took at least 36 hours. The most reliable route—taking a ship around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America—could take half a year. With the success of steam-powered locomotives in the 1830s, forward-thinking leaders of both countries began making plans for a transcontinental railroad.

The Union and Central Pacific

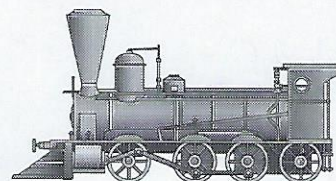
Demand for a transcontinental railroad in the United States increased when the western territories were acquired from Mexico in 1848, and with the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Many states lobbied for the right to have the transcontinental railroad built across their territory. The decision of where to build the transcontinental railroad was delayed by debate over the future of slavery in newly acquired territories. Finally, in 1862 the U.S. Congress authorized the Union Pacific Railroad to build a rail line westward from Omaha, Nebraska, across the Great Plains. The Central Pacific Railroad was authorized to build its part of the railroad eastward from Sacramento, California, over the Sierra Nevada. These two rail lines raced to see who could lay the most track. They met at Promontory, Utah, in 1869.

Building the railways across the West was dangerous and backbreaking work. The men who laid the tracks faced more than 2,000 miles of plains, deserts, rivers, and mountains. Workers were often injured or killed in rockslides and gunpowder explosions as they worked to level the land and tunnel through mountainsides. Constant exposure to extreme weather meant the workers suffered from sunstroke and frostbite. A significant number of the workers were Chinese laborers, who suffered tremendous prejudice in addition to the other dangers.

The Trans-Canada Line

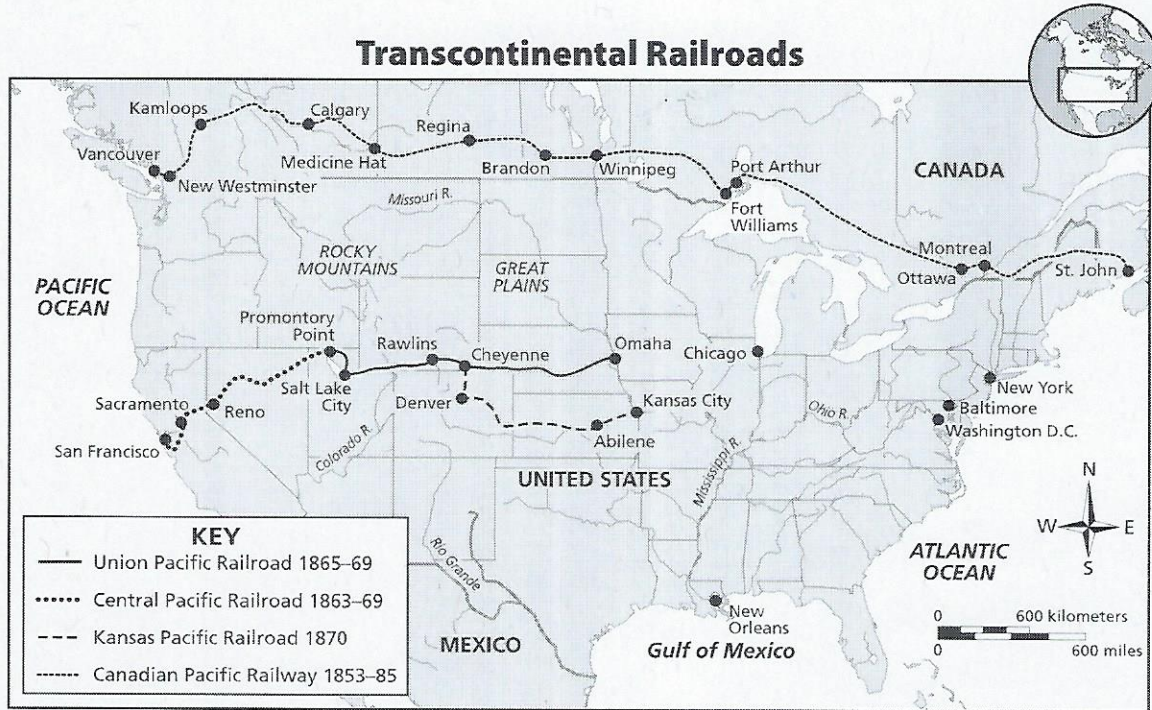
In 1867 four provinces united to become the Dominion of Canada. Fearing that Americans would move into the far western colony of British Columbia, the Canadian government began building the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1882. Workers from the east had to hack their way through the Canadian Shield and fill in boggy areas. Workers in British Columbia blasted through mountains and built bridges over steep canyons. Chinese laborers played a major role in building the railroad, as they had in the United States. Completed in 1885, the trans-Canadian railroad unified the country and made goods and services easier to exchange.

A trip across the United States or Canada, which had previously taken 149 days, was now possible in just 6 days.



Geography and History Activity

continued



Applying Geography to History

Directions: Read the information about the transcontinental railroads and examine the map. Then answer the questions below.

1. Calculating How long did a trip across the North American continent take before the railroad was built? How many days did a transcontinental railroad trip take?

2. Explaining What route did ships take from New York to California? Approximately how long did the trip take?

3. Identifying What invention in the early 1800s made the railroad an efficient way to travel?

4. Speculating Why do you think the debate over slavery in the United States delayed the building of a transcontinental railroad?

5. Analyzing Visuals Study the lengths and routes of the Central Pacific rail line and the Union Pacific rail line. Which company built the longer portion of the transcontinental railroad? Explain why.

6. Mapping Activity Use an outline map of North and South America to trace the route sailing ships took from a U.S. city on the East Coast to a U.S. city on the West Coast. Label the cities, Cape Horn, and the Isthmus of Panama. Then measure the route.