

William T. Sherman on the western railroads, 1878

Introduction

After Ulysses S. Grant's election as president, William Tecumseh Sherman, known for leading the "March to the Sea" in the closing months of the Civil War, was appointed commanding general of the United States Army. Headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri, Sherman's command often sent him westward across the country on the lines of the transcontinental railroad, the first of which was completed in 1869.

In this September 1878 letter to David Douty Colton, vice president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, Sherman commends the "first class steel railroad across the Great Desert" of Arizona. The general recognized the railroad's value to the military, which could now move large numbers of men and equipment across the country. Commending the "grand enterprise" of the railroad, Sherman wrote, "every mile of new Railroad south and East from Yuma, will be important in increasing trade and intercourse with our neighbors in Mexico, and thus cause friendly relations, and secure peace on that National Border." He also noted that the railroad would be a "great civilizer" that would "enable the Military Authorities to maintain peace and order among Indians."

Excerpt

To the Military Authorities it makes little difference with which of these two roads you ultimately make connection, but meantime every mile of rail road you build Eastward, is of great importance to us; saves the costly and difficult transportation of stones by wagons, and the infinitely more tedious and painful marching of men over dusty roads, at long intervals without water and with scanty food.

A Railroad East and West through Arizonia, apart from its importance as a Commercial Route from the Pacific to the Atlantic, is a "great civilizer" and will enable the Military Authorities to maintain peace and order among Indians, as well as the Equally dangerous class of Robbers who of late have so much increased in members and boldness.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and excerpt, view the image, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Explain why General Sherman as commander of the army had such a great interest in the railroads.

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2. Explain what Sherman meant when he claimed that railroads would become the “great civilizer” of American Indians.
3. In what ways did Sherman express confidence that the expansion of railroads in the Southwest would improve the economy of the nation?

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Image

Palace Hotel San Francisco, Cal.
September 26th 1878.

General David D. Colton
Vice President, Southern Pacific R.R.

My dear Sir,

Having just arrived from the East, by a route which brought me to Yuma, I cannot honestly neglect the opportunity to thank you and your associates personally and officially, for having built a first class Steel Rail Road across the Great Desert, ~~and~~ to the Colorado River.

The public convenience is so great especially to the troops who garrison the Arizona posts, that I as their head venture to offer you thanks, and to express an earnest hope that in due time your labors and enterprise will be duly rewarded -

William T. Sherman to David D. Colton, September 26, 1878 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05095)

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Transcript

William T. Sherman to David Douty Colton, September 26, 1878 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05095)

1 –

Palace Hotel San Francisco Cal.

September 26th 1878.

General David. D. Colton

Vice President, Southern Pacific R.R.

My dear Sir:

Having just arrived from the East, by a route which brought me to Yuma, I cannot honestly neglect the opportunity to thank you and your associates personally and officially. for having built a first class Steel Rail Road across the Great Desert, to the Colorado River.

The public convenience is so great Especially to the troops who garrison the Arizonia posts, that I as their head venture to offer you thanks, and to Express an Earnest hope that in due time your labors and Enterprise will be duly rewarded –

2 –

[2] I take it for granted that you have made full investigation of the natural resources of Arizonia, and that you are well advised of the progress of the two Rail Roads approaching New Mexico from the East, one, or both of which seems destined to meet you in your progress Eastward, making another TransContinental Railway.

To the Military Authorities it makes little difference with which of these two roads you ultimately make connection, but meantime Every mile of rail road you build Eastward, is of [*struck: infinite*] [*inserted: great*] importance to us; saves the costly and difficult transportation of stones by wagons, and the infinitely more tedious and painful marching of men over dusty roads, at long intervals without water and with scanty food.

A Railroad East and West through

3 –

[3] Arizonia, apart from its importance as a Commercial Route from the Pacific to the Atlantic, is a “great civilizer” and will Enable the Military Authorities to maintain peace and order among

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Indians, as well as the Equally dangerous class of Robbers who of late have so much increased in members and boldness.

I am informed that you contemplate an Extension from Yuma eastward to Santa Fé New Mexico; and that about two hundred miles to Maricopa Wells are to be contracted for at once. Though I did not pass over that particular Route I possess official information enough to say that such Extension will be most Valuable to the Military Authorities, because the roads leading from Prescott at the North, and Tucson at the South, are much better as to grass and water to –

4.

[4] Maricopa Wells, than to Yuma. I do not Entertain a high opinion of of Arizonia as an agricultural Territory. but there seems to be no doubt about its Minerals, Gold, Silver, and Copper. Therefore I venture to Express a hope that I am rightfully informed of this your purpose, and shall be among the first to congratulate you on the completion of what must prove a most valuable link in so Grand an Enterprise.

I am further of opinion that every mile of new Railroad south and East from Yuma, will be important in increasing trade and intercourse with our neighbors in Mexico, and thus cause friendly relations, and secure peace on that National Border –

On these points I am so clear, that I have no objection to your using this letter with the understanding that it is written without consultation with the War Department of our Government, but almost certain

5.

[5] that it will meet with its sanction.

With Great respect & c

W. T. Sherman

General.