


Chapter 204 – The Potential For A Transcontinental Line Gains Momentum

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">PURVIANCE'S ALBUM PHOTOGRAPHS, Pennsylvania Central Railroad.</p>  <p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">J. S. EARLE & SONS, 816 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, E. LOVEJOY, 87 S. Clark St., Chicago, General Agents for the Publisher.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">View in Jack's Narrows.</p>	<p>Dates: 1849-1853</p>	<p>Sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The California Gold Rush Tips The Scales In Favor Of A Transcontinental Railroad • High Stakes Political Maneuvering Begins Over Routing The Transcontinental Line
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Date: 1849-1853

The California Gold Rush Tips The Scales In Favor Of A Transcontinental Railroad



The Penn State Railroad Heading Through Jacks' Narrows Gorge

Musings about the transcontinental railroad begin to surface in the 1830's along with the early locomotives.

But the first serious promoter of such a venture is one Asa Whitney, a dry goods merchant, who makes a fortune trading tea and spices in China during a trip there in 1842-44. From this experience, he imagines the possibility of importing more goods from throughout Asia and then transporting them to eastern markets by rail. The route he envisions would begin in the pacific northwest at Vancouver, then swing down to the South Pass and back to St. Louis along the Oregon Trail. Whitney sums up his plan in a formal document, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific* and lobbies for it with Congress in 1849, before eventually giving up.

Whitney's banner is picked up in 1845 by Douglas, then a freshman in the House. His proposal enjoys support, but founders when other cities – St. Louis, Quincy, Memphis, and New Orleans – offer alternative routes.

Congress returns to the notion in 1850 when it passes the first of what will be several Land Grant Acts, this one setting aside 3.75 million acres of public property to construct a railroad from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. This land would be given free to any developer in exchange for future reduced rate shipping of government goods.

The effects of the Gold Rush, however, quickly shifts attention back to reaching California. This prompts the 1853 Appropriations Bill "To Ascertain the Most Practical and Economical Route for a Railroad From the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean."

Between 1853 and 1855, four different routes to California will be explored by the Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers. These crisscross the nation at the 49th, 39st, 35th, and 32th parallels, from the Canadian border in the North to the Mexican border in the South.

At stake in the final choice is the opportunity to lead the commercial development of the west, and to reap the economic bonanza that will hopefully follow. Each of the contenders will rally its own set of potential investors and look to its own leading politicians to make their case in Congress – a task that will involve the cleverest forms of horse-trading.

Among the many maneuvers that follow will be one proposed by a frustrated Steven Douglas involving the Nebraska territory that will inadvertently spark the American Civil War.

Date: 1849-1853

High Stakes Political Maneuvering Begins Over Routing The Transcontinental Line



Isaac Stevens (1818-1862)

Political leaders have already begun to lobby for their regional interests by the time Congress officially sets aside money in 1853 to explore various pathways to the west coast.

Asa Whitney's call for a line ending at the mouth of the Columbia River is picked up by recently named Governor of Washington Territory, Isaac Stevens, a West Point grad, veteran of the Mexican War and an early supporter of Pierce in the 1852 race. Instead of Whitney's angle through the South Pass, he proposes a straight shot along the Canadian border at the 49th parallel. As an engineer and surveyor himself, Stevens will eventually lead the team during the actual exploratory phase.

The far Southern route along the 32nd parallel is favored by Pierce's Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, and by the influential Charleston native, James Gadsden, who will serve as his Ambassador to Mexico. Gadsden is 65 years old and an ex-army man, having been aide de

camp to Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 and then Seminole War in Florida. He joins Calhoun's Nullifier movement, runs his *Pimlico* rice plantation which boasts 235 slaves, and serves as President of the South Carolina Railroad for a decade. After proposing secession in 1850, he sponsors a bill to divide California into two states, with the southern half open to slavery and San Diego as his proposed terminal for his southern transcontinental line.

Other powerful men will argue on behalf of a central route, somewhere between the 38th and 41st parallel.

One is the aging Thomas Hart Benton, who represents Missouri in the Senate between 1821 and 1851, before being denied a sixth term for his growing reservations about the expansion of slavery. But Benton remains a giant in both Washington and Missouri, and he is dedicated to positioning St. Louis as the hub for the Pacific line.

In February 1849 the Senator unveils what becomes known as "Benton's National Central Highway." It proposes a line funded and owned by the U.S. government rather than by private corporations as Whitney would have it. The tracks would be laid over a strip of set-aside land – 1600 miles long and 100 miles wide – running from St. Louis to San Francisco. The route he chooses follows that taken and well documented by his "Pathfinder" son-in-law, John C. Fremont, during his 1842-45 expeditions.

Another proponent of a central line is Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Chairman of the powerful Committee on Territories in Congress. Unlike Benton, however, Douglas is a fervent supporter of Chicago, not St. Louis, as the linchpin for the new line.

Benton and Douglas first clash over the rivalry at a National Railroad Convention which opens on October 15, 1849 in St. Louis. Benton touts St. Louis as the gateway to the west, citing its history as jumping off point for trailblazing expeditions to the coast. Douglas counters by citing Chicago's unique access to both waterways and railroads back to the Atlantic coast.

One week later, on October 23, a second railroad convention is held, this time in Memphis. Some 400 attendees show up, including delegate Asa Whitney and a brief visit by Jefferson Davis. The outcome predictably favors a southern route heading from San Diego along the Mexican border to the Mississippi River and eventually terminating in Memphis.