



TOPIC: The Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers

GRADES: 7 - 12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

The construction of the 1,776-mile Transcontinental Railroad was established by the federal government's Pacific Railway Act of 1862. The Central Pacific Railroad (West, breaking ground in Sacramento, California) and the Union Pacific Railroad (East, breaking ground in Omaha, Nebraska) took on the challenge to link travel between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. From 1863 to 1869, Central Pacific hired roughly 15,000 Chinese laborers—enduring long journeys across the ocean from China to California—to complete the Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass. This was exhausting work, with Chinese workers shoveling twenty pounds of rock over 400 times a day to make their way through 1,659 feet of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to complete the project.

The Transcontinental Railroad shaped America in countless ways by facilitating domestic commerce and international trade. During the 1880s, the freight the railroad transported was worth around \$50 million per year. The railroad also connected the scattered cities and towns across the West, making it easier for immigrants to settle across the land.

Chinese workers served as the major labor force on the Central Pacific Railroad construction (roughly 90% of crews), but were treated differently. White workers were paid \$35 per month including food and accommodation; however, Chinese workers received only \$26 without any food, accommodation, or basic insurance. The Chinese workers held an eight-day silent protest against the wage disparity and working conditions, leading to a decrease in both extreme working hours and whippings. Over time, company leadership slowly improved the pay of the Chinese laborers.

During the 19th century, one week of pay in America was equivalent to several months of wages in China. With minimal pay, Chinese workers were able to emerge as a new class of aristocrats in the Guangdong province of China. They saved their earnings and sent this remittance back abroad, improving the living conditions of their families overseas and supporting the 1911 Chinese Revolution which established the Republic of China (1912-1949). After the railroad was completed, many Chinese returned home with their new fortune, while others stayed and persevered against exclusion by American society, seeking new financial opportunities. The contributions of Chinese workers to the Transcontinental Railroad have been overlooked by American history—noticeably their absence in the photo at the Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869. Only recently have the Chinese railroad workers been recognized, including being inducted into the Labor Hall of Honor by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2014.

VOCABULARY

- Remittance: The transfer of money sent by migrants to family members and relatives in their home countries.
- Golden Spike: During the “Golden Spike Ceremony” on May 10, 1869, the rail lines of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific were joined at Promontory Summit, Utah. Of the 15,000 Chinese workers that comprised almost ninety percent of the Central Pacific labor force, none were visible in the iconic photograph taken on that day.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What purpose did the Transcontinental Railroad serve for the U.S. economy at that time?
- Why were Chinese workers needed to build the Transcontinental Railroad?
- Why did the Chinese workers want to come to the U.S. to build the railroad?
- Why do you think the Chinese were not included in the completion ceremony photograph at Promontory Point? Why were they not acknowledged for their work?
- What types of jobs do immigrant and migrant workers take on today?
- Why do immigrant and migrant workers continue to come to the United States today?

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: The impact of the Transcontinental Railroad

In 1867, Chinese railroad workers who were working their way through the rocky terrain of the Sierras, laid down their tools and went on strike for better working conditions.

Ask students to research this, noting:

- What were the differences in pay and treatment between white workers and the Chinese workers?
- What were some of the demands that the Chinese laborers were making?
- What did the railroad director do in retaliation of the strike?
- Were the strikers concessions met? Was this work stoppage/strike successful for the Chinese? Why? Why not?

Have students share their findings in a class discussion, addressing the questions above.

Activity 2: Mapping the Transcontinental Railroad

“[Utilizing the Geography of Chinese Workers Building the Transcontinental Railroad](#)” by the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University and the “[Exploring the Path of Chinese Railroad Workers](#)” by the 1882 Foundation, have students research key historic sites from the railway path.

Assign each student one of the sites - such as Sacramento, Bloomer Cut, Summit Tunnel - and have students explore the challenges and obstacles that workers had to overcome in the creation of the Transcontinental Railroad. Have students share presentations on the sites in class.

Activity 3: Present day immigrant and migrant workers

Ask students to research contemporary immigrant and migrant workers.

- What type of jobs do immigrant and migrant workers take on today?
- Does the U.S. need immigrant and migrant workers today? Why or why not?
- Why do immigrant and migrant workers continue to come to the United States?
- How might immigrant and migrant workers contribute to their home country while working abroad?
- How do immigrant and migrant workers contribute to the U.S. economy?

FURTHER INFORMATION

- “[Utilizing the Geography of Chinese Workers Building the Transcontinental Railroad](#)” by the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University
- “[Exploring the Path of Chinese Railroad Workers](#)” 1882 Foundation



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