

# Golden Spike

National Historic Site  
P.O. Box 897  
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## The Last Spikes

Most people have heard about driving the Golden Spike at Promontory Point. The facts may be surprising. The Golden Spike Ceremony, which took place May 10, 1869, was held at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, thirty-seven miles north of Promontory Point, and no one ever attempted to drive a golden spike.

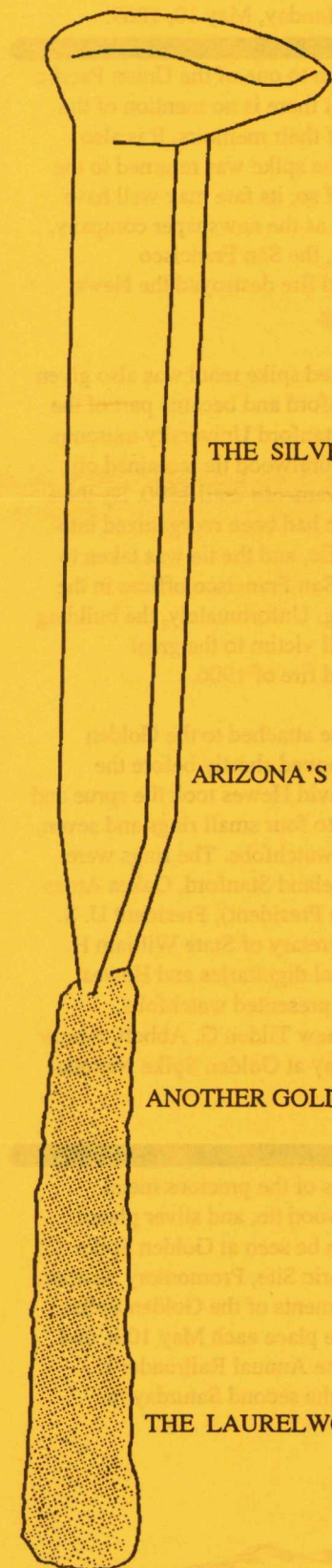
Misconceptions surrounding the Ceremony were started by newspaper reporters. Due to the press of the crowd around the Last Spike Site, not one member of the press saw the Ceremony, and many reporters had

actually written their special "eye-witness" accounts days before the Golden Spike Ceremony was held. The only information the reporters had was that some sort of celebration was to take place May 8, near Promontory Point (the only place marked on their maps), and that Central Pacific President Leland Stanford was bringing a gold spike. Final plans for the Ceremony were not even made until the morning of May 10, when dignitaries of the Central Pacific met with those of the Union Pacific, who had been delayed two days by angry workers and rainy weather.

### THE GOLDEN SPIKE

On May 4, 1869, with the scheduled May 8 completion of the Railroad imminent, Stanford's friend, San Francisco contractor David Hewes, was upset to discover no one had prepared a special commemorative of the event. Unable to persuade anyone to finance the casting of a solid gold or silver section of rail, Hewes decided upon a more practical token. Taking over \$400 worth of his own gold, he had San Francisco jewelers Schulz, Fischer & Mohrig fashion and cast a 5½ inch long, 14.03 ounce, 17.6 carat golden spike. Only about \$350 worth of gold was used to make the spike, with the remainder left attached in a large sprue.

After casting, the spike was engraved on one side, "May God continue the unity of our Country as the Railroad unites the two great Oceans of the world." Another side read, "The Pacific Railroad ground broken Jan 8<sup>th</sup> 1863 and completed May 8<sup>th</sup> 1869." The remaining two sides were engraved with the officers of Central Pacific on one and the railroad's directors (most of whom were the same persons) on the other. The top of the spike was simply engraved, "The Last Spike." Although there was another spike of solid gold at the Ceremony, Hewes' spike became famous as *the* Golden Spike.



### THE SILVER SPIKE

Unlike the Golden Spike, Nevada's silver spike was forged instead of cast. The spike was ordered on May 5, 1869 by Railroad Commissioner and candidate for Governor of the new State of Nevada, Mr. F. A. Tritle. Virginia City assayers E. Ruhling & Co. provided 25 ounces of silver which Robert Lodge of the Dowling Blacksmith Shop forged into a rather rough, unpolished, 6 inch long, 10½ ounce spike bearing only

the assayers stamp. The spike was rushed twenty miles to Reno, barely in time to be given to Stanford aboard his delayed special train heading to Promontory.

### ARIZONA'S SPIKE

The spike presented by Arizona Territory was a composite made from plating an ordinary 6 inch iron spike with gold on the head (upper portion) and silver on the shaft (lower portion). The Territory's newly appointed Governor, Anson P. K. Safford, apparently had the spike made, but when and by whom is unknown. The highly polished spike was engraved, "Ribbed with iron clad in silver and crowned with gold

Arizona presents her offering to the enterprise that has banded a continent and dictated a pathway to commerce. Presented by Governor Safford."

### ANOTHER GOLD & MAUL

A second gold spike was ordered, at the same time as the Golden Spike, by Frederick Marriott, proprietor of the San Francisco *News Letter* newspaper company. This 5 inch long, 9½ ounce spike, made from about \$200 worth of gold, was inscribed, "With this spike the San Francisco *News Letter* offers its homage to the great work which has joined the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. This month-May, 1869."

L. W. Coe, president of San Francisco's Pacific Express Company, had tool maker Conroy & O'Conner manufacture a special spike hammer, or maul, for the Golden Spike Ceremony. The maul was then taken to Vanderslice & Co. of San Francisco, where it was heavily plated with silver and stamped with the manufacturer's name.

### THE LAURELWOOD TIE

West Evans, tie contractor for Central Pacific, had San Francisco billiard table manufacturer Strahle & Hughes prepare a highly polished tie made from California laurelwood. The 7½ foot long, 8 X 6 inch tie bore a centered silver plaque marked, "The last tie laid on completion of the Pacific Railroad, May, 1869." the plaque also listed the officers and directors of Central Pacific along with the names of the

tie maker and donor. Four holes were augured, or drilled, into the tie in order to accommodate ceremonial spikes without the need to drive them.

Actual Size of the Golden Spike and sprue

## A STRIKING CEREMONY

Before the start of the Golden Spike Ceremony, workers brought the laurelwood tie from Stanford's coach, placed it down, and laid the last rail sections across it. The Ceremony commenced, emceed by wealthy Sacramento banker Edgar Mills. The invocation was offered by the Reverend Dr. John Todd of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Presentation of the spikes and ties followed.

After an ardously verbose speech, Dr. H. W. Harkness, a Sacramento newspaper publisher and editor, presented the two golden spikes to Leland Stanford, who placed them into the first and fourth pre-drilled holes in the laurelwood tie. Union Pacific Vice-President Thomas Durant was presented Nevada's silver spike by Mr. Tritle and Arizona's spike by Governor Safford. Durant placed these spikes into the second and third holes in the tie. Stanford then offered a rousing speech. He was to have been followed by Durant, but, due to Durant's severe headache (most likely a hangover from the previous night's party in Ogden), Union Pacific's Chief

Engineer, General Grenville Dodge, took Durant's place and gave a few short, yet enthusiastic words. Mr. Coe then presented the silver plated maul, which Stanford and Durant used to ever-so-gently tap the precious metal spikes, leaving no mark upon either the spikes, or the maul.

Immediately, the precious metal spikes and laurelwood tie were removed and replaced with a pine tie, into which three ordinary iron spikes were then driven. A fourth iron spike, and a regular iron spike hammer, were both wired to the Transcontinental Telegraph line so that the Nation could "hear" the blows as the spike was driven.

Being a man of large stature, Stanford took a mighty swing at the spike, and struck the tie instead. Durant, still not feeling too well, took a feeble swing, and did not even hit the tie! Finally, a regular rail worker drove home the last spike, and the telegrapher, W. N. Shilling of Western Union, sent the long awaited message, "D-O-N-E." The time; 12:47 P.M., Monday, May 10, 1869.

## A SCATTERING OF HISTORY

After the Ceremony, the Golden Spike traveled back to California in the laurelwood tie aboard Stanford's coach. Enroute, a group of Army Officers riding with Stanford attempted to "drive" the Spike into the tie with the pommels of their swords, which accounts for several small round indentations on the Spike's head.

Following a brief time on display, the Golden Spike was returned to David Hewes. Hewes kept it until 1892, when he donated his extensive rare art collection, including the Golden Spike, to the museum of newly built Leland Stanford Junior University in Palo Alto, California.

Nevada's silver spike was temporarily returned to Virginia City jewelers Nye & Co., who brightly polished the spike and engraved one side, "To Leland Stanford President of the Central Pacific Railroad. To the iron of the East and the gold of the West Nevada adds her link of silver to span the continent and wed the oceans." The spike was then delivered to Stanford and eventually placed along with the Golden Spike in the Stanford University museum.

It is unknown what happened to Arizona Territory's spike immediately following the Ceremony. Decades later, it became part of the Smithsonian's transportation museum.

The whereabouts of the second gold spike is unknown. It has been speculated that the

spike was given to one of the Union Pacific dignitaries, but there is no mention of the spike in any of their memoirs. It is also possible that the spike was returned to the *News Letter*. If so, its fate may well have been the same as the newspaper company, when, in 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed the News Letter Building.

The silver plated spike maul was also given to Leland Stanford and became part of the collection at Stanford University museum. The famous laurelwood tie remained on display in Sacramento until 1890. By then, Central Pacific had been reorganized into Southern Pacific, and the tie was taken to the railroad's San Francisco offices in the Flood Building. Unfortunately, the building and tie also fell victim to the great earthquake and fire of 1906.

The large sprue attached to the Golden Spike was removed shortly before the Ceremony. David Hewes took the sprue and had it made into four small rings and seven, one inch long watchfobs. The rings were presented to Leland Stanford, Oakes Ames (Union Pacific President), President U. S. Grant, and Secretary of State William H. Seward. Several dignitaries and Hewes relatives were presented watchfobs, including nephew Tilden G. Abbott, whose fob is on display at Golden Spike National Historic Site.

Today, replicas of the precious metal spikes, laurelwood tie, and silver plated spike maul can be seen at Golden Spike National Historic Site, Promontory Summit, Utah. Reenactments of the Golden Spike Ceremony take place each May 10th, and again during the Annual Railroader's Festival, held the second Saturday in August.

