



A brief tale of three Chinese gangs (1865-1869):

How three different work gangs of Chinese laborers helped build the last leg of the first transcontinental railroad to the Pacific coast, from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay

Many people are familiar with the first transcontinental railroad and how it was “completed” in May 1869 when the rails of Central Pacific from Sacramento and the rails of Union Pacific from Omaha were joined at Promontory Summit in Utah with a golden spike ceremony, accompanied by a lightning-fast telegraphed D.O.N.E. across the nation. However, the transcontinental railroad had not reached the Pacific coast in May 1869 and was not done. This is a story about the building of the westernmost segment of the first transcontinental railroad to the Pacific coast -- the first railroad from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay -- and the three distinct Chinese work gangs who helped build it from 1865 to 1869.

Three plaques (1951, 1969, and 1979): Which is correct?

There are three plaques or markers, among many, commemorating this important first railroad from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay, which finally completed the first transcontinental railroad to the Pacific coast. But they are conflicting. The oldest plaque of the three was erected in 1951 at Alameda and read in part: “*On September 6, 1869, the first transcontinental railroad train linking two great oceans... passed here on way to a wharf terminal west of here...*” The second plaque of interest was erected in 1969 (but missing since 2009) at Mossdale in Lathrop near the San Joaquin River railroad bridge and was inscribed as follows: “*The construction of the San Joaquin River Bridge completed the last link of the Transcontinental Railroad. Building had simultaneously proceeded from the Bay Area and Sacramento and met at the San Joaquin River. The first train crossed the bridge on September 8, 1869.*” The last plaque of interest was erected in 1979 at Niles, Fremont (on Niles Boulevard near J Street) and read in part: “*In September the final link between San Francisco and Sacramento was completed near the Flour Mill of Jesus Vallejo, a short distance east of this location.*”

The messages on these three plaques are in mutual tension; this tension has been with us for perhaps forty years, since 1979 when all three were in place. To help sort out this tension, I went back to the news sources of the 1860s, some available online through the UC-Riverside California Digital Newspaper Collections, as well as other sources like maps. The following is a brief account of the tale I found that emerged from these sources about the building of the first railroad from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay. Unlike the oft-told epic story of the building of the Central Pacific Railroad through one gigantic Chinese work gang under the charge of J. H. Strobridge, this is a tale of three different Chinese work gangs helping build the first Western Pacific Railroad to the Bay. The tale turned out to be new to me with some surprising twists, and I think parts of it might just surprise you too.¹ For ease of cross checking with the many 1860s sources, I retain, in this story here, place names commonly used in the 1860s.

¹ I wish to thank two of my Acacia Creek friends, Tau Alpha and Roger Baird, for inspiring me to pursue this story.