
Thomas Hart Benton

TO THE NATIONAL RAILROAD CONVENTION ¹

October 16, 1849
(St. Louis, Missouri)

We live in extraordinary times, and are called upon to elevate ourselves to the grandeur of the occasion. Three and a half centuries ago, the great Columbus—the man who was afterwards carried home in chains from the New World which he had discovered—this great Columbus, in the year 1492, departed from Europe to arrive in the East by going to the West. It was a sublime conception. He was in the line of success, when the intervention of two continents, not dreamed of before, arrested his progress. Now, in the nineteenth century, mechanical genius enables his great design to be fulfilled. In the beginning, and in barbarous ages, the sea was a barrier to the intercourse of nations. It separated nations. Mechanical genius, in inventing the ship, converted that barrier into a facility. Then land and continents became the obstruction. The two Americas intervening has prevented Europe and Asia from communicating on the straight line. For three centuries and a half this obstacle has frustrated the grand design of Columbus. Now, in our day, mechanical genius has again triumphed over the obstacles of nature, and converted into a facility that which had so long been an impassable obstacle. The steam-car has worked upon the land, and among enlightened nations, and to a degree far transcending it, the miracle which the ship, in barbarous ages, worked upon the ocean. The land has now become the facility for the most distant communications, the conveyance being invented which annihilates both time and space. We hold the intervening land: we hold the obstacle which stopped Columbus: we are in the line between Europe and Asia. We have

it in our power to remove that obstacle—to convert it into a facility—and to carry him on to his land of promise, and of hope, with a rapidity, a precision and a safety unknown to all ocean navigation. A king and a queen started him upon his great enterprise. It lies in the hands of a republic to complete it. It is in our hands—we, the hands of the people of the United States, of this first half of the nineteenth century. Let us raise ourselves up. Let us rise to the grandeur of the occasion. Let us complete the grand design of Columbus by putting Europe and Asia into communication, and that to our advantage, through the heart of our own country. Let us give to his ships, converted into cars, a continued course, unknown to all former times. Let us make the iron road—and make it from sea to sea, states and individuals making it east of the Mississippi, the nation making it west. Let us now, in this convention, rise above everything sectional, personal, local. Let us beseech the national legislature to build the great road upon the great national line which suits Europe and Asia—the line which will find, on our continent, the Bay of San Francisco at one end, St. Louis in the middle, the national metropolis, and great commercial emporiums at the other—and which shall be adorned with its crowning honor, the colossal statue of the great Columbus, whose design it accomplishes, hewn from the granite mass of a peak of the Rocky Mountains, overlooking the road—the mountain itself the pedestal, and the statue a part of the mountain—pointing with outstretched arm to the western horizon, and saying to the flying passenger, there is the East! there is India!

[Great applause followed this grand conclusion.]

¹ *The Missouri Republican*, October 18, 1849.