



# Irish Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

Grade 7

# Irish Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

By Steve Pollock

## Summary

Students will compare the treatment between Irish and Chinese workers on the transcontinental railroad. Students will investigate the discrimination faced by Irish workers and why.

## Main Curriculum Tie

UT Standard 2.5: Students will construct an evidence-based argument to explain how the development of transportation and communication networks across the state changed Utah's economy and human geography. (economics, geography)

## Additional Curriculum Ties

UT Standard 2.6: Students will explain how agriculture, railroads, mining, and industrialization created new communities and new economies throughout the state. (economics, geography)

## Time Frame

2 periods of approximately 45 minutes each. (90 minutes total)

## Group Size

Students will work individually in Parts 1 and 4. Students can complete Part 2 in partners, and Part 3 in small groups (3-4 students).

## Life Skills

Aesthetics     Character     Communication     Employability  
 Social & Civic Responsibility     Systems Thinking     Thinking & Reasoning

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[www.theroot.com/when-the-irish-weren-t-white-1793358754](http://www.theroot.com/when-the-irish-weren-t-white-1793358754)

## Materials

- 1- Anticipation Guide
- 2- Reading: Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad
- 3- Venn Diagram
- 4- Photographs and images to print out and post around classroom for gallery walk activity.
- 5- Gallery Walk Worksheet
- 6- Exit Ticket

## Background for Teachers

Teachers will need to know how an Anticipation Guide works. Students complete the left column at the beginning of the lesson, and complete the right column after completing the reading and gallery walk.

Teachers should understand that most of the people who worked to build the transcontinental railroad were immigrants from China and Ireland. These immigrants faced discrimination in the U.S., but their labor made this national achievement possible.

## Student Prior Knowledge

Students will need to have some basic knowledge of the planning and building of the transcontinental railroad.

## Intended Learning Outcomes

Students will identify the immigrants who built the transcontinental railroad. Students will identify differences in the treatment of Irish and Chinese workers. Students can explain that Irish were faced with discrimination and why.

## Instructional Procedures

### First Day

Part 1- Students pre-assess using the True False Anticipation Guide.

Part 2- Partners read “Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad,” then fill in the Venn diagram.

### Second Day

Part 3- Working in small groups, students complete the Gallery Walk activity and worksheet.

Part 4- Students finish the Anticipation Guide and Exit Ticket individually.

## Strategies for Diverse Learners

Students can work with other students in small groups. Underline key vocabulary in the reading and have students define the words before reading. [https://www.pearsonsuccessnet.com/temp-images/scorm/rdg10/na/en/0-328-73643-0/A21618/pdf/RSEN11\\_G5U1W5\\_ms.pdf](https://www.pearsonsuccessnet.com/temp-images/scorm/rdg10/na/en/0-328-73643-0/A21618/pdf/RSEN11_G5U1W5_ms.pdf)

## Assessment Plan

The students will be doing informal assessments throughout this lesson. 1. During the pre-read of the anticipation guide, the students will be accessing schema and prior knowledge. 2. The teacher can check the Venn diagrams to make sure the students are seeing the comparisons and contrasts between Irish and Chinese workers. 3. Students will turn in the worksheet that they have completed during the gallery walk. 4. The students will turn in the anticipation guide after completing all the work, including the post knowledge indicators. 5. Students will complete a short exit ticket with “one important thing they learned in this lesson.”

## True or False Anticipation Guide

**Directions:** Read each “Statement About the Topic” in the center of the chart. Think about whether the statements are true or false and place a check in the appropriate box under the "Before Reading" heading. Next, complete the lesson about the Irish working on the railroad. Think about the information in the lesson and whether the statements below are true or false. Then, place a check in the appropriate box under the "After Reading" heading.

### *Before Reading*

### *After Reading*

True	False	Statement About the Topic	True	False
		The major groups of immigrants that worked on the transcontinental railroad were from Ireland and China.		
		All immigrants working on the transcontinental railroad were treated equally and with high standards.		
		Immigrants were feared because they were seen as outsiders who would change “democracy” and the American way of life.		
		Dislike of Irish immigrants goes back many centuries. But the main reason people discriminated against the Irish in the 1860s was because of their religion.		
		Most of the immigrants who built the Union Pacific railroad were from Ireland.		
		The land that was crossed by the Union Pacific was always flat and easily traversed.		
		At one point the crews were so fast, they completed 10 miles of track in one day.		
		Abraham Lincoln was the president when the railroad idea was first signed into law in 1862 and he was delighted to attend the Golden Spike ceremony May 10, 1869.		

## The Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act into law on July 1, 1862. The act gave two companies, the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad, responsibility for completing the transcontinental railroad and authorized extensive land grants and the issuance of 30-year government bonds to finance the undertaking. The Union Pacific was to lay track westward from a point near Omaha, Nebraska; the Central Pacific was to build eastward from Sacramento, California.

The labor required to build the first transcontinental railroad was extensive. The main laborers, the ones who laid the track, did back-straining work for days on end, for not necessarily high wages, in sometimes brutal conditions. This massive transportation construction project also required an entire network of support, including medical staff, cooks, and proprietors of provisions, stores and living areas.

Irish immigrants were the primary early builders of the Central Pacific Railroad. Management of the initial railroad work was not very inspirational, and pay was not exactly high; as a result, many Irish workers walked off the job. To fill the gap, Central Pacific turned to Chinese immigrants, who were travelling across the Pacific Ocean in increasing numbers, 40,000 in the 1850s alone. Many of these Chinese immigrants had come to California for the Gold Rush and had stayed.

Chinese workers continued to fill the Central Pacific ranks; by 1868, they numbered about 12,000, or 80 percent of the entire workforce. Their Central Pacific bosses found the Chinese workers to be punctual and amenable to the hardest of tasks. Despite racial harassment, Chinese laborers worked hard. They were paid a maximum of \$30 a month and often lived in the underground tunnels they were constructing, some of which collapsed onto the workers. (More than 1,000 Chinese workers died in rail-related accidents.) By contrast, Irish workers were paid \$35 a month, and were provided with housing.

Railroad workers, whatever their country of origin, lived in makeshift camps right alongside the railroad line. An exception to this was in the mountains, when workers sheltered at night in wooden bunkhouses (which were not exactly weather-proof but still offered protection from the worst of the mountain weather).

For food and drink, the Chinese workers drank lukewarm tea, which was boiled in the morning to remove bacteria and then dispensed throughout the day. They also ate a combination of dried food brought from San Francisco and freshly prepared food from pigs and chickens kept onsite. By contrast, Irish workers got by on company-provided boiled beef and potatoes, mostly, and drank both water and alcohol.



Track construction through mountainous terrain was painstaking. Some days, crews managed little more than several feet of track. Tunnels through hills and mountains were especially time-consuming. The advent of dynamite, invented in 1867 by Alfred Nobel, helped somewhat in this regard. In all, Central Pacific crews built 15 tunnels along the route. The longest tunnel, called the Summit, ran 1,659 feet.

Despite the initial segregation and distrust, Irish and Chinese laborers worked together more and more as the miles of track piled up. As the route wound further eastward and into flatter land, rail crew bosses pushed their workers to go faster. On April 28, 1868, a crew laid 10 miles of track in one day. The distrust also eased because the number of Chinese workers easily outstripped the number of Irish and American workers. By the time that the railroad was finished, the Central Pacific workforce was 90 percent Chinese.

Construction was especially slow going in the mountains. The route wound through a low pass, but still went through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. To keep work going through the winter, workers built dozens of miles of huge wooden show sheds to cover

the tracks; as a result, avalanches and snow drifts blew over the wooden "roofs" and didn't cover the tracks or the workers laying them down underneath.

The Central Pacific construction was well under way before the Union Pacific work got started. Union Pacific bosses didn't have the benefit of the vast numbers of Chinese workers laboring away for the western part of the rail network. In fact, labor in the middle of the country was in short supply. By the end of 1865, the miles of track laid stood at 40.

The following year, however, construction began in earnest, as new waves of Irish immigrants and a huge influx of Civil War veterans showed up in pursuit of work and, more importantly, money paid for that work. The Union Pacific's work force included Irish immigrants, former soldiers from the North and the South, convicts from eastern prisons, as well as Mormons living near the railroad route in Utah Territory. Union Pacific workers formed an assembly line, laying rails and track, wielding hammers, driving spikes, and then repeating the sequence. The average amount of construction for one day was two miles.

Sanitation was a prime concern with Union Pacific workers. Diets were regular, consisting mainly of beef and bread and coffee. Water-borne illnesses were rampant, as were squalid conditions in the close quarters of the working camps.

Also plaguing Union Pacific efforts were the activities of its vice president, Thomas C. Durant. Later disgraced in the Credit Mobilier scandal, Durant made a habit of manipulating railroad finances to put money into his own pocket. The federal government paid the railroad company by the number of miles of track laid, so Durant chose a meandering route that added many miles to the railroad.

Despite all of these challenges, the railroad was completed. The two railroads met at Promontory Summit, in Utah, on May 10, 1869, and drove in the Golden Spike, symbolizing the completion of the biggest step in a coast-to-coast railway. Along the way, Central Pacific had laid 690 miles of track and Union Pacific had laid 1,087 miles of track.

Later that year, workers completed the final leg to the West coast, with tracks leading from Sacramento to Oakland.

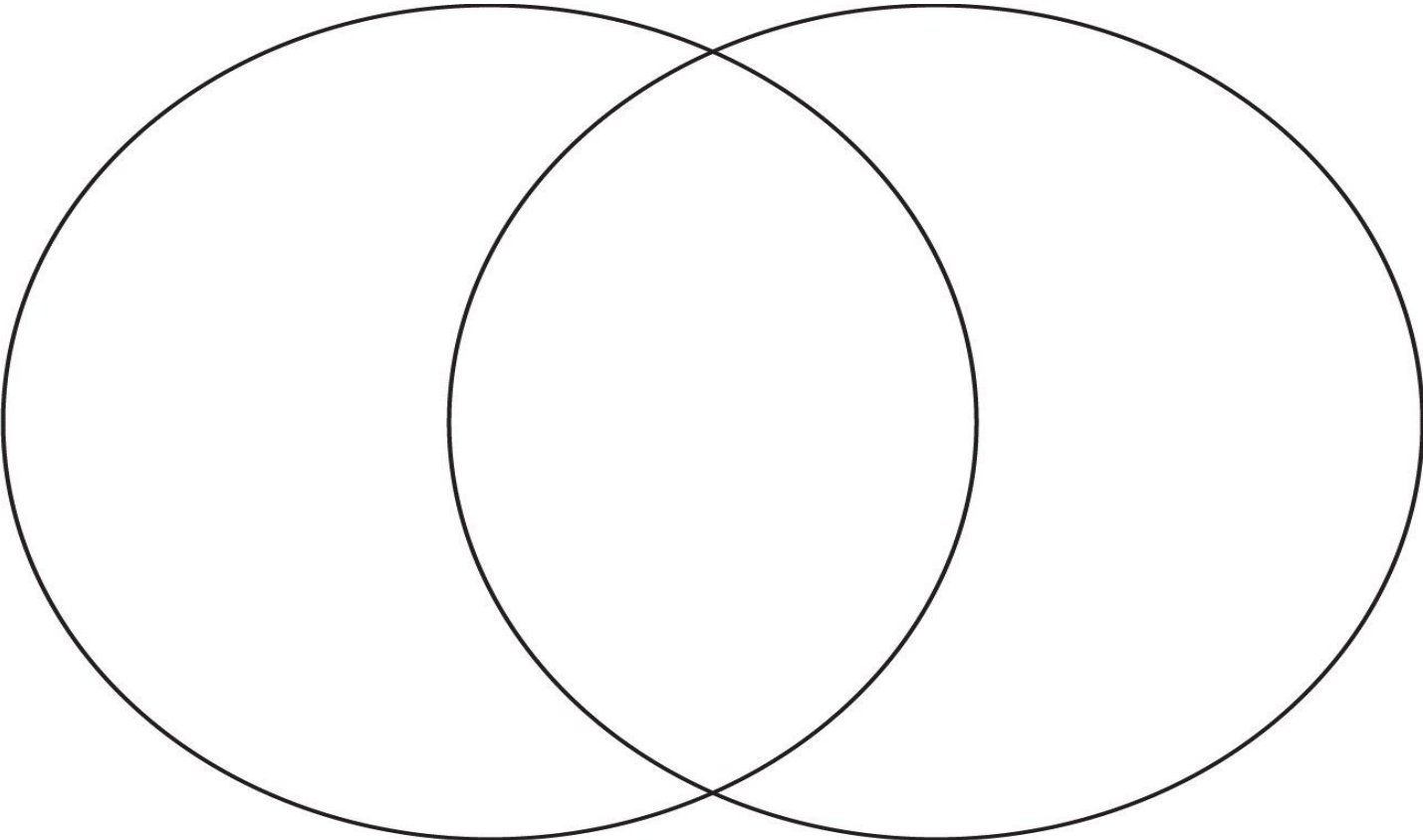
Sources: <http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/articles/ushistory/transcontinentalrailroad-builders.htm>; [worlddigitalibrary.org](http://worlddigitalibrary.org)

# Irish and Chinese Workers Venn Diagram

Use Builders of the Railroads to compare the similarities and differences of the two working groups for the railroads.

Irish

Chinese



# Gallery Walk Worksheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Period \_\_\_\_\_

Picture Group	What do you see? Literally.	What can we learn from this?	What new questions do you have?
Set 1 Exodus			
Set 2 Discrimination			
Set 3 Obstacles			
Set 4 Technology & Muscle Power			
Set 5 Meeting at Promontory			
Set 6 Laws against Irish and Catholics			



## **For the Gallery Walk**

**Print the pages below and post around classroom, in order.  
Place the images in each set near each other.**

## Set 1. A Mass Exodus from Ireland

By 1852 Ireland had lost nearly half its population because of the potato blight (a disease that killed the country's staple food crop) and the famine it created. While approximately 1 million Irish people perished from starvation, another 2 million abandoned the land in the largest single population movement of the 19th century. Most of the exiles—nearly a quarter of the Irish nation—washed up on the shores of the United States. They knew little about America except one thing: It had to be better than the heat that was searing Ireland.

A flotilla of 5,000 boats transported the pitiable castaways from the wasteland. Most of the refugees boarded minimally converted cargo ships—some had been used in the past to transport slaves from Africa—and the hungry, sick passengers, many of whom spent their last pennies for transit, were treated little better than freight on a 3,000-mile journey that lasted at least four weeks.

Herded like livestock in dark, cramped quarters, the Irish passengers lacked sufficient food and clean water. They choked on fetid air. They were showered by excrement and vomit. Each adult was apportioned just 18 inches of bed space—children half that. Disease and death clung to the rancid vessels like barnacles, and nearly a quarter of the 85,000 passengers who sailed to North America died at sea.

Why do you think they called these boats “coffin ships”?

Source: <https://www.history.com/news/when-america-despised-the-irish-the-19th-centurys-refugee-crisis>



Drawing of a famine-era “coffin ship” carrying passengers. Source: Illustrated London News/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

**NURSE WANTED—A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, CAPABLE of taking care of two small children; she must be a good plain seamstress; no Irish need apply. Apply at 11 East 14th st., between 10 and 12 o'clock, A. M., or from 5 to 7 P. M.**



*“No Irish Need Apply”*

Anonymous (Written about 1910)



<https://www.history.com/news/when-america-despised-the-irish-the-19th-centurys-refugee-crisis>

This political cartoon is titled "The Great Fear of the Period: That Uncle Sam May Be Swallowed by Foreigners." The cartoonist depicts Uncle Sam being eaten by an Irish immigrant (left) and a Chinese immigrant (right). The cartoonist specifies Chinese and Irish immigrants because of how many people came from these countries to work on America's railroads. The railroads crossing the continent are shown beneath the figures' feet.

How does the artist depict Irish people? Chinese people? What does the artist mean by "great fear"? Why does the artist think Americans are (or should be) afraid of these immigrants? What does the artist mean by "the problem solved"?



Source: Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98502829/>

### **Set 3. Obstacles were Abundant**

There were many natural obstacles facing the builders of the first transcontinental railroad, including mountains, rivers, and canyons stretching the 1,776 miles between Omaha and Sacramento.



*Nebraska State Historical Society*



*Nebraska State Historical Society*



*Emigrants Needle Rocks, Cas 2/1867*



Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

## Set 4. Technology and Muscle Power

Railroad workers used hand tools, explosives, and simple machines to build a stable, level roadbed and secure the iron rails to wooden ties. The bridges, tunnels, and railroads they built were marvels of modern technology in the 1860s.



Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.





Carmichael's Cut. Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Tunnel No. 3, Weber Canyon. Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Union Pacific Railroad Construction, 1868. Photo by A. J. Russell. Digital Image © 2008 Utah State Historical Society. All Rights Reserved. <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=440147>.



Steam shovel at Hanging Rock. No. 143 hauling broken rock to fill in around ties and to widen embankments. Photo by A.J. Russell. Digital Image © 2008 Utah State Historical Society. All Rights Reserved.

<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=440155>



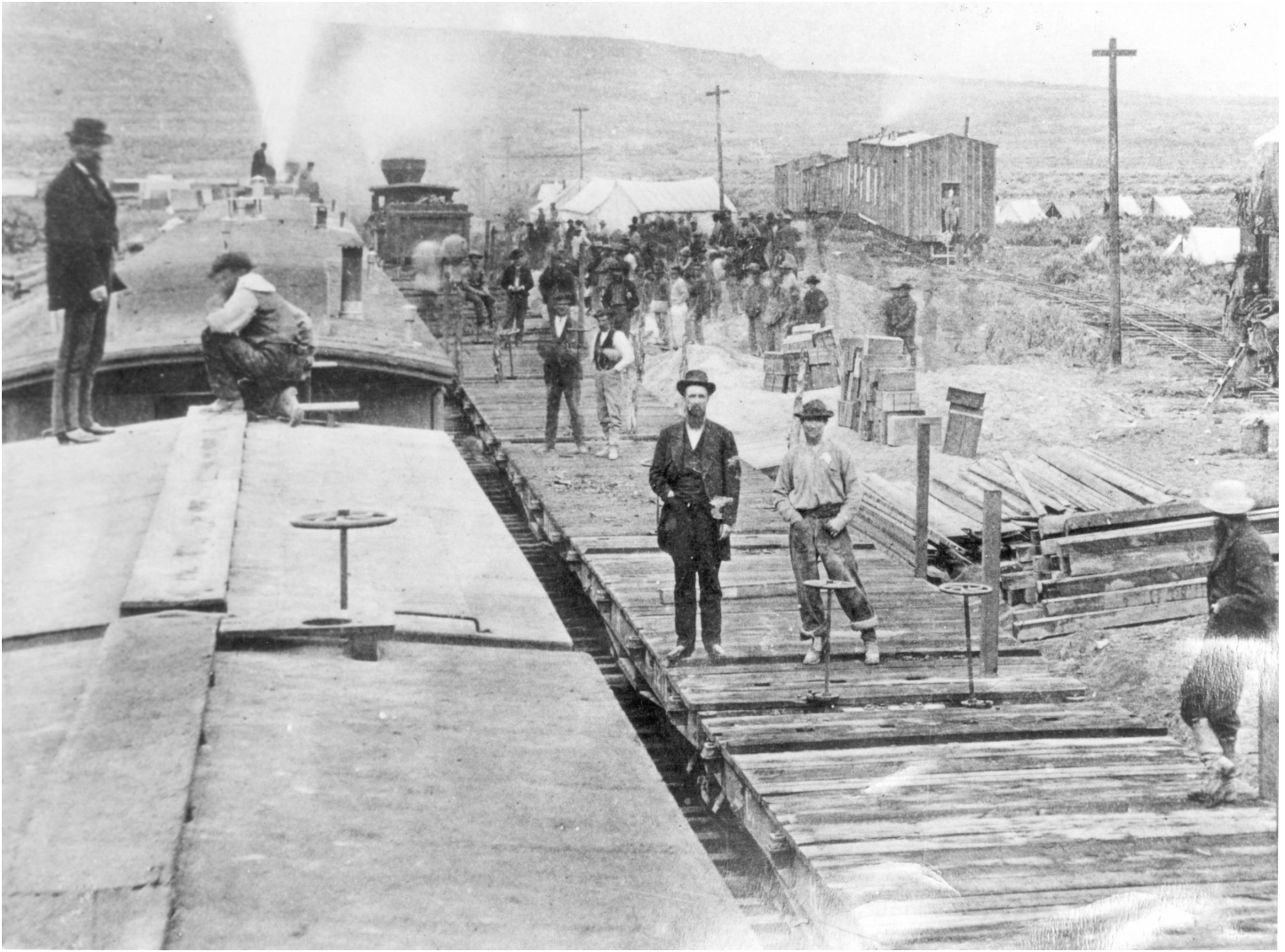
Central Pacific Railroad, construction and sign: "10 miles of track, laid in one day, April 28th, 1869". Digital Image © 2014 Utah State Historical Society. All Rights Reserved. <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6d523gc>

As the two railroads drew near to each other, a bet was made that the Central Pacific work crews could do the seemingly impossible: lay ten miles of track in a single day. The test was carefully planned, with building supplies stacked onto train cars at the end of the track, ready and waiting. Did they succeed?

"In one day, on April 28, 1869, these men, fired with the enthusiasm of the greatest railroad *construction* race in the history of the world, laid ten miles and fifty-six feet of *track* in a little less than twelve hours to bring the railhead of the Central Pacific three and one-half miles from Promontory, Utah."

[cpr.org/Museum/Southern\\_Pacific\\_Bulletin/Ten\\_Mile\\_Day.html](http://cpr.org/Museum/Southern_Pacific_Bulletin/Ten_Mile_Day.html)

"With the iron car moving steadily along, eight Irishmen lay rails just ahead of its rolling wheels. These "ironmen" were Michael Shay, Thomas Daley, George Elliot, Michael Sullivan, Edward Killeen, Patrick Joice, Michael Kenedy, and Fred McNamare. The four forward men seized the 560-pound, thirty-foot-long rails, while the four rear men slid the rails to the rollers on each side of the iron car. The lead ironmen ran forward. "Down," shouted the foreman. With a loud thud the iron hit the ties within inches of the previous rail". Source: Mary Ann Fraser, *Ten Mile Day*. [https://www.pearsonsuccessnet.com/temp-images/scorm/rdg10/na/en/0-328-73643-0/A21618/pdf/RSEN11\\_G5U1W5\\_ms.pdf](https://www.pearsonsuccessnet.com/temp-images/scorm/rdg10/na/en/0-328-73643-0/A21618/pdf/RSEN11_G5U1W5_ms.pdf)



Central Pacific Railroad, 10-mile day construction at Victory Camp in Box Elder County, Utah, 1869. Digital Image © 2014 Utah State Historical Society. All Rights Reserved. <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=454934>.

## Set 5. Meeting at Promontory Summit

The meeting point of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific, important to the railroad companies because of the land and subsidies granted to them for each mile of track they completed, was negotiated in Washington, DC, in April 1869 by Collis Huntington of the Central Pacific and Grenville Dodge of the Union Pacific. Hoping to maximize their profits, the two companies had already built past each other, laying more than 200 miles of parallel roadbed across northern Utah. They finally agreed to join the tracks at Promontory Summit (also known as Promontory Point), Utah. Their agreement called for the transfer of 47.5 miles (76.4 kilometers) of track from the Union Pacific to the Central Pacific, and for the building of a jointly operated terminal. The actual “wedding of the rails” ceremony took place on May 10, 1869.

Source: worlddigitallibrary.org



Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.





Andrew J. Russell / Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

## Set 6. Laws against Irish and Catholics

In [Liverpool](#), England, where many Irish immigrants settled following the [Great Famine](#), anti-Irish prejudice was widespread. The sheer numbers of people coming across the Irish sea and settling in the poorer districts of the city led to physical attacks and it became common practice for those with Irish accents or even Irish names to be barred from jobs, public houses and employment opportunities. Anti-Irish sentiment is found in works by several 18th-century writers such as [Voltaire](#), who depicted the Catholic Irish as savage and backward, and defended British rule in the country.

In 1798, the U.S. Congress passed three "[Alien Acts](#)" based mainly on fears of Irish-Catholic, anti-immigrant sentiment. These new laws gave the president the power to stop immigration from any country at war with the U.S. and the right to deport any immigrant, and made it harder for immigrants to vote. Then, in the late 1840s, a nationalist political group called the [Know-Nothings](#) sprang from a populist movement of poor whites who were dissatisfied with the two-party system and started the American Party, intent on preserving America's culture by [restricting immigration, especially from Catholic countries](#)—including by Irish Catholics. They managed to get candidates elected into the highest political offices in America, [including a president](#).

[www.theroot.com/when-the-irish-weren-t-white-1793358754](http://www.theroot.com/when-the-irish-weren-t-white-1793358754)



EXIT SLIP

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Period \_\_\_\_\_

What was the thing about the Irish railroad workers that surprised you the most?

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Period \_\_\_\_\_

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Lesson plans on the Transcontinental Railroad created with the support of Spike150, the Utah Division of State History, and Utah Council for the Social Studies.

