

Hard to Track: Who Exactly Benefited from constructing the Transcontinental Railroad?

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As the 19th century progressed and white Americans continued pushing westward, a looming issue began to arise: how would America stay connected with such great distances between its citizens? That question was answered in 1827 with the introduction of the steam locomotive. Soon enough, trains would be running up and down the east coast, but the railroads' greatest feat was still yet to come. About thirty years later, in 1863, work began on the industry's biggest project yet, a rail line spanning the horizontal length of the United States. The project lasted six years, ending in 1869, and became recognized as the "Transcontinental Railroad." Over the years, reports have surfaced of miserable working conditions and disputes with indigenous peoples that often ended in hundreds of deaths. These atrocities raise the question: was the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad beneficial to everyone in America? Obviously the railroad was beneficial to its owners and merchants who used the lines to reach a greater number of consumers, but were there people that were negatively impacted by the building of the Transcontinental Railroad? The Transcontinental Railroad is held in two vastly different perceptions depending on the group asked. Due to the unethical ways it was constructed, indigenous peoples, railroad construction workers and persons barred from riding the train were negatively impacted by the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. At the same time, railroad owners, manufacturers and citizens of the United States benefited from being allowed to ride the train.

An extremely expensive project, estimates range upwards of a hundred million dollars at the time of construction for both railway lines that constituted the Transcontinental Railroad.<sup>1</sup> This ambitious undertaking was necessitated by America's westward expansion. Beginning in the early 19th century by claiming states such as Ohio, Illinois, and as far west as Missouri, the

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<sup>1</sup> "Transcontinental Railroad Bonds and Land Grants," Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum, accessed December 15, 2023, <http://cprh.org/Museum/FAQs.html#Cost>.

United States was expanding its borders.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. offered incentives to travelers willing to settle down in these states, such as money or free land.<sup>3</sup> Most of the expansion in the early 1800s was east of the Mississippi River, but in the mid 19th century settlers started to cross the Mississippi.<sup>4</sup> There were two key components of the westward expansion across the Mississippi, the first being a new white American ideology called Manifest Destiny. This ideology started appearing in American culture after the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804-1806, and was given its name when it appeared in a painting in 1845.<sup>5</sup> Manifest Destiny was centered in the belief that American settlers were destined to move across and conquer the “unclaimed land” westward. America also used this ideology to later take parts of Mexico — including Texas and part of California — as well as many Pacific islands.<sup>6</sup> Not long after Manifest Destiny had begun, gold was discovered in California in 1848.<sup>7</sup> This expedited the speed at which white Americans were traveling westward. From a little less than a hundred thousand residents two years after gold was discovered, California’s population increased over threefold just ten years later to around 380,000 in 1860.<sup>8</sup> Due to the mass influx of settlers far westward, there was a larger demand for a quick transportation method between coasts and the settled land in between. The fastest method of stagecoach took around half a year to complete, so it was really only useful for moving houses.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “American Statehood Map,” Wikimedia Commons, accessed December 15, 2023, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/74/US\\_states\\_by\\_date\\_of\\_statehood\\_RWB\\_dates.svg/1024px-US\\_states\\_by\\_date\\_of\\_statehood\\_RWB\\_dates.svg.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/74/US_states_by_date_of_statehood_RWB_dates.svg/1024px-US_states_by_date_of_statehood_RWB_dates.svg.png).

<sup>3</sup> “Homestead Act of 1862,” National Parks Service, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/home/learn/historyculture/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> “American Statehood Map”

<sup>5</sup> David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, “Manifest Destiny,” Encyclopædia Britannica, October 17, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> “The California Gold Rush,” PBS, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Twelfth Census of the United States,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/bulletins/demographic/10-population-ca.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Mintz and Sarah McNeil, “Building the Transcontinental Railroad,” Digital History, accessed December 15, 2023, [https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3147](https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=2&psid=3147).

Luckily, during the period of westward expansion, there was also a new technological invention brought over from England, the locomotive. This would be the answer to the question of new transportation methods. By 1850, or about the same time gold was discovered in California, there were already 9,000 miles of track laid in the Eastern United States.<sup>10</sup> Rail systems were expanding at an extraordinarily fast pace. Instead of relying on two horses carrying a stagecoach, the fastest steam engines were able to reach speeds of up to 80 mph by 1850.<sup>11</sup> In fact, before the transcontinental railroad was even an idea, people assumed trains would be the main way of transportation. For example, the painting of Manifest Destiny features a train not far behind the settlers in stagecoach, basically explaining the next step of settlement was building rail lines to connect to the rest of the United States.<sup>12</sup> With the newfound speeds of the train, settlers believed they could lessen travel times to even under a week.<sup>13</sup>

After the massive influx of people to California and being announced by Abraham Lincoln a year prior in 1862, the Transcontinental Railroad began construction in 1863.<sup>14</sup> The plan was to join the Central Pacific and Union Pacific rail lines to connect Sacramento and Omaha, where passengers could transfer to other lines.<sup>15</sup> During the first couple years of work, there were large labor shortages. This was because construction contractors were hiring only white workers, most of whom were Irish and some German immigrants. In 1965, two years after construction began, there was a worker deficit of around 3,200 as there was enough work for

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<sup>10</sup> "Freight Railroad Chronology," Association of American Railroads, October 13, 2023, <https://www.aar.org/chronology-of-americas-freight-railroads/>.

<sup>11</sup> Rob, "How Fast Were Trains In The 1800s?," Train Conductor HQ, September 13, 2022, <https://www.trainconductorhq.com/how-fast-were-trains-in-the-1800s/>.

<sup>12</sup> David Heidler

<sup>13</sup> Steven Mintz, "Building the Transcontinental Railroad"

<sup>14</sup> "The Transcontinental Railroad," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 15, 2023, [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures\\_of\\_congress/text/page15\\_text.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures_of_congress/text/page15_text.html).

<sup>15</sup> "Westward Expansion," Ducksters, accessed December 15, 2023, [https://www.ducksters.com/history/westward\\_expansion/first\\_transcontinental\\_railroad.php](https://www.ducksters.com/history/westward_expansion/first_transcontinental_railroad.php).

4,000 men but only 800 were hired.<sup>16</sup> This shortage made contractors reconsider their white only policy and eventually abandon it to hire Chinese immigrants. These workers were still mistreated, however. Chinese workers were paid \$5 less a month, and had to pay for room and board unlike their Irish counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Railroad construction did not stop at employing 4,000, eventually reaching a peak of over 15,000 workers.<sup>18</sup> This was seen as a benefit to many Americans, as on the surface level it created many new jobs and boosted the economy for an increasing white American population. However, more than 80% of these jobs were filled by immigrant laborers coming in from China on fixed contracts. The Chinese immigrants were often not even given citizenship to the United States, but came to do work for a couple years and then return home with their earnings.<sup>19</sup> Not only was money from the Transcontinental Railroad leaving the United States, the dollars these workers received were not stimulating the local economy. Therefore, it can be disputed if these 15,000 new jobs actually benefited the economy.

Something that cannot be argued is that these immigrant laborers were often faced with long hours, brutal working conditions, and were heavily exploited. The most blatant example of the exploitation workers faced was when they went on strike to protest for higher wages. Instead of giving the workers higher wages, the Transcontinental Railroad owners halted their food supply.<sup>20</sup> Not only was this measure manipulative, but it seems almost illegal. The workers could not do anything other than continue construction because otherwise they were stranded in the

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<sup>16</sup> "Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad," PBS, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tccr-workers-central-union-pacific-railroad/>.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Mintz and Sarah McNeil, "Chinese Immigrants and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad," Digital History, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/voices/china1.cfm>.

<sup>18</sup> "Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad"

<sup>19</sup> James D. Phelan, "Why the Chinese Should Be Excluded," *The North American Review* 173, no. 540 (1901): 663–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25105245>.

<sup>20</sup> "Forgotten Workers," National Museum of American History, Accessed November 3, 2023, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/american-enterprise/new-perspectives/forgotten-workers>.

middle of nowhere and would die if they weren't fed by the Railroad company. This example does not even mention that the workers often labored upwards of 10 hours a day for six days a week which is more than one and a half times the standard forty hour work week we know today.<sup>21</sup> Not only does a sixty hour work week reduce personal time, but it also leads to exhaustion and makes workers more prone to injury.<sup>22</sup> The grueling effects of these weeks helps explain why over a thousand workers died during the production of the Transcontinental Railroad.<sup>23</sup>

Facing the brunt of the negative effects of construction were the Chinese workers. Not only did they constitute most of the workforce, and therefore most of the deaths, but they were discriminated against on the job. There were many instances of discrimination such as being paid less than the white workers and not being considered 'worthy' of some jobs,<sup>24</sup> but it was also felt afterwards with anti-Asian legislation being passed such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>25</sup> Because of racist legislation and on being banned from many stores due to their skin, many racial minorities were negatively impacted by the railroad, as whites now had yet another advantage of being allowed to use the railroad while others weren't.

Because of the hard work, the Transcontinental railroad was completed in just six years.<sup>26</sup> This feat was considered one of the greatest accomplishments in the 19th century United States, but it came with even more consequences than just the deaths of the workers. The surrounding environment was often destroyed and to build the railroad. Materials such as wood were used to

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Mintz, "Chinese Immigrants and the Building of the Transcontinental Railroad"

<sup>22</sup> "The Pros and Cons of a 60-Hour Workweek," Indeed, February 3, 2023, <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/finding-a-job/60-hour-work-week>.

<sup>23</sup> "Chinese Labor and the Iron Road," National Parks Service, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/chinese-labor-and-the-iron-road.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> "Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad"

<sup>25</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act#>.

<sup>26</sup> "Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad," Library of Congress, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://guides.loc.gov/this-month-in-business-history/may/completion-transcontinental-railroad>.

build tracks and bridges. These materials could either be brought in which would take a long time and be costly to transport, or they could be taken from the areas surrounding the build site. Railroad companies decided to do the latter.<sup>27</sup> In addition, more wood was spent on temporary shelters to house builders. Because of the speed at which the railroad was constructed, it often wasn't put together in a long lasting way, and parts of the track needed repairs within a couple years which increased the environmental destruction within those areas.<sup>28</sup>

Environmental issues weren't the only external issues the railroad caused. The biggest conflict caused by the construction of the railroads was with the indigenous. Not only did the railroad cross over indigenous land, but it symbolized more movement westwards. The minor disputes between the Sioux tribe and the U.S. government finally heated up enough in late 1864, and soldiers went into a Sioux encampment near Sand Creek and killed over 150 Sioux even after they had surrendered. The few that escaped told other tribes about the pointless slaughter of their brethren and there was retaliation.<sup>29</sup> This came in the form of a raid on Julesburg, CO. The town was almost entirely slaughtered, telegraph wires were cut, and buildings burnt down.<sup>30</sup> The U.S. army responded to this, and attacked the indigenous back.<sup>31</sup> This conflict was not necessarily part of the railroad, but it caused the construction crews to be wary of encounters with indigenous, specifically the Sioux. Their fears became reality in 1866 when a group of Sioux attacked a train and led a group of soldiers to slaughter.<sup>32</sup> While this didn't happen on the Transcontinental Railroad itself, the event caused many workers on the train to quit for fear they

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<sup>27</sup> "Changing the Landscape," Digital Public Library of America, Accessed November 3, 2023, <https://dp.la/exhibitions/transcontinental-railroad/changing-landscape>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> "Sand Creek," American Battlefield Trust, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/sand-creek>.

<sup>30</sup> "Native Americans and the Transcontinental Railroad," Public Broadcasting Service, Accessed November 3, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

would be the next target of Sioux frustration.<sup>33</sup> Other than that, there was not too much fighting with the indigenous, mostly because working crews were well protected and had so many people that it was a tough task for a small indigenous group to take. However, there was one group of indigenous people that welcomed the railroad construction crews: the Pawnee. They helped defend people constructing the railroad, and in return they were offered rides by construction workers.<sup>34</sup> These Pawnee soldiers were also another big reason why the Sioux did not attack. In addition, since the railroad crossed over indigenous land, it could also interfere with the native animals' natural crossings and migration routes. These types of changes could be detrimental to the longevity and survival of indigenous groups, as some seasons depended solely on the presence of one or a few types of animals, for instance Bison.<sup>35</sup>

Once completed, the Transcontinental Railroad offered many benefits to society. The biggest was that it allowed goods from California, such as gold, to be better shared with the Eastern United States and vice versa. A trip that originally took almost half a year by stagecoach could now be completed in under a week.<sup>36</sup> Travel between the East and the West used to be only reserved for moving, it was a big decision and there was pretty much no going back, even if the West wasn't as expected. Now, there was the option to at least plan a trip out to the west coast before moving there for sure just to see if it was the right place to move. Before trains it just wasn't really an option with almost a full year round trip at the very least.

People were not the only thing these locomotives carried. One of the biggest benefits from the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad was the ease of shipping products around the United States. Not only were items able to ship quicker, but firms could reach a greater

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> "People and Bison," National Parks Service, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bison/people.htm#>.

<sup>36</sup> Steven Mintz, "Building the Transcontinental Railroad"



audience of people. Especially for firms with perishable items, the Transcontinental Railroad was a major help in boosting the number of people who were able to receive their products. This opened a lot of new opportunities for small businesses, most of whom could only sell to a small area and did not have any viable means of transporting their goods far distances. With the added benefits of receiving items quicker and more businesses able to ship their products around, the Transcontinental Railroad was a boost to the economy on practically every front.

When all was said and done, America's GDP rose by an incredible 33% just from the existence of the Transcontinental Railroad and the products it carried.<sup>37</sup> This one technological innovation may have been the greatest increase in American GDP ever. Not only did the completion boost GDP, but the connectedness of America showed its industrial abilities and growing power as a nation. It was no longer a nation divided by plains and mountains — it was now *e publius unum*.<sup>38</sup> While the jobs created from the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad itself can be viewed skeptically in terms of its economic and ethical impact, the railways still kept many employees after completion.<sup>39</sup> These jobs were generally far less physically demanding, so there was less ethical question about whether or not the jobs were having a positive impact on society.

In addition, railway lines such as the Transcontinental Railroad helped create the vacation economy which helps fund many small towns across the United States to this day. Originating in New York as a way to get out of the city, residents would take a short train ride north to visit the

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<sup>37</sup> "Railroads, Reallocation, and the Rise of American Manufacturing," Becker Friedman Institute at UChicago, March 2, 2020, <https://bfi.uchicago.edu/insight/research-summary/railroads-reallocation-and-the-rise-of-american-manufacturing/>.

<sup>38</sup> Out of many, one - "E Pluribus Unum Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/e%20pluribus%20unum>.

<sup>39</sup> "Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad"

Adirondack mountains.<sup>40</sup> While this trip wasn't nearly as long as the Transcontinental Railroad, increases in train technology and to make trips quicker and less treacherous meant that more citizens began taking time off to travel, with the Transcontinental Railroad being an important connecting part of the trip.

The question of if the railroad was a benefit or hindrance to society is impossible to answer. What can be answered is who would agree that it's a benefit, and who would say it's a hindrance. First, the most obvious benefactors of the Transcontinental Railroad were the owners and managers of the railroad. These people were high up in the company line and did not have to participate in any of the backbreaking labors of construction, underpaying the workers that did and taking all of the profits from those cheap wages for themselves. Secondly, business owners in both the eastern and western United States benefited greatly from the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. These business owners were now able to ship their products elsewhere, businesses could now sell to people who were too far away to be worthwhile before construction. This allowed citizens to purchase new and cheaper goods than before, which helped bolster the average amount people could afford. The new standard of living for the average citizen of the United States grew. The third benefactor of the Transcontinental Railroad were these citizens of the United States. They were now able to travel faster from coast to coast and have a better standard of living from more affordability. Those who were able to use the train to its full advantage, citizens of the United States, were often limited to whites. Due to racial segregation, even after the civil war, nonwhites were often discriminated against and often left worse off from the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. In addition to minorities, the native peoples were negatively impacted by the railroad. Natives lost both parts of their land

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<sup>40</sup> Tony Perrottet, "Where Was the Birthplace of the American Vacation?," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 1, 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/where-was-the-birthplace-of-the-american-vacation-5520155/>.

and for some their lives when they went back and forth with retaliations against the government. The railroad stretched in a straight line for thousands of miles and interfered with animal crossings and the stability of their food supply. Finally, it hurt many of the people who built the railroad, especially those who could not get the benefits from it once construction was finished. Once finished, the white Irish immigrants who built the railroad could ride it. However, the Chinese were still negatively regarded in society and were mistreated even though they were the reason it was finished so fast. It's disappointing to see that many of the workers who helped achieve one of 19th century America's greatest accomplishments ended up worse off because of it. As great an accomplishment as the Transcontinental Railroad was for America, it must be recognized that it wasn't seen as a benefit to many minority groups of Americans and only furthered the gap between the races.

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