

# Our First Transcontinental Railroad

And The

## The Last Gold Spikes at Promontory, Utah May 10, 1869

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1. The **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike** is in fact at Stanford University Museum and apparently has been in their possession or control since David Hewes donated it to the University in 1892. The confusion as to its authenticity developed by the research by Prof. Robin Lampson in which he was misled at several points. He either failed to recognize or ignored the Jewelers receipt he found in 1937 which listed the charges for "*Finishing 2 Gold Spikes*" and did not recognize that the two photos he was given by Mrs. Mabel Hewes Chandler were not of the original spike but of a second spike which was still unknown outside the Hewes family. He was not alone in overlooking the description of 2 spikes on the receipt as the receipt had been donated to Stanford and is/was framed and hanging on the wall in the Stanford Archives Room for public display. No record of anyone else, Lampson, Stanford Archivist, historian or visitor, has ever questioned if there were actually two spikes.

Lampson's research was further confounded by the National Park Service who borrowed the brass replica from Stanford, duplicated the spike exactly but then duplicated the engraving, not from the Stanford replica, but from the Hewes photographs of the second spike that Prof. Lampson had earlier provided without realizing the difference. This left everyone believing that the NPS replica was an exact duplicate of the **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike**. That spike rests at the NHS at Promontory to this day. The next conflict was discovered by Lampson in reviewing the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in its Winter 1969 issue where he discovered photographs of "*two obviously different 'Last spikes', one on page 80 and the other on page 144*". One was identified by Lampson as one of the Stanford brass spikes, the other Stanford's gold spike. The magazine credited Stanford University with the two photos of the original spike and Lampson concluded "we

are confronted with two different "originals" of a single historical artifact." The Stanford Archivist was also not aware of the differences between the photographs he had provided to the NHS.

Photos of the **Stanford Spike** were published by Gerald Best in his "Iron Horses to Promontory" pg.58 in 1969; by J.N. Bowman in his research published in the California Historical Society Quarterly, June 1957, pg. 97 and by Lampson (as seen by him on May 26, 1969 at Stanford U. Museum) in his paper "The Golden Spike is Missing" published in the Pacific Historian, Winter, 1970. All three photos are of the same original **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike**. Lampson is the only one who believed his photo was of a replica.

It is my opinion that one should not fault Prof. Lampson on his research except for his failure to recognize that "2 spikes" were on the receipt. Had he known that I am sure the outcome of his research would have been quite different. He encountered too many misrepresented facts and he received no good advice or help from others who should have known or at least have been interested. The one thing that Lampson did accomplish was to discover the evidence that would eventually be used to prove what the **Hewes Keepsake Gold Spike** actually was. If the CSRM will make the second spikes identity and place in history well known then fifty years from now we won't have another mystery of which spike is the original gold spike.

2. The stories of the Sprue or "Nugget" attached to the **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike** has also become an exaggerated legend, added to every time someone finds a miniature spike or determines more rings were made. In the Lieutenant Joshua Hewes family biography, a copy, which is available on the CPRR.org web site, David Hewes clearly states "*I presented the gold spike to Governor Stanford, as a compliment to the Central Pacific Railroad, and after he had taken as much of the nugget as he required to make certain souvenirs, it was returned to me*—". page 252. (Emphasis added) Governor Stanford no doubt kept a portion of the "Sprue" as James Harvey Strobridge, Supt. of Construction on the Central Pacific was known to have worn a piece of the nugget as a fob on his watch chain until his death in April 1921 as attested to by his grandson, Edward Keating Strobridge Jr. in an interview in 1977. One can only speculate that Stanford took a piece large enough to make more than the one souvenir that he gave Strobridge but the existence of any others has never come to light. It seems only reasonable to assume that Stanford might have taken as much as half the nugget to share with the key men who worked on the Central Pacific.

Hewes describes a symbolic ring he had made from his portion of the gold sprue and presented to Secretary of State William H. Seward. "*It was made with two oval shaped emblems, one of California gold quartz and the other of quartz containing moss-agate, which was found in the Rocky Mountains and gold quartz representing the Central Pacific, and the Moss Agate for the Union Pacific.*" Hewes writes on page 250 of his memoirs—"the golden

*spike and several souvenir rings made from a portion of the spike left for that purpose" all being in the Stanford Museum. Note that Hewes never made any claim to have made any miniature gold spikes!*

Leo J. Friis, in his biography of David Hewes: *More than the Golden Spike*, 1974, p.33 writes that Hewes gave his wife a ring bearing the inscription "Last Spike P.R.R. (sic), Driven May 10, 1869, a similar ring inscribed "Last Spike P.R.R., Driven May 10, 1869 From D. Hewes to R. Abbott, his favorite sister, a fourth ring, inscribed "The Mountain Wedding, May 10, 1869" presented to John Todd, the minister who gave the invocation at the last Spike Ceremony. Friis also makes no mention of any miniature gold spikes.

Stephen E. Ambrose, in his book *Nothing like it in the World, 1863-1869*, 2002, pg. 360, not to be outdone, adds rings for "*President Grant, Oakes Ames (Pres. of the Union Pacific) and others*" with no supporting documentation; the stuff that legends are built on.

The Southern Pacific Bulletin May 1926, pg. 8 tells the story of General Foreman of Telegraph construction, Amos Bowsher's CPRR reminiscences, "*Some 'Shark' from San Francisco signed up people to send them gold spikes as a piece of the original, I was one of those who bit at \$5 a charm. Of course our charms were knocked out of far different stuff than the real gold spike!*"

The Southern Pacific Bulletin Oct. 1927 pg. 11 Chapter 23 reports "*For months afterwards (May 10, 1869) in all parts of the country miniature gold spikes were offered for sale as mementos of the completion of America's first transcontinental railroad.*"

There were also newspaper advertisements in the Sacramento newspapers and the country was flooded with these sales of these miniature gold spikes. Today these miniature gold spikes can be found at the NHS in Promontory, Utah, at the CSRM, sometimes offered by antique dealers and who knows where else. Unless tested by a metallurgist against the **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike** there would be no way to determine which ones of the possible hundreds made could possibly be authentic.

Stanford University Library, Dept. of Special Collections in **Central Pacific–Gold Spike and Memorabilia–Fol.2** has a "Photograph (numbered #14011) of a gold spike and other memorabilia." It includes the **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike**, all four rings described by Hewes in his two biographies, one miniature gold spike (which appears to be the same design as the one now in the NHS Promontory collection and a small hammer which may have been intended to represent the symbolic Silver Headed Spike Hammer. The fact that these mementoes are all in the same photograph indicates that the photo itself may be a very old one, probably taken before the mementoes were given to their intended recipients, possibly as early as 1869-1870. The photo appears to bear out what David Hewes has said regarding the four rings he had made from the sprue removed from the **Stanford Spike** as well as the one miniature spike claimed to have been given to his brother-in-law, Benjamin Cox. The one claimed to have been given to Tilden G.

Abbott, now at the NHS appears to be of the same design. The possibility that Hewes did make at least one, perhaps two miniature gold spikes from the sprue makes one wonder how much gold was in the "nugget." I suspect that the **Hewes Keepsake Gold Spike** and attached "nugget" are comparable to the Stanford Spike and the volume and/weight of the sprue can be closely estimated from it. That knowledge would help determine how much gold was available for the souvenirs made.

David Hewes never made any claims of making any of these miniature spikes even though a number of people claimed to have had an original souvenir. The San Francisco "Sharks" did their work well and the nation today is faced with more souvenirs taken from the **Hewes Stanford Gold Spike** Nugget (sprue) than there was sprue available. One would need to be very careful in accepting any of these small souvenir gold spikes as authentic without some examination by a metallurgist and an expert in the jewelers art. Hewes used the art of engravers for his mementos, the "Sharks" spike were mass-produced and have been observed with the engraving actually stamped in the souvenir.

3. The *San Francisco Newsletter and California Advertiser* Gold Spike, donated to Leland Stanford on May 1st, 1869 by Frank Marriott, was covered in great detail. In Vol.IX No.14 dated May 1, 1869 on page 1, col. 1 published a notice:

"THE LAST SPIKE" The "News Letter has this morning forwarded to Hon. Leland Stanford, at the Front of the Central Pacific Railroad, a Railway Spike Of Solid Gold" and follows with a complete copy of the inscription."

along with an engraving of the spike in almost a scale size.

In its May 8th edition, on page 1, Col. 2, Frank Marriott offers a lengthy story and then quotes from the *S.F. Daily Times* (and others) on the description of his spike:

A handsome gold spike, weighing 9 and a half ounces, and costing about \$200, was sent to President Stanford and other officers of the road, yesterday, by Frederick Marriott, proprietor of the **News Letter**. The spike, which is an exact *facsimile* of an ordinary railroad spike, bears the following inscription: "With this spike the San Francisco Newsletter offers its homage to the great work which has joined the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans this month – May 1869." *S.F. Daily Times*.

Note: The *News Letter* spike, unlike the Hewes Spikes, is an exact facsimile of a contemporary common spike used on the Central Pacific track construction. There were several manufacturers of these spikes so the design varied slightly from one manufacturer to another. Generally the original common **iron** spikes measured 9/16" square by 5 3/8" long and weighed 8 1/2 oz. This writer has several original unused original CPRR "dropped spikes" in his collection.

"Promontory Point". May 7th. – Governor Stanford and party have brought out the last tie, and are provided with an assortment of last spikes. The largest is the solid gold one presented by Mr. Hewes. Besides this there is a handsome one of pure gold presented by the San Francisco *News Letter* and two silver ones from Virginia bullion and from Arizona. —*Bulletin p.1: 2*

A special four-page edition, Vol. IX No. XV was published on May 15, 1869. This edition was called a "**Supplement to the News Letter**" and on the page 1 header, labeled the edition the **Transcontinental Railroad Postscript** to the San Francisco News Letter and California Advertiser. The entire edition is dedicated to the May 10th ceremony and the history surrounding

the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad including a close up view and reporting by Frank Marriott representative. "Mr. [A. D.] Bell of the [San Francisco] Bulletin."

He describes the driving of the Frank Marriott San Francisco News Letter golden spike:

"At a quarter of the hour before noon seven strokes of the silver hammer in the hands of Governor Stanford as he drove **our** golden spike into the auger hole prepared for it, and the connection and the connection between the "Union Pacific" and the "Central Pacific" Railroads was complete. (Pg. 1:1)

Mr. A.D. Bell provides a description of the News Letter Spike:

"The Gold Spike that we presented to Governor Stanford to be driven into the last rail (sic) was manufactured by Messer's. J. W. Tucker & Co., well known goldsmiths of San Francisco; was photographed by Messer's. Bradley & Rulofson, and engraved by Mr. Van Vleck". p. 4:2

Mr. Bell again writes: "muscular exertion and mental energy have been used to their utmost tension, and **our golden spike** that joins the ends of the roads exemplifies that past exertion—" p.3: 2

My point here is to emphasize that Frank Marriott had a representative on site and was watching closely what had become of the gold spike he donated to Stanford. Mr. Bell described the scene:

"Some newspapers had three men on the ground and it was all I could do to prevent myself from being choked out by the morning newspapers, working for extra editions across the continent." p.4:1

His description of what became of the News-Letter Spike:

"One of the [gold] presentation spikes was afterward cut, and half given to (Sidney) Dillon (Director of the U.P.) for a memento." p.4: 2.

Why Mr. A. D. Bell did not provide the identity of this spike is not known but it had to be the gold *News Letter* spike as all the other presentation spikes were accounted for. Other newspapers, including J.N. Bowman, Calif. State Library historian, in his treatise "Driving The Last Spike," Calif. Historical Society Quarterly, Sept. 1957, pg.271:5, states "*the second gold spike was given to General Dodge.*"

With the testimonials above one can reasonably conclude that the *News Letter* gold spike, mutilated by the seven strokes of the silver hammer by Governor Stanford was cut in half, one half given to Sidney Dillon and the other given to General Dodge. This spike, having little importance in the day's event and with no obligation to Frank Marriott, was donated to the two officials of the Union Pacific Railroad, neither of who were held in high regard by Stanford, his Associates or James Harvey Strobbridge. One can reasonably surmise that in order to save face Dillon and Dodge both accepted the mutilated pieces of the second spike, measuring no more than 2 1/2" or so and neither remaining piece recognizable as a railroad spike much less a treasured ceremonial "Last Spike." General Dodge had earlier that day alienated himself by his hard headed demands on the precedence of who should drive the last spike and even:

"positively refused [a rail] connection and told the Central Pacific people that they might do as they liked, and that there should be no joint celebration." It was not until 5 minutes before the ceremony began that an amicable arrangement was attained by Durant and Stanford." SFNL May 15, 1869, p. 3:1 p.5

I can also accept the probable cause of these two pieces never again being seen, or at least identified by later historians was due to the large egos of Dillon and Dodge causing their mementos to disappear. General Dodge had caused enough problems between the CP & UP railroads by his intractable positions during their final negotiations for the final track connections and now this "Last Spike" ceremony that he no doubt experienced a little subtle payback.

4. The Lemon Spike may have been one of the four last iron spikes driven after the four ceremonial spikes were removed; however his affidavit, statements and interviews are so full of errors and conflicting information that there will always be questions about truth of what David Lemon has claimed. He was even unable to provide an accurate description of the gold spike, describing it as about *"the size of a 20 penny wire nail."* *UP Magazine. "David Lemon – Old Timer" May 24, p. 5 (CPRR.org)*

5. Who in fact did strike the Gold Spike for the last time? An interesting statement by Mr. Bell about his observations is found in the last sentence of the last paragraph of the last page of the May 15, 1869 edition of the *San Francisco News Letter*:

"The gold spike that **we** presented to Governor Stanford to be driven into (sic) the last rail ——— The last blow of the hammer was struck by that noble-hearted and excellent lady, Mrs. Stro(w)bridge. Women's mission is peace and there is no greater peacemaker than the rail." SFNL, May 15, 1869, p. 4"2 p. 6

J.N. Bowman writes in his thesis on pg. 269-270, CHSQ, Sept. 1957:

*"that after the formal ceremonies of Stanford and Durant's ceremonial blows that the crown was again asked to retire so the three official photographers could take their pictures. The engines advanced and "nosed over the Laurel tie and the photographs were taken".*

Two more ceremonies remained: The ceremonial driving of the spikes by the military officers and the ladies, and the engines crossing over the joint. Mrs. Strobridge is mentioned by name (Sacramento Bee) as having given a token blow on one of the silver spikes however no evidence was found on the Nevada spike and Bowman speculates that the spike she struck "may have" been that of the Arizona Spike. In fact he found no viable evidence to support his speculation.

It appears that Mr. A. D. Bell's report is the most accurate considering that it was his responsibility to carefully watch exactly what happened to **"our"** spike and that he was referring to the News Letter Spike that was struck for the last time by Hanna Maria Strobridge, wife of James Harvey Strobridge, Superintendent of Construction on the Central Pacific Railroad.

**A personal note of thanks to the CPRR Museum for all it has done to promote these discussions on the history of the Central Pacific Railroad. 1863-1869**

Copies of much of the contemporary documentation for the above research can be found on the excellent website "CPRR.org" which makes it possible for many interested researchers

and students of the First Transcontinental Railroad to view much of the original documentation and photographs previously only available to researchers who were able to visit, or better yet, work at the various historical Libraries and Museums. Personally I owe a debt of gratitude for what the CPRR Museum has done, and for bringing together those serious railroad historians who have shared their expertise with us all.

The “missing” copy of the San Francisco *News Letter* is not and has not been missing at all. Both the California State Library has an original copy, as does the Sutro Library in San Francisco.

*Courtesy Edson T. Strobridge.*

Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum  
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