

## FEATURE

# 150th Anniversary of the Golden Spike Ceremony - Marking the Completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad

Remarks Prepared for Delivery by  
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150th Anniversary of the Golden Spike Ceremony  
Promontory Summit, Utah

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<https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/150th-anniversary-golden-spike-ceremony-marking-completion-first-transcontinental>



*Photograph by Andrew J. Russell. The celebration marking the completion of the first transcontinental railroad lines at Promontory Summit, Utah, on May 10, 1869,*

Today “at the 150th anniversary of the Golden Spike Ceremony marking the completion of the transcontinental railroad” is a day to

commemorate the achievement of the railroads and railroad workers who risked everything to make the Transcontinental Railroad a reality.



*Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao (image credit: DOT) May 10, 2019 at Promontory, Utah*

The Transcontinental Railroad was a tremendous feat of engineering, innovation and manpower that was key to unleashing the economic prosperity of the United States for generations.

Within three years of its completion, trains could travel from New York City to San Francisco in just one week. Prior to that, travelers endured up to 6 months or more of dangerous travel by ship or covered wagon to cross the continent.

The ability to move people and goods across the continent, at much reduced time and lower cost, led to explosive economic growth. The benefits were felt not only in the big coastal cities, but in the rural interior, which gained access to new markets. Within ten years of completion, the intercontinental railroads were

shipping \$50 million of freight from coast to coast each year.

The act of building the transcontinental railroad was transformational.

The government provided land and other resources to encourage private sector investment in the railroads. Innovation and planning guided the project. Standard gauge track was adopted on a national basis. Telegraph lines were built along the track right of way. Nitroglycerin gradually replaced less powerful black powder when blasting tunnels through the Sierra mountains. The railroad workers became so skilled that a legendary team of workers built 10 miles of track in a single day.

Today, we pay special tribute to the diverse workforce that built this seminal project.

^ Civil war veterans from both the North and the South worked together on the transcontinental railroad, along with Mormon settlers, African-Americans, native Americans, and, of course, Chinese laborers.

Building from the East, the Union Pacific Railroad hired Irish immigrants to lay track across the Great Plains.

Building from the West, the Central Pacific Railroad hired 15,000 workers, of whom 12,000 or more were Chinese immigrants.

The Chinese workers blasted and chiseled their way through the rugged Sierra Nevada mountains. Using manual hammer drills, pick axes and explosives, they dug 15 tunnels through hard granite. Snow fell so deeply in the mountains that they had to build roofs over 37 miles of track so supply trains could make it through. The conditions were merciless, dangerous and harsh.

An estimated 500-1,000 Chinese workers lost their lives.

But the Chinese workers persevered and played a key role in building one of the greatest infrastructure projects in the world. Their

achievement is even more poignant in light of the fact that many of the Chinese laborers did not have the opportunity to bring their families with them or to become citizens of the United States. Many of their names are lost to history. Their families in China may never have known what became of their loved ones.

As the first U. S. Secretary of Transportation of Chinese ancestry, I have the unique and moving opportunity to fully acknowledge and recognize the contributions and sacrifices of the laborers of Chinese heritage to the construction of the transcontinental railroad.

This great history, which helped transform our country, was made possible by a diverse group of brave and determined workers. The railroad laborers and innovators of 150 years ago who helped unite our country is every bit as consequential as the digital revolution that binds the world together today.

Today, we remember the estimated 12,000 or more Chinese laborers and all the laborers who sacrifice greatly to make this great dream a reality, the benefits of which America is still enjoying today.