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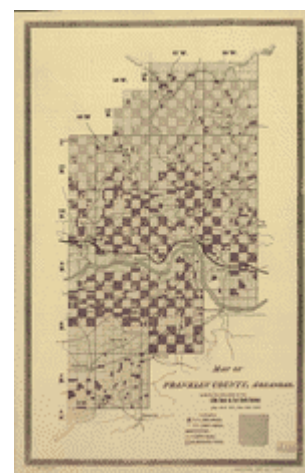
The Transcontinental Railroad

The possibility of railroads connecting the Atlantic and Pacific coasts was discussed in the Congress even before the treaty with England which settled the question of the Oregon boundary in 1846.^[8] Chief promoter of a transcontinental railroad was Asa Whitney, a New York merchant active in the China trade who was obsessed with the idea of a railroad to the Pacific. In January 1845 he petitioned Congress for a charter and grant of a sixty-mile strip through the public domain to help finance construction.^[9]

Whitney suggested the use of Irish and German immigrant labor, which was in great abundance at the time. Wages were to be paid in land, thus ensuring that there would be settlers along the route to supply produce to and become patrons of the completed line. The failure of Congress to act on Whitney's proposal was mainly due to the vigorous opposition of Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, who favored a western route originating at St. Louis.

In 1849 Whitney published a booklet to promote his scheme entitled *Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*. It was accompanied by an outline map of North America which shows the route of his railroad from Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, across the Rocky Mountains north of South Pass. An alternate route to the south of the pass joined the main line at the Salmon River and continued to Puget Sound. Proposed lines also extended from St. Louis to San Francisco and from Independence, Missouri, to New Mexico and the Arkansas River. This is one of the earliest promotional maps submitted to Congress and was, according to its author, conceived as early as 1830^[10].

Although Congress failed to sanction his plan, Whitney made the



A large-scale grant map dated 1893, showing the alternate sections of public land granted to the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railway. Such maps were used by land speculators to advertise railroad lands for sale to the public.

Pacific railroad one of the great public issues of the day. The acquisition of California following the Mexican War opened the way for other routes to the coast. The discovery of gold, the settlement of the frontier, and the success of the eastern railroads increased interest in building a railroad to the Pacific.^[11]

Railroads were also needed in the West to provide better postal service, as had been developed in the East, by designating railroad lines "post roads" in 1838. Strengthened by other proposals such as those of Hartwell Carver in 1849 and of Edwin F. Johnson in 1853, such leading statesmen as John C. Calhoun, Stephen A. Douglas, and Jefferson Davis declared their support for linking the country by rails. The lawmakers, however, could not agree on an eastern terminus, and they did not see the merits of the several routes west. To resolve the debate, money was appropriated in 1853 for the Army Topographic Corps "to ascertain the most practicable and economical route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean."

Under the provisions of the Army Appropriation Act of March 1853, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis was directed to survey possible routes to the Pacific. Four east to west routes, roughly following specific parallels, were to be surveyed by parties under the supervision of the Topographical Corps. The most northerly survey, between the 47th and 49th parallels, was under the direction of Isaac Ingalls Stevens, governor of Washington Territory. This route closely approximated that proposed by Asa Whitney.

The ill-fated party under Capt. John W. Gunnison was to explore the route along the 38th and 39th parallels, or the Cochetopoa Pass route, which was advocated by Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton. After Gunnison's death at the hands of hostile Indians, Lt. Edward G. Beckwith continued the survey along the 41st parallel. Capt. Amiel W. Whipple, assistant astronomer of the Mexican Boundary Survey, and Lt. Joseph Christmas Ives surveyed the route along the 35th parallel westward to southern California. This line was favored by Jefferson Davis and was essentially the route traversed by Josiah Gregg in 1839 and later surveyed by Col. John J. Abert. The most southerly survey, which followed the 32d parallel, was surveyed by Lt. John G. Parke from California along the Gila River to the Pima villages and the Rio Grande. Capt. John Pope mapped the eastern portion of the route from Dona Ana, New Mexico, to the Red River.

A fifth survey, following a north-south orientation, was conducted under the direction of Lt. Robert S. Williamson. This party reconducted topographical surveys to locate passes through the Sierra Nevadas and the Coast Range in California in order to determine a route that would connect California, Oregon, and Washington were made under the direction of Lt. Robert S. Williamson^[12].

These surveys showed that a railroad could follow any one of the routes, and that the 32nd parallel route was the least expensive. The Southern Pacific Railroad was subsequently built along this parallel. The southern routes were objectionable to northern politicians and the northern routes were objectionable to the southern politicians, but the surveys could not, of course, resolve these sectional issues.

While sectional issues and disagreements were debated in the late 1850s, no decision was forthcoming from Congress on the Pacific railroad question. Theodore D. Judah, the engineer of the Sacramento Valley Railroad, became obsessed with the desire to build a transcontinental railroad. In 1860 he approached Leland Stanford, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker, leading Sacramento merchants, and soon convinced them that building a transcontinental line would make them rich and famous. The prospect of tapping the wealth of the Nevada mining towns and forthcoming legislation for federal aid to railroads stimulated them to incorporate the Central Pacific Railroad Company of California. This line later merged with the Southern Pacific. It was through Judah's efforts and the support of Abraham Lincoln, who saw military benefits in the lines as well as the bonding of the Pacific Coast to the Union, that the Pacific Railroad finally became a reality.

The Railroad Act of 1862 put government support behind the transcontinental railroad and helped create the Union Pacific Railroad, which subsequently joined with the Central Pacific at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869, and signaled the linking of the continent.