

The Golden Spike Ceremony Revisited "Lay Report"  
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The Golden Spike Ceremony is one of the most famous events in American History. It has been a popular subject for over a century and has been portrayed many times in books and movies. However, the event has been subject to very little scholarly study. This project reviewed a vast amount of primary material related to the ceremony to test our historical knowledge of it. The results were unexpected and challenge much of what we thought we knew.

Because so few people could really see and hear the event, many accounts of it are contradictory. However, a reinterpretation of the data suggests that things happened in a different order than previously thought. The ceremony began a few minutes past noon (local sun time). It is probable that it opened with an invocation followed by a ceremonial laying of the last rail and tie. Then four precious-metal spikes were presented by various states. After brief acceptance speeches by Leland Stanford and Grenville M. Dodge, a silver-plated spike maul, a kind of sledge hammer, was presented. Then came the driving of the last spikes—one for each company. Union Pacific Vice President Thomas C. Durant stood on the north side of the track while Central Pacific President Stanford stood on the south side. At a signal from the telegrapher, both took swings at their respective spikes. They did not swing at the golden spikes but at common iron spikes in an adjacent tie. Stanford's was wired to the telegraph line, and each of his blows was transmitted across the nation's telegraph network. After the spikes were finally driven home, likely by John Strobridge and Samuel B. Reed, the master of ceremonies announced the work completed, and the telegrapher flashed D-O-N-E across the country. The entire ceremony lasted only about twenty minutes.

The text of a previously unknown speech was discovered in the research. The words of L.W. Coe, who presented the silver-plated spike maul, were found in a California newspaper. President of the Pacific Union Express Company, Coe made a facetious speech that repeatedly used forms of the word express.

Other misconceptions were discovered. A large detachment of soldiers, traveling west by rail, had been thought to have been present during the ceremony. Documentary and photographic evidence indicates they arrived just afterward. It had also been reported in several books that W. N. Shilling had been the telegrapher. In a 1919 newspaper interview, Shilling indicated only that he had helped attach the telegraph wires to the track.

A final focus of the study was the celebrations of the event in major United States cities. Various sources had reported the ringing of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the firing of a 220-gun salute in San Francisco, and the dropping of a magnetic ball at the Capitol in Washington, D.C. All proved untrue. While the bell in the tower of Philadelphia's Independence Hall was rung, the damaged Liberty Bell had been removed from the tower years previously. In San Francisco, only one cannon, wired to the telegraph line, was fired. And in Washington, D.C., a magnetic bell--not a magnetic ball--at the Western Union office signaled the railroad's completion.

The Golden Spike Ceremony has become an important part of the nation's saga. Its pompous tycoons, rough and ready workers, brilliant technicians, and exploited minorities are historical archetypes, its setting is the mythic landscape of the Far West, and it involves the lure and fascination of gold. More than any other event, it captures the essence of America in the last half of the nineteenth century.