

The Other Side of the Tracks

In 2019, in cities across the country, the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad was enthusiastically celebrated. The Joslyn Art Museum along with the Union Pacific Railroad Museum organized a multi-city traveling exhibition, [The Race to Promontory](#), commemorating the anniversary of the “meeting of the rails.” And in Ogden, UT, Union Pacific offered [a special interactive exhibit](#).

Many of our nation’s cities were built by train, including Chicago, Cheyenne, Albuquerque, and Seattle. From 1827 to 1880, the US experienced an explosion of railway expansion, as new lines from Baltimore to Ohio to New York City and Pittsburgh became the country’s first network of connected municipalities. By 1850, some nine-thousand miles of rail crisscrossed the eastern US. Then, in 1862 President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act, a law that chartered the Union Pacific and Central Pacific companies to connect one side of the country to the other. Ogden’s Union Station on historic 25th street became one point along the transcontinental line, a junction Union Pacific passed through on its way to Promontory and the golden spike.

Heavily inscribed in our national mythos, the locomotive emblemizes our country’s ingenuity, its economic potency, and its dogged pursuit of manifest destiny. Photographers like [William Henry Jackson](#) and [Alfred A. Hart](#) were commissioned to capture the majestic scenery of the country from train boxcar—and painters such as [Edward Hopper](#) were inspired by the train’s power to alter the landscape.

These are the stories we know and have celebrated. And as trade, tourism and immigration surged along the arteries of this new grid, the train built the west, replacing horse and carriage and building wealth along with a passel of bustling new cities *from sea to shining sea*.

But there is another story that must be told.

Hidden beneath the romance of the sturdy locomotive and western expansion, masked by the legends of the men and machines that forged their way through mountains, dense tamarack forests and bogs is another truth. It is the story of millions of lives, irrevocably changed by the railroad, but excluded from the history we know.

It is the story of the enslaved men in the south whose labor built the railways so the locomotive could ship cotton and other goods across the country, propping up chattel slavery and the economy of the Confederacy.

It is the story of the Arapahoe, Sioux and Cheyenne peoples across whose ancestral lands the railway companies cut nearly seven thousand miles of track between 1870 and 1883.

It is the history of the Shoshone, pushed from their Canyon County highlands by rail expansion—and it is the record of the soldiers enlisted to crush indigenous peoples who dared to resist.

It is the story of the Mexican, Irish and Chinese immigrants who hoisted railway ties reeking of creosote onto their backs and drove the spikes, installing the tracks from Brownsville, TX to Atlantic City—and from Savannah to Sacramento. And it is the distressing account of the thousands who died from disease and exhaustion in the process.

These are histories unaccounted for in our best-known tales of the train—the men, women and communities transformed but ignored in the dominant narrative of the black-soot engine and the nation it built. It is their stories of the tracks that still wait to be told. What did they receive if not a grand vision of a glorious new nation?

This contemporary visual art exhibition will highlight and center the work of artists who come from these communities, their voices excluded from the triumphal tales of the track. The work of Native American, African American, Chinese and Mexican art-makers—as well as women artists will create a powerful vision of the railway from a perspective Americans have rarely experienced before. A central component of this project will be a research experience—an opportunity for the artists in the exhibit to take a brief trip by train, visiting towns and cities built by the railway. This experience will be a vital part of the proposed program and inform the work the artists produce for the show.

As a new generation of faster trains emerge it is important that we think critically about the history of our railways: who they have served, who they've neglected, and who they have hurt. The power that trains have to move and inspire us is still strong; but if we are to build a more equitable future, we must make a more concerted effort to clearly see our past.