

Document No. 1

Excerpts from Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods* (1854)

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. . . . The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad. . . . It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them. . . . For the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence. . . . Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. . . . I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately to [experience] only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . The nation itself, with all its so called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered . . . and tripped up by its own trap[ping]s, ruined by luxury and heedless expense. . . . It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and . . . talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour [on a railroad]. . . . If we do not get our sleepers [railroad ties], and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build the railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers [*railroad ties*] are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. . . . Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine tomorrow.

Source: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), 10–17, 98–101.

Document No. 2

Excerpts from Alexander Mackay, “The Growth and Development of Railroads Link East and West in the United States” (1849)

It is a common thing in Europe to speculate upon the probabilities of a speedy dissolution between the northern and southern divisions of the Union; but I confess that, for myself, I have for some time back been of opinion that, should a dissection ever take place, the danger is that it will be between the East and the West. . . . On referring to the map, it will be found that fully one-third of the members [states] of the confederation are situated in the same great basin, having one great interest in common between them, being irrigated by the same system of navigable rivers, and all united together into one powerful belt by their common artery, the Mississippi. . . . The great region drained by the Mississippi is pre-eminently agricultural, whilst much of the sea-board is manufacturing and commercial. The first-named region is being rapidly filled with an adventurous and energetic population. . . . The revolution of a very few years will find it powerful enough to stand by itself, should it feel so inclined, and then nothing can prevent a fatal collision of interests between it and the different communities on the sea-board but the recognition and adoption of a commercial policy, which will afford it an ample outlet for its vast and varied productions. . . . Antagonistic as they are in many respects in their interests, were the East and the West to be left physically isolated from each other, the difficulties in the way of compromise of interests would indeed be insurmountable. Had the East no direct hold upon the West, and had the West no communication with the rest of the world but through the Mississippi, one might well despair of a permanent reconciliation. It is in obviating the physical obstructions . . . that the great barrier to a permanent good understanding between the East and the West has been broken down; it is by rendering each more necessary to the other that the foundation has been laid for that mutual concession, which alone can ensure future harmony and give permanence to the Union. . . . Had matters been left as nature arranged them, the whole traffic of the Mississippi valley would have been thrown upon the Gulf of Mexico. . . . When I consider the many parallel lines of artificial communication [*the network of canals and railroads*] which [have been] established between the East and the West, I must say that . . . we have taken, or are taking, advantage of all our opportunities. . . . Great parallel lines of intercommunication have effectually counteracted the political tendencies of the Mississippi. . . . Every thing, too, which improves the position of the West, as regards the Atlantic seaports, renders the mutual dependence between the two sections of the Union, as respects their home trade, more intimate and complete. . . . It strengthens more and more the sentiment of nationality, by bringing the denizens of the West and the East in constant communication with each other. They freely traverse each other's fields, and walk each other's streets, and feel equally at home. . . . We have united [the West] to us by bonds of iron [railroads] which it cannot . . . break. By binding it to the older States by the strong tie of material interests, we have identified its political sentiment with our own. We have made the twain one by our canals, our railroads, and our electric telegraphs, by making the Atlantic more necessary to the West than the Gulf.

Source: Alexander Mackay, *The Western World or Travels in the United States in 1846–1847* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1849), 1:236–240.

Document No. 3

Excerpts from Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the Eighth Census, "Progress of Railroads in the United States for the Decade of 1850–1860," *Preliminary Census Report* (1862)

The decade which terminated in 1860 was particularly distinguished by the progress of railroads in the United States. At its commencement the total extent in operation was 8,588.79 miles; . . . at its close, 30,598.77 miles; . . . the increase in mileage having been 22,004.08 miles . . . the increase in mileage was nearly 300 per cent. . . . Up to the commencement of the decade our railroads sustained only an unimportant relation to the internal commerce of the country. Nearly all the lines then in operation were local or isolated works, and neither in extent or design had begun to be formed into that vast and connected system which, like a web, now covers every portion of our wide domain, enabling each work to contribute to the traffic and value of all, and supply means of locomotion and a market, almost at his own door, for nearly every citizen of the United States. . . .

Previous to the commencement of the last decade tidewater and only one line of railroad had been completed between tide-water and the great interior basins of the country, the products of which now perform so important a part in our internal and foreign commerce. . . . The commerce resulting from our railroads consequently has been, with comparatively slight exceptions, a creation of the last decade. . . .

The eight great works¹ . . . connecting the interior with the seaboard, are the trunks or base lines upon which is erected the vast system that now overspreads the whole country. . . . The works names, assisted by the Erie canal, now afford ample means for the expeditious and cheap transportation of produce seeking eastern markets, and could . . . transport the entire surplus products of the interior.

Previous to 1850 by far the greater portion of railroads constructed were in the States bordering the Atlantic, and . . . were for the most part isolated lines, whose limited traffics were altogether local. Up to the date named, the internal commerce of the country was conducted almost entirely through *water* lines, natural and artificial, and over ordinary highways. The period of the settlement of California marks really the commencement of a new era in the physical progress of the United States. The vast quantities of gold it produced imparted new life and activity to every portion of the Union, particularly the western States, the people of which [in 1850] were thoroughly aroused as to the value and importance of railroads. . . . Enterprises were undertaken and speedily executed which have literally converted them into a net-work lines, and secured their advantages to almost every farmer and producer.

¹ The eight railroads built in the 1850s: the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, New York Central Railroad, New York and Erie Railroad, Pennsylvania Railroad, Western and Atlantic Railroad, Memphis and Charleston Railroad, Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, and the Atlantic and St. Lawrence (Grand Trunk) Railroad.

. . . During the decade from 1850 to 1860 our population . . . has increased more than thirty-five per cent. More than fifty millions of acres of land were brought into cultivation. . . . The products of manufacture increased from nine hundred millions of dollars, or at the rate of eighty-six per cent. . . . More than 22,000 miles of railroad were completed. . . . to indicate on the map of our country the lines of telegraph would be to represent the web of the spider over its entire surface. Our internal and foreign trade kept pace with our advance in production and increase of capital. . . . Our country seemed the chosen abode of prosperity and peace.

Source: Joseph C. G. Kennedy, *Preliminary Report on the Eighth Census* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1862), 103–104, 118.

Document No. 4

Map: “Growth of Railroads in the United States between 1850 and 1861”

Railroads in Operation in the United States in 1850 (green lines on map below)

Railroads in Operation in the United States by 1861 (red lines on map below)



Map Source: Council for Economic Education, <http://www.econedlink.org>

Map Notes: In 1861, before the start of the Civil War, most railroad lines were located east of the Mississippi River; two-thirds of the tracks had been built in the North, and one-third of the tracks had been built in the South. These railroads and tracks were financed primarily by local governments and private interests in cities and towns. The first railroads were short in length and often without standardized track widths. By 1840, the United States had built 4,000 miles of railway tracks; by 1850, nearly 8,600 miles of railroad tracks has been constructed; by 1860, more than 30,600 miles of railway tracks had been built in the United States. Eventually, these extensions and connections of railroad lines provided uninterrupted transportation over longer distances.

Document No. 5

Excerpts from the Pacific Railway Act (July 1, 1862)

Chap. CXX – An Act to aid in the Construction of a Railroad and Telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to Secure to the Government the Use of the Same for Postal, Military, and Other Purposes.

Sec. 1: . . . The Union Pacific Railroad Company . . . is hereby authorized and empowered to layout, locate, construct, furnish, maintain, and enjoy a continuous railroad and telegraph . . . from a point on the one hundredth meridian of longitude west from Greenwich, between the south margin of the valley of the Republican River and the north margin of the valley of the Platte River, in the Territory of Nebraska, to the western boundary of Nevada Territory.

Sec. 2: . . . the right of way through the public lands be, and the same is hereby, granted to said company for the construction of said railroad and telegraph line; and the right, power, and authority is hereby given to said company to take from the public lands adjacent to the line of said road, earth, stone, timber, and other materials for the construction thereof; said right of way is granted to said railroad to the extent of two hundred feet in width on each side of said railroad . . . including all necessary grounds for stations, buildings, workshops, and depots, machine shops, switches, side tracks, turntables, and water stations. The United States shall extinguish as rapidly as may be the Indian titles to all lands falling under the operation of this act and required for the said right of way.

Sec. 3: Be it further enacted that there be, and is hereby, granted to the said company . . . to secure the safe and speedy transportation of the mails, troops, munitions of war, and public stores thereon, every alternate section of public land, designated by odd numbers, to the amount of five alternate sections per mile on each side of said railroad. . . . All such lands, . . . which shall not be sold or disposed of by the said company within three years after the entire road shall have been completed, shall be subject to settlement and preemption. . . at a price not exceeding one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre, to be paid to said company.

Sec. 4: . . . Whenever said company shall have completed forty consecutive miles of any portion of said railroad and telegraph line, ready for service, . . . the rails and all the other iron used in the construction and equipment of said road to be American manufacture of the best quality, the President of the United States shall appoint three commissioners to examine the same . . . then, upon certificate of said commissioners . . . patents shall issue conveying the right and title to said lands to said company, on each side of the road.

Source: Excerpt from the Pacific Railway Act (July 1, 1862) in *Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives* , <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/>.

Document No. 6

Photograph of the Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, May 10, 1869, by Andrew J. Russell at Promontory Point, Utah

Photograph Notes: This photograph shows the Union Pacific and Central Pacific locomotives nose-to-nose, surrounded by officials and executives. Leland Stanford, co-founder of the Central Pacific Railroad, connected the tracks' eastern and western sections with a golden spike. This project took six years of labor to complete, employed more than 15,000 workers as laborers, masons, teamsters, bridge builders, and explosive experts (2,000 died on the job), and constructed 1,777 miles of railroad track from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California. Notably absent from the photograph are the Irish and Chinese immigrants who were the railroads' primary source of labor.



Source: "Joining the Rails at Promontory Summit," photograph by Andrew J. Russell, May 10, 1869. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04481.01)

Document No. 7

Excerpts from General William Tecumseh Sherman, Letter on the Importance of Railroads, September 26, 1878

Having just arrived from the East . . . I cannot honestly neglect the opportunity to thank you and your associates personally and officially, for having built a first class Steel Rail Road across the Great Desert, to the Colorado River.

The public convenience is so great especially to the troops who garrison the Arizonia posts, that I as their head venture to offer you thanks, and to Express an Earnest hope that in due time your labors and enterprise will be duly rewarded . . . and that you are well advised of the progress of the two Rail Roads approaching New Mexico from the East, one, or both of which seems destined to meet you in your progress Eastward, making another Trans-Continental Railway.

. . . A Railroad East and West through Arizonia, apart from its importance as a Commercial Route from the Pacific to the Atlantic, is a “great civilizer” and will enable the Military Authorities to maintain peace and order among Indians, as well as the Equally dangerous class of Robbers who of late have so much increased in numbers and boldness.

. . . I do not entertain a high opinion of Arizona as an agricultural territory but there seems to be no doubt about its minerals, gold, silver, and copper. Therefore, I . . . shall be among the first to congratulate you on the completion of what must prove a most valuable link in so Grand an Enterprise.

I am further of opinion that every mile of new Railroad . . . will be important in increasing trade and intercourse with our neighbors in Mexico, and thus cause friendly relations, and secure peace on that National Border. . . .

Source: Letter from General William T. Sherman to David D. Colton, vice president of Southern Pacific Railroad, September 26, 1878. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05095)

Document No. 8

Excerpt from Helen Hunt Jackson, *Bits of Travel at Home* (1878)

We cross the Missouri [River] at Council Bluffs [Iowa]. . . . Now we see for the first time the distinctive expression of American overland travel. Here all luggage is weighed and rechecked for points further west. . . . Side by side with the rich and flurried New-Yorker stands the poor and flurried emigrant. Equality rules. Big bundles of feather-beds, tied up in blue check, red chests, corded with rope, get ahead of Saratoga trunks. Many languages are spoken. German, Irish, French, Spanish, a little English, and all varieties of American, I heard during thirty minutes in that luggage-shed. Inside the wall was a pathetic sight,—a poor German woman on her knees before a chest, which had burst open on the journey. It seemed as if its whole contents could not be worth five dollars,—so old, so faded, so coarse were the clothes and so battered were the utensils. But it was evidently all she owned; it was the home she had brought with her from the Fatherland, and would be the home that she would set up in the prairie. The railroad-men were good to her, and were helping her with ropes and nails. This comforted me somewhat; but it seemed almost a sin to be journeying luxuriously on the same day and train with that poor soul. . . .

Some were eating hastily, with looks of distress, as if they knew it would be long before they ate again. Others, wiser, were buying whole chickens, loaves of bread, and filling bottles with tea. Provident Germans bought sausage by the yard. . . . Murderous-looking rifles and guns, with strapped rolls of worn and muddy blankets, stood here and there; murderous, but jolly-looking miners, four-fifths boots and the rest beard, strode about, keeping one eye on their weapons and bedding. Well-dressed women and men with polished shoes, whose goods were already comfortably bestowed in palace-cars, lounged up and down, curious, observant, amused. . . .

“All aboard!” rung out like the last warning on Jersey City wharves when steamers push off for Europe; and in the twinkling of an eye we were out again in the still, soft, broad prairie, which is certainly more like sea than like any other land.

Again flowers and meadows, here and there low hills, more trees, too, in a look of greater richness. Soon the Platte River, . . . the silent guide for so many brave men who are dead! The old emigrant road, over which they went, is yet plainly to be seen; at many points it lies near the railroad. . . .

The air was sharp and clear. The disagreeable guide-book said we were only 1,176 feet above the sea; but we believed we were higher. . . . [At a dining saloon rest-stop in Fremont, Nebraska], we said [to the owner], “But how far apart are your two houses [dining saloons]?” “Only eight hundred miles. It’s considerable trouble to go back an’ forth.”

Source: Helen Hunt Jackson, *Bits of Travel at Home* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878), 6–8.

Document 9

Map: “Growth of Railroads in the United States between 1870 and 1890”

Railroads in Operation in the United States in 1870 (green lines on map below)

Railroads in Operation in the United States by 1890 (red lines on map below)



Map Source: Council on Economic Education, <http://www.econedlink.org>

Map Notes: The prospects of relieving the congestion of eastern cities, finding precious minerals (gold and silver), and claiming surveyed government land (Homestead Act of 1862) created a strong demand for easier access to the West. In 1862, the federal government enacted the Pacific Railway Act, which provided thirty-year loans and land grants to two companies, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific Railroads, to develop and complete this project across two-thirds of the continental United States from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California. When this transcontinental railroad venture was completed at Promontory Point, Utah, in May 1869, the United States was connected with rail lines from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. As a result, instead of six weeks of travel across the nation in a stagecoach, the journey could now be completed “coast-to-coast” in five to six days.

The success of this venture led to the construction of four additional transcontinental rail lines, often with federal government assistance and support:

- The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway connected Atchison, Kansas, with the Southern Pacific Railroad at Deming, New Mexico, which established a second link to Los Angeles, California, in 1882.

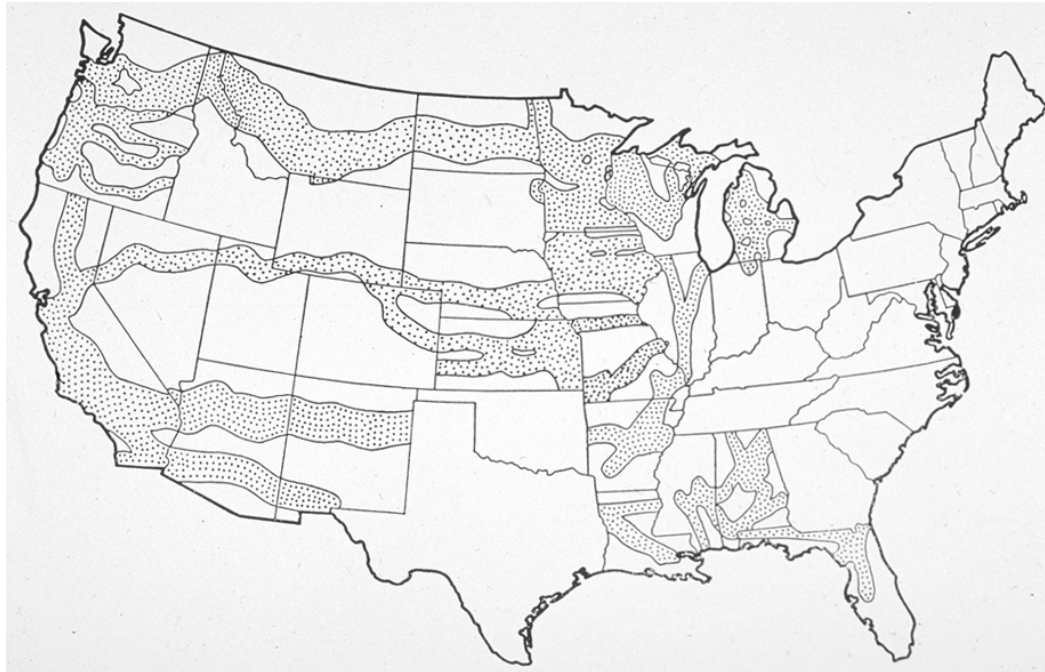
- The Southern Pacific Railroad connected New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Gulf of Mexico to Los Angeles in 1883.
- The Northern Pacific Railway, also completed in 1883, connected Chicago, Illinois, with Seattle, Washington.
- The Great Northern Railroad stretched from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Seattle in 1893.

Between 1865 and 1890, the extent of railway lines west of the Mississippi River increased from 3,272 miles of track to 72,463 miles.

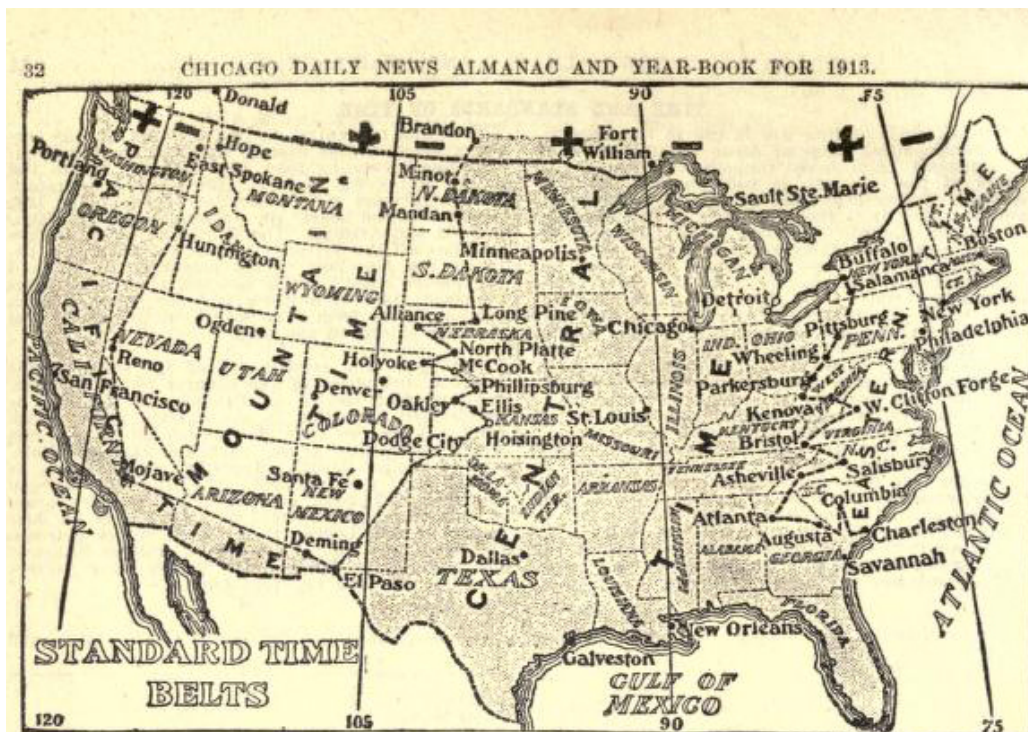
For additional details and information on the specific routes of the transcontinental railroads, please also refer to the map in “Document No. 10,” entitled “The Development of Land Grants, Transcontinental Railroads, and Time Zones in the United States.”

Document Nos. 10 and 11

Maps showing Land Grants and Time Zones in the United States



Map Source: US western railway land grants, GSD lantern slide 36471 from the Images of America: Lantern Slide Collection. (Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University)



Map Source: *Chicago Daily News National Almanac and Year-book for 1913* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Daily News Company, 1912), 32. (Available on archive.org.)

Map Notes: The construction of transcontinental railroads in the United States was a series of very costly and risky ventures that required federal government loans, land grants, and subsidies as incentives to the railroad companies to build the rail lines. These railroad systems promoted economic growth and national unity and advanced the nation's postal and security (military) needs. In total, the federal government granted approximately 155,505,000 acres of land and the western states contributed an additional 49,000,000 acres to the railroads for the construction and operation of the nation's transcontinental railroads. Railroads were permitted to select alternate mile-square sections (in checkerboard fashion). Until 1883, every town in the United States decided its own "local time." In order to facilitate and maintain standardized train schedules and avoid train accidents, the major railroads eliminated this "jumbled patchwork" of "local times" and established four distinct "time zones" for the nation—Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific.