Today in History - May 10

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"Wedding of the Rails"

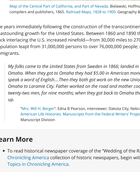
Officials and workers of the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railways held a ceremony on Promontory Summit, in Utah Territory—approximately thirty-five miles away from Promontory Point, the site where the rails were joined—to drive in the Golden Spike on **May 10**, 1869. The spike completed construction of the first transcontinental railroad, an event that connected the nation from coast to coast and reduced a journey of four months or more to just one week.

Ceremony of "wedding of the rails," May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah. May 10, 1869. Photo & Photographic Division

The Corps of Discovery, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, generated the first maps and reports to describe the topography of the trails and passages that led from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Congress recognized the importance of such topographical information and sponsored expeditions and organized a Corps of Topographical Engineers in 1838. In the 1850s the Senate ordered that ten thousand copies be printed of topographical reports and surveys dubbed the Pacific Railroad Reports, including one by John Charles Frémont, a member of the Corps. It was clear to expansionists such as Senator Thomas Hart Benton (Frémont's father-in-law) that such pioneers and explorers would rely on such topographical reports to transverse the continent and to accomplish what so many believed was the nation's Manifest Destiny—unity from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It also became increasingly clear to Congressional leaders that in the event of a Civil War between the North and the South, another side had the best transportation system and access to the West would hold a great military advantage.

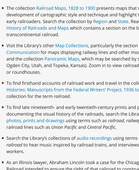
Among the great topographical studies of the nineteenth century were those undertaken by the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railroads. Maps such as Greenville Dodge and Peter Dey, chief engineers for the Union Pacific, and Theodore Judah and Samuel Montague, Chief Engineers for the Central Pacific, detailed the topography, the locations of rivers, streams and deserts and blazed straight through mountains. It is a measure of their engineering skills that today, the well travelled east-west motor highway, Interstate 80, closely follows much of the path charted in the 1860s by engineers of the first transcontinental railway.

Map of the Union Pacific Rail Road and Surveys of 1864, 65, 66, 67, 1868 From Missouri River to Humboldt Wells... G. M. Dodge, Chief Engineer. 1869. Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900. Geography & Map Division



New Map of the Union Pacific Railway, the Short, Quick and Safe Line to All Points West. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1883. Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900. Geography & Map Division

The Central Pacific Railroad began construction eastward from Sacramento, California, and the Union Pacific Railroad began construction westward from Omaha, Nebraska. The majority of the track was built by Irish laborers from the East, Chinese who entered the country from the West, veterans of both the Union and Confederate armies, and Mormons who wished to see the railroad pass through Ogden and Salt Lake City. (The Mormon leader Brigham Young became a member of the Board of Directors of the Union Pacific). The men worked for an average of between one and three dollars a day. Between 1865 and 1869 the Union Pacific laid 1,086 miles of track; the Central Pacific laid 689 miles of track.



Map of the Central Pacific of California, and Part of Nevada. Bielawski, Hoffmann & Prett, compilers and publishers. 1865. Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900. Geography & Map Division

The years immediately following the construction of the transcontinental railroad were years of astounding growth for the United States. Between 1860 and 1890 the miles of railroad track interlacing the U.S. increased ninefold—from 30,000 miles to 270,000 miles, and the population kept from 31,000,000 persons to over 76,000,000 people; many were recent immigrants.

> *My folks came to the United States from Sweden in 1860, landed in New York, then came to Omaha. When they got to Omaha they had $0.60 in American money, no job, and couldn't speak a word of English... Then they built grub well on the new Union Pacific railroad from Omaha to Laramie City. Father worked on the road and mother cooked and worked for twenty-two men, for nine months; when they got back to Omaha they had $300.00 saved up.*
>
> "Mrs. Will H. Berger", Edna B Pearson, interviewer: Dakota City, Nebraska, November 21, 1938. American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940. Manuscript Division

Learn More

- To read historical newspaper coverage of the "Wedding of the Rails" in the Library's Chronicling America collection of historic newspapers, begin with: Golden Spike (1869) Topics in Chronicling America.
- The collection Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900 presents maps that reveal the development of cartographic style and technique and highlight the achievement of early railroaders. Search the collection by Region and Place. Read the illustrated essay History of Railroads and Maps which contains a section on the building of the transcontinental railroad.
- Visit the Library's other Map Collections, particularly the section on Transportation and Communications for maps displaying railway lines and other modes of transportation, and the collection Panoramic Maps, which may be searched by state or city (such as Ogden City, Utah, and Topeka, Kansas). Zoom in to view railroad tracks, trains, depots, or roundhouses.
- To find firsthand accounts of railroad work and travel in the collection American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940, search the collection for the term railroad.
- To find late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prints and photographs documenting the visual history of the railroads, search the Library's collections of photos, prints and drawings using terms such as railroad, railway, locomotive, and railroad lines such as Union Pacific and Central Pacific.
- Search the Library's collection of audio recordings using terms such as train and railroad to hear music inspired by railroad trains, and interviews with passengers and workers.
- As an Illinois lawyer, Abraham Lincoln took a case for the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad intended to ensure the right of that railroad to construct a bridge across the Mississippi. As president, he signed the Pacific Railway Act that provided government support for the building of the transcontinental railroad. Search on the term railroad in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress to read more about Lincoln and the railroads. Read, for example, a letter from Thomas Durant of the Union Pacific to Lincoln regarding a request for a military escort for a party of engineers led by Peter Dey.

Jefferson Davis Captured!

On **May 10**, 1865, Union troops captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis near Irwinville, Georgia. Davis and his Cabinet had retreated from Richmond after General Lee's defeat at Petersburg on April 2, 1865. For several weeks the Confederate government had been in flight from the Union Army. Davis' plan was to escape by sea from the east coast of Florida and to sail to Texas where he hoped to establish a new Confederacy.

> *Just before day the enemy charged our camp yelling like demons. Mr. Davis received timely warning of their approach... He started down the little stream hoping to meet his servant with his horse and arms... Knowing he would be recognized I stayed with him to let me throw over him a large waterproof wrap which had often served him... for a dressing gown and thinking it would cause no comment as he passed in the grey of the morning he would not be recognized. As he strode off I threw over his head a little black shawl which was around my own shoulders, saying that he could not find his hat... When he had proceeded a few yards the guards around our tents with a shocking oath called out to know who that was. I said it was my mother...*
>
> Letter, Varina Davis to Montgomery Blair describing the capture of her husband, Jefferson Davis, June 6, 1865. Ser. 19.05. Blair Family Papers, Manuscript Division

En route, the Cabinet disbanded, taking payment from the gold of the Treasury. With rumors spreading among the Southern troops of the defeat of the Confederacy, the Davises were in hourly anticipation of attack by marauding Confederate soldiers in search of treasure. When the Union soldiers charged their camp, Jefferson Davis mistook them at first for the expected marauders.

Jeff. Davis Caught in Last. Hoop Skirts & Southern Chivalry... Philadelphia: J. L. Magee, 1865. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

A version of Jefferson Davis's capture by Union cavalry. The title at the top of the cartoon reads, "The very true Picture of the Capture of Jeff. Davis, from the account furnished by Col. Prichard of the 4th Mich. Cavalry." Davis says, "I think the United States Government could find something better to do than hunting down Women and children."

Jeff's Double Quick. The Last Words of the Confederacy. "Jeff's War Hoops." Sheet music cover. Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1865. Lithosin Prints, American Prints & Photographs Division

A comic version of Confederate President Jefferson Davis' ignominious capture by Union troops in May 1865. Davis, clad as a woman and holding a wooden musket, is being "purchased for the benefit of the Western Sanitary Fairs, Michigan Cavalry. The soldier fits the barrels of the bayonet to reveal a pair of black boots. Davis's wife (at right) protests, saying, "Oh! my mother."

When apprehended by the Union soldiers, Davis was wearing his wife's dark gray cloak and black shawl. The Union soldiers reported that he was attempting to escape in the disguise of a woman. Responding to accusations of her husband's cowardice, First Lady Varina Davis attempted to offer a justification for Davis' apparent disguise in a letter to Montgomery Blair, an old friend and postmaster general in the Lincoln administration:

> *Although one of Davis's own aides was persuaded his chief had indeed disguised himself as a woman to elude his escape, Varina Davis Hanna Howell Jones, was incensed at accusations of her husband's cowardice in the Northern press. Her letter to the powerful Montgomery Blair, a friend of earlier years and postmaster general under President Abraham Lincoln,... provides a firsthand, detailed account of her husband's capture. Readers must decide for themselves whether the sequence of events was entirely coincidental or the efforts were calculated to deceive...*
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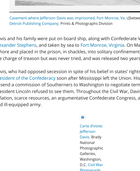
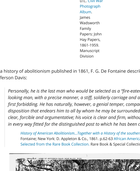
> Descriptive note accompanying Varina Davis letter of June 6, 1865. Jerice E. Ruth and John B. Sellers, Manuscript Division.



Caricature where Jefferson Davis was imprisoned, Fort Monroe, Va. (between 1910-1920). Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

Davis and his family were put on board ship, along with Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, and taken by sea to Fort Monroe, Virginia. On May 22, Davis was taken ashore and placed in the prison, in shackles, into solitary confinement. He was indicted on the charge of treason but was never tried, and was released two years later, in May 1867.

Davis, who had opposed secession in spite of his belief in states' rights, was chosen president of the Confederacy soon after Mississippi left the Union. His first act in office was to send a commission of Southerners to Washington to negotiate terms of peace, but President Lincoln refused to see them. Throughout the Civil War, Davis contended with inflation, scarce resources, an argumentative Confederate Congress, and an undermined and ill-equipped army.



Varina (Davis) Jefferson Davis. Brady-Handy Photographs Collection, Washington, D.C. Civil War Glass Negatives and Albums. James Wadsworth Family Papers. Lincoln, John Hay Papers, 1861-1905. Manuscript Division

In a history of abolitionism published in 1861, F. G. De Fontaine described President Jefferson Davis:

> *Personally, he is the last man who would be selected as a "Brave man." He is a prim, smooth looking man, with a fair manner, a cold, solitary countenance, and an outward dignity that is at first forbidding. He has naturally, however, a great temper, companionable qualities and a disposition that endears him to all by whom he may be surrounded. As a speaker he is clear, forcible and argumentative; his voice is clear and firm, without tremor, and he is one in every way fitted for the distinguished post to which he has been called.*
>
> History of American Abolitionists... Together with a History of the southern Confederacy, by F. G. De Fontaine. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1861. p.62-63 African American Perspectives: Materials Selected from the Rare Book Collection. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

Beauvoir, Home of Jefferson Davis, near Biloxi, Miss., 1906?. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

Davis retired to this small Gulf Coast estate in 1877 and spent his last years there.

Learn More

- Search on *Jefferson Davis* in Detroit Publishing Company to find more photographs associated with Davis's life.
- Search Today in History on the terms *Confederacy*, *Confederate*, or *Civil War* to find more related features.
- The Time Line of the Civil War, a Special Presentation in the collection of Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints, provides an overview of the sequence of events during the war.
- View a photograph of the location of Jefferson Davis's capture by Union Soldiers on May 10, 1865, in the collection Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives.
- To learn more about Jefferson Davis, visit The Papers of Jefferson Davis. A variety of Davis's speeches and letters are available online through the efforts of this documentary editing project from Rice University.
- For additional perspectives and insight into the operation of the Confederate government and postwar problems and issues in the South, examine the Alexander Hamilton Stephens Papers. As vice president of the Confederate States of America, Stephens had a unique viewpoint.

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