

Binding East and West: Collis P. Huntington's Role in Uniting the States

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Definitions

Let us define an entrepreneur as one who, using his own or borrowed money, advances the development of a business venture which provides a new kind of service or device which improves and enriches human life. Clearly, in the series of papers preceding this one, we have covered the Oneonta entrepreneurs who created the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad (Eliakim Reed Ford), founded the companies that evolved into IBM (Harlow Elisha Bundy and George Winthrop Fairchild), and invested in the group of gifted man who invented the microcircuits which enable modern life (Sherman Mills Fairchild). The impacts of the businesses they created were at the local, regional, national, international, and extraterrestrial levels. Indulging in the parlance of professional boxing, we have shown that Oneonta (never having more than 14000 people) punched way above its weight class. Yet we cannot complete our study of Oneonta entrepreneurs without considering the career of Collis Potter Huntington.

The Shop Around the Corner

An 1841 map of Oneonta shows E.R. Ford's shop on South Main St. in the flats near the river.ⁱ That same map depicts a long, narrow plot of land owned by S. (Solon) Huntington on Main St. His younger brother Collis P. Huntington, aged 22, joined him there in 1843 to co-run the shop. If you stand today on the north-west corner of the intersection of Chestnut and Main Streets, and you look across Main St. to the south east, you will see the site of their market. Collis was a bluff, hands-on guy who could throw a sledgehammer (as a sport) and, having experimented with early fire-fighting apparatus, was elected Oneonta's first fire chief in 1847.ⁱⁱ In 1849, spurred by news of the Gold Rush, Collis migrated to

Sacramento, CA not as a miner but with the intent to establish the west coast branch of S.& C.P. Huntington.ⁱⁱⁱ Its goal was to service the growing numbers of prospectors with supplies of all kinds. Always able to spot a coming trend, a natural deal maker who lived a quiet, abstemious life with the wife he sent for from Oneonta, C.P. prospered in partnership with another thrifty transplant from Henderson, NY named Mark Hopkins.^{iv} Their joint business was located at 54 K Street in Sacramento. As a result of the construction of Interstate 5 in 1970, the store was moved to Old Sacramento, where it can still be visited today.^v

The Dream Fulfilled

By 1850, the western frontier of the civilized eastern United States had been pushed from the Hudson River to the Missouri.^{vi} As a staunch Republican, C.P. undoubtedly knew that the building of a Pacific Railroad uniting Iowa and California over a route including the Nebraska, Colorado, Utah and Nevada territories was a plank of the 1860 party platform.^{vii} For all passenger or freight customers, the benefit of replacing a voyage around Cape Horn or a trek from the Atlantic to the Pacific side of Panama as part of a shorter voyage were obvious. Fortunately, an RPI-trained railroad builder named Theodore Judah had, with the help of Daniel Strong, surveyed a buildable right-of-way across the 7000 foot crest of the Sierra Nevada mountain range between Sacramento and Truckee, CA. In November, 1860 Ted Judah held a public meeting in Sacramento at the St. Charles Hotel on K Street to discuss his survey findings and how they might tier up into the coming Pacific railroad bill. Unlike some of the audience, C.P. held back his support but asked Judah to stop by his office some night for another discussion.^{viii} At that meeting, Judah, who had been a Lobbyist in Congress for a conglomerate of California railroads, explained to C.P. the interlocking self-interests of the numerous roads vying for a piece of the Pacific road. He also said the surveyed right of way could quickly be turned into a wagon road to Nevada (a precipitous Catskill Turnpike, if you will). The immediate prospect of profits enticed C.P., who explained that Judah's method of trying to sell a few shares here and there at meetings would never pan out. What was

needed was to find four other Sacramento businessmen who would put \$1500 down payment on stock to become directors of Judah's railroad.^{ix}

C.P.'s first choice as an additional investor was logically Mark Hopkins. His second was a local jeweler named Charles Bailey. The third was a wholesale grocer named Leland Stanford, a one-time lawyer from outside Albany, New York. And the fourth was Charles Crocker, a Troy, NY native who like C.P. was a shopkeeper. With the resignation of Bailey, the *Associates* (Huntington, Hopkins, Stanford, and Crocker) became the directors of what Ted Judah was to coin the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR).^x After completing a final, detailed survey of the Sierra Nevada line, Ted Judah was sent to Washington to lobby for the CPRR when consideration of the Pacific Railroad came to the Congressional docket in 1862. Local stock subscriptions would not be enough to finance the CP railroad, government subsidies were needed to offset the tremendous construction costs the railroads were taking on. On July 1 1862 President Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad bill.^{xi} What this amounted to was that two railroads, the Central Pacific building east from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific building west from Council Bluffs Iowa, would be heavily subsidized in bonds and adjoining land for every mile built, and would meet at some intermediate point, which in fact turned out to be Promontory Point, Utah. The delays, labor and supply problems, Indian fights, and obstacles of mountains challenged and crossed are beyond the scope of this paper and are ably described in Bain's book.

Success and Further Efforts.

The meeting of the two lines occurred on May 10, 1869.^{xii} The Central Pacific eventually expanded to encompass most of California and extended as far east as New Orleans. Virginia promoters approached C.P. to take control of the Chesapeake & Ohio railroad which built east from the Atlantic coast to Cincinnati, Chicago, and Detroit. C.P. Huntington went on to control an empire consisting of 6000 miles of track so that he could board a train in New York and travel to San Francisco entirely on lines he owned. His fortune grew to \$200 million.^{xiii} As a staunch Republican and former abolitionist, he contributed to black educational institutions like the Hampton Institute. He also founded the Newport News

Shipbuilding Co. to build commercial and naval ships. Despite the global scope of his businesses, C. P. ever after traveled in a private railroad car named for the upstate New York hometown that he always treasured, *Oneonta*.



Driving the Golden Spike at Promontory, Utah 1869 by A.J. Russell (Public Domain)

In our next and final episode of the pantheon of Oneonta entrepreneurs, we will discuss how Henry Edwards Huntington, Collis' nephew, became the builder of the California dream life in the Los Angeles Basin. Until then, the reader can ponder the identity of the young cadet in the following photo taken when H.E. visited the neighboring George S. Patton family in San Marino, CA.



H. E. Huntington (center) and Patton family, November 1903

mssHEH 61/31, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

ⁱ Milener, Eugene M., *Oneonta – the Development of a Railroad Town*, Oneonta, NY (1997), p. 177.

ⁱⁱ Milener, p. 186.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bain, David Howard, *Empire Express*, New York, NY (1999) p. 88.

^{iv} Whose name graces the most famous hotel in San Francisco.

^v Google “Old Town Sacramento, Huntington-Hopkins Hardware Store”.

^{vi} Bain, p. 25.

^{vii} Bain, p. 89.

^{viii} Bain, p. 87.

^{ix} Bain, p. 90.

^x Bain, pp. 91-94.

^{xi} Bain, p. 115.

^{xii} Bain, p. 661.

^{xiii} Milener, pp. 188.