The Transcontinental Railroad

Today we're going to talk about the Transcontinental Railroad...in just a minute.

In the early 1800s, crossing the United States was dangerous, expensive, and took six months by covered wagon or ship. Americans sought a quicker, safer way to travel from coast to coast. White settlers in the East sought new opportunities out West, and businesspeople wanted to transport goods. Plus, many people believed in Manifest Destiny, the belief that Americans had the divine right to control all the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans.

In 1862, the Pacific Railroad Act made it possible for two companies to begin building a transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific started in California and built eastward, while the Union Pacific began in Nebraska and built westward in a race to meet in the middle. Construction was difficult and dangerous, and many workers were injured or died—especially Chinese immigrants, who made up much of the workforce.

In 1869, the railroad was completed in Promontory, Utah. Now people and goods could cross the US in one week.
This was great news for settlers and business tycoons and terrible news for the Native Americans who had lived on the land for generations. Construction of the railroad and the White settlers it brought to new territories escalated the ongoing displacement of Indigenous people.

What impact do you think the Transcontinental Railway made on society in the years following its completion?