

The 1800s saw an ever-increasing number of Americans moving westward in hopes of adventure and opportunity. A number of new states along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers were admitted to the United States in the early decades of the century. With the discovery of gold in California, more and more people realized the need for a transcontinental railroad system to tie the western territories to the east. In 1853, Congress sent surveyors out west to identify possible routes for a transcontinental railroad. In 1862, the Pacific Railway Act was passed. It authorized the Union Pacific Railroad to build a rail line west from Omaha, Nebraska and the Central Pacific Railroad to build a rail line east from Sacramento, California. The project was completed in 1869 and the United States for the first time was connected from New York to California with a railroad network that spanned over 3500 miles of track.

The lyricist of “The Age of Progress” wrote in his ballad that the completion of “the great Pacific Railroad” would be a part of an “age of giant progress.” By definition, an age of progress is one in which a society experiences positive improvement and growth. Writing his song in 1860, the lyricist could not know for sure, but only imagine, the actual impact that a transcontinental railroad would have on the people living in the United States. What role did the transcontinental railroad play in the improvement and growth of American society?

In this activity, you are going to read primary and secondary source documents to gather evidence that will help you answer this focus question. You will have a chance to work in a group to discuss your ideas. Then you will use your prior knowledge and details from the primary and secondary sources to summarize what you have learned from this historical investigation.