Visions of Empire
The Quest for a Railroad Across America, 1840–1880
April 21–July 23, 2012
MaryLou and George Boone Gallery
The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

The Presenting Sponsor of this exhibition is the Union Pacific Railroad. Major support is provided by the Henry Mayo Newhall Foundation. Additional support is provided by Judi and Bry Danner, the Ahmanson Foundation Exhibition and Education Endowment, and Robert London Moore Jr.
Oinciding with the 150th anniversary of the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862, “Visions of Empire: The Quest for a Railroad Across America, 1840–1880” follows the evolving notion of a transcontinental railway from the earliest proposals through its eventual completion in 1869 and the sweeping economic, social, and cultural transformations this powerful new technology unleashed across California and the West in subsequent decades.

Drawing on the unparalleled manuscripts collection on the topic held by The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, this major exhibition features some 200 items—the vast majority from The Huntington—including maps, photographs, illustrations, newspapers, magazines, letters, and diaries, most of which have never before been on public display.

Early Visions and Visionaries

Until the advent of steam power, the energy needed to move people and goods from place to place came only from beasts of burden or the winds. Americans, confronted by the great distances that characterized their country, eagerly sought more efficient transportation. By 1835, steam locomotives had begun pulling carriages along iron tracks up and down the East Coast. Quickly establishing themselves as indispensable to American commerce, railroads soon became inextricably linked to social and political matters as well. As American visions of a nation stretching from sea to sea took shape in the 1840s, some saw a transcontinental railroad as the indispensable engine of empire. It would move the trade of the entire globe through American hands to the nation’s unending profit.

Charting the Route, 1840–1862

The notion of a transcontinental railroad ignited the imagination of many Americans, and it garnered increasingly serious public support during the 1840s and 1850s. The idea became embedded in the ongoing national debate about the young republic’s destiny. Expressing their support in newspapers, in state legislatures, and on the floor of the U.S. Congress, proponents offered...
Spanning the Continent, 1865–1869

At the close of the American Civil War in April 1865, neither the Central Pacific nor the Union Pacific had covered much distance. The Central Pacific, pushing east from Sacramento, assaulted the stubborn granite heights of the Sierra Nevada peaks with a growing army of Chinese laborers, hammering out its route mile by mile. Meanwhile, as the Union Pacific thrust onto the Great Plains, it encountered implacable resistance from indigenous peoples such as the Sioux and the Cheyenne. Despite such persistent challenges, however, the pace of progress increased year by year as each line stretched its resources to the maximum. The eastbound and westbound tracks finally met at Utah’s Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869.

Creating a New America, 1869–1880

Long before the last spike was hammered in place, the first locomotives had begun chugging up the slopes of the Sierra Nevada and across the Nebraska prairies. They unleashed irrevocable changes in American social, political, and economic circumstances. The joining of the rails in 1869 accelerated the pace of such transformation, encouraging other entrepreneurs to launch additional transcontinental lines and establishing railroads in many arenas of national life. By making large swaths of western landscapes more accessible, for example, the first transcontinental route and the accompanying network of feeder lines facilitated commerce, emigration, and even leisure travel. Meanwhile investors small and large followed the rails to discover and exploit the diverse

Launching the Enterprise, 1862–1865

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Act, which promised government bonds and grants of public lands to the federally chartered Union Pacific Railroad and its peer, the Central Pacific Railroad of California. In its wake, various entrepreneurs such as the quartet of Sacramento merchants known as the “Big Four” (Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, and Leland Stanford), New York railroad financier Thomas C. Durant, and Iowa congressman Samuel R. Curtis pondered how to profit from this endeavor. Even with the promise of federal largesse extended by the 1862 Act, both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific struggled to raise enough money. Neither company, however, could overcome the dire shortages of men, materials, and money at the height of the Civil War. Their failure to make noteworthy progress on the railroad in these early years encouraged their opponents and eroded their financial and political backing.
and plentiful natural resources of the West. At the same time, however, critics of the railroads became increasingly vocal, condemning the conduct of individual companies and of the industry as a whole. Many Americans of this era thought of leading railroad men such as Collis Huntington (Henry E. Huntington’s uncle) and Leland Stanford as corrupt speculators, land-hungry corporate buccaneers, or oppressive “robber barons,” caring nothing for the common good.

Epilogue: Iron Horse America

By the early 1880s, the vision of a nation bound together from sea to sea had surely been realized. Three more transcontinental railways had been built by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe; the Northern Pacific; and the Southern Pacific. Determined to profit from their labors, they jostled with each other and with the Union Pacific and Central Pacific for the patronage of farmers, ranchers, immigrants, manufacturers, and tourists. To realize their potential, however, these railroads had to expend great effort to remake the western landscapes. They brought in professional surveyors, engineers, and laborers to lay the track, raise the bridges, erect the trestles, dig the tunnels, and build the stations that constituted each railroad’s right of way. None of these achievements, though, could dispel the anger and disdain many Americans felt for these grand corporate enterprises. Hostile observers argued that the transcontinental railroad had indeed created a new empire, but one ruled by the masters of the iron horse rather than the people. The ensuing struggle between railroads and their critics would echo through the coming century and influence the course of American economic and political life down to our own time.

Peter Blodgett, H. Russell Smith Foundation Curator of Western Historical Manuscripts

RELATED EVENTS

Lectures and Tours

The Iron Horse in the Garden: Railroads and the Western Environment, the Southern Pacific Story

May 7 (Monday) 7:30 p.m.

Historian Richard Orsi, author of Sunset Limited: The Southern Pacific Railroad and the Development of the American West, 1850–1930, will discuss his continuing research into the ambiguous environmental legacy of western railroads. Although the source of great havoc in wilderness landscapes, farms, lands, and cities, these enterprises also encouraged more modern and balanced environmental practices and more “sustainable” human relationships with nature. A book signing follows the talk. Free; no reservations required. Friends’ Hall.

Lecture Series

May 10, 17, and 24 (Thursdays) 10–11:30 a.m.

Join curator Peter Blodgett for a three-part lecture series that will include topics such as the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, the influence of railroads on America’s visual culture, and the promotion by railroads of tourism in the 19th-century American West. Each illustrated talk will be followed by a discussion in the gallery. Members: $55. Non-Members: $65. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Curator Tour

June 7 (Thursday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.

Join curator Peter Blodgett for a private tour of the exhibition and gain insights into The Huntington’s unparalleled resources of letters, diaries, tourist guidebooks, travel narratives, railroad posters, and stereographic photographs. This exceptional collection of materials illuminates the remarkable changes wrought in the United States by the transcontinental railroad. Members: $15. Non-Members: $20. Registration: 626-405-2128.

Classes

Preschool Series: Ticket to Travel

May 9, 16, 23, and 30 (Wednesdays) 10 a.m.–noon

Pack your bags for an adventure into the world of railroads as we embark on an exploration inspired by the exhibition. With instructor Laura Moede, each class includes a visit to the garden or gallery, art projects, stories, and more. Fee includes one accompanying adult. Ages 3–4. Members: $85. Non-Members: $95. Registration: 626-405-2128.

A Taste of Art—American Culinary Tour

May 26 (Saturday) 10 a.m.–1 p.m.

Explore the role the railroad played in American dining habits while viewing the exhibition. After a visit to the gallery with chef and art educator Maite Gomez-Rejon of ArtBites, teens can learn some basics in American cuisine inspired by 19th-century cookbooks. Ages 14–17. Members: $60. Non-Members: $70. Registration: 626-405-2128.

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