On October 24, 1861, the transcontinental telegraph was completed, and like the transcontinental railroad, it was built by two crews working toward the middle. 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.

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

Endnotes

FIRST LEGAL HISTORY TRAVEL GRANT WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Earlier this year, the California Supreme Court Historical Society established a research grant program to help defray the travel and archival-related expenses of graduate students and law students pursuing research on California legal history.

The fund has now awarded its first grants, to Taylor Cozzens, a history master’s student at the University of Oklahoma, and Smita Ghosh, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pennsylvania.

Ghosh’s research relates to her dissertation on the history of immigrant detention, and the grant will help fund her travel to several archives in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. Cozzens’ research focuses on the history of the California Rural Legal Assistance organization during the 1970s. The non-profit CRLA, founded in 1966, provides legal services to California’s low-income individuals and communities. The grant will enable Cozzens to work with materials in Stanford University’s Special Collections.

The Society congratulates these young scholars.

The Legal History Travel Grant is funded by the generosity of California Supreme Court Justice Kathryn Mickle Werdegar (Ret.) and David M. Werdegar, M.D., in honor of Selma Moidel Smith, editor-in-chief of California Legal History.

Application information is found at https://www.cschs.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CSCHS-California-Legal-History-Research-Travel-Grant-121018.pdf. Applications are considered on a rolling basis.