



A California Chief Justice Sent the First Transcontinental Telegram

ON OCTOBER 24, 1861, the transcontinental telegraph was completed, and like the transcontinental railroad, it was built by two crews working toward the middle.¹ The telegraph wire roughly followed the route taken by the fabled Pony Express and its completion signaled the demise of the one-year-old delivery system.

The two construction crews met in Salt Lake City, Utah on the 24th. Brigham Young sent the first telegram west but the first coast-to-coast message was sent by California's Chief Justice Stephen J. Field at 7:40 pm and received by President Abraham Lincoln 3,595 miles away, in Washington, DC at 11:30 am on Oct. 25th. Some six months into the Civil War, Field, substituting for the temporarily absent Gov. John Downey, used the telegram to pledge California's loyalty to the United States.

To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States:
In the temporary absence of the Governor of the State, I am requested to send you the first message which will be transmitted over the wires of the telegraph line which connect the Pacific with the Atlantic States.

The people of California desire to congratulate you upon the completion of the great work. They believe that it will be the means of strengthening the attachment which binds both the East and the West to the Union, and they desire in this, the first message across the Continent, to express their loyalty to that Union, and their determination to stand by the Government, in this, its day of trial. They regard that Government with affection, and will adhere to it under all fortunes.

STEPHEN J. FIELD, Chief Justice of California.²

Fewer than two years later, Lincoln appointed Field to the U.S Supreme Court. ★

ENDNOTES

1. This note is drawn from Dakota Livesay, "Transcontinental Telegraph. The Week in the Old West," *White Mountain Independent*, Oct. 25, 2019, https://www.wmicentral.com/news/arizona_news/transcontinental-telegraph/article_44a5a6bf-098a-5e9c-90fa-35339edd639e.html. The Review thanks Society Board Member David Ettinger for his post noting this milestone, "The first transcontinental telegram was sent by a California Supreme Court chief justice," *At the Lectern*, Oct. 27, 2019, <http://www.atthelectern.com/the-first-transcontinental-telegram-was-sent-by-a-california-supreme-court-chief-justice/>.
2. "The Telegraph to California. The First Message over the Pacific Line," *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1861, <https://www.nytimes.com/1861/10/29/archives/the-telegraph-to-california-the-first-message-over-the-pacific-line.html>.