

Andrew Onderdonk

(30 August 1848 – 21 June 1905) was a construction contractor who worked on several major projects including the San Francisco seawall in California and the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia. He was born on August 30, 1848 in New York to an established Dutch family. He received his education at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He married Sarah Delia Hilman of Plainfield, New Jersey. After starting his career surveying townsites and roads in New Jersey, he headed west to work as a general manager for financier Darius Ogden Mills on several engineering contracts. He died in Oscawana-on-the-Hudson, New York on June 21, 1905.



San Francisco

His first major project was the San Francisco seawall. This project took three years and involved constructing ferry slips and seawalls for the San Francisco Harbour.

Canadian Pacific Railway

In 1879, he won a series of contracts to build the western section of what is now the Canadian Pacific Railway. Working directly for the Canadian government, he built the 127 mile section from Vancouver to Savona (near Kamloops). When those sections were complete he continued building eastward under contract with the Canadian Pacific Railway until he ran out of rail in Eagle Pass in 1885.

Onderdonk and his wife, moved to Yale, British Columbia to supervise the construction. Yale was the head of navigation for steamships on the Fraser River and very near the starting point for his first contract at Emory's Bar. It was not until 1882 that the contract was let for the section between Yale and Port Moody.

Chinese Workers

One of the more controversial aspects of Onderdonk's work in British Columbia was his use of Chinese workers. From Emory's Bar to Savona, the railway had to be built through the Fraser Canyon with immense cliffs requiring extensive and expensive tunnelling. Against the wishes of much of the white British Columbia population and the new province's government, which wanted British railway workers as settler-colonists, he got permission from the federal government to import Chinese workers from both California and China, as the Canadian national government wanted to save money by hiring workers at lower costs than would be possible with workers from Britain. The white population also feared wage decreases and job loss because of undercutting the much lower wages paid to Chinese workers. Onderdonk told the federal government that if he could not use Chinese workers, the railway could not be built, and the government of British Columbia was forced to accept Ottawa's plans to cut costs in order to get the railway built.

Historians estimate he brought in several thousand Chinese from China and many more thousand from California. The Chinese workers were always kept on crews separate from the white workers and often given the most dangerous jobs including the tunnel blasting using the highly unstable nitroglycerin explosive. Many Chinese were killed in accidents or died of scurvy during the winter, though part of the blame for the scurvy lies with the workers' dietary reliance on rice, mats of which were part of their pay system and they had actual little cash on hand because of debts owed to the Chinese labour contractors who had sold their services to Onderdonk. Unlike the white workers, injured Chinese workers were not provided access to the company hospital and were abandoned to the rest of the workers to help. At the end of construction, the Chinese labour contracting companies abandoned their responsibilities; thousands of workers were left stranded and living in caves without food and water in the desert heat of the mountains surrounding Spences Bridge and were only gotten out of the area after white charities in Vancouver sponsored tickets to get them home.

Discrimination and racism[citation needed] led to occasional fights between the Chinese workers and the white workers, and the murder of a white foreman by a mob of Chinese workers at Camp 23 near Lytton in response to the firing of three workers. Generally the Chinese were seen by management as efficient, hard working and well behaved workers, though many thousands deserted to the goldfields rather than stay in the harsh conditions of the railway camps.

Canadian Pacific Contracts

When Onderdonk finished the five government contracts, he undertook contracts directly with the Canadian Pacific Railway to build eastward to meet the track being built from the east. Unlike the section in the Fraser Canyon, the section east of Savona was much easier to build. The route followed the south shore of Kamloops Lake, through the city of Kamloops, then along the South Thompson River, Little Shuswap Lake, the Little River to Shuswap Lake. The line generally follows the shore of Shuswap Lake except for a short cut through Notch Hill. Leaving the lake at Sicamous (in Onderdonk's day called Eagle Pass Landing), the line goes up the Eagle River towards Eagle Pass. Navigable waters along this entire section of the route enabled supply of construction materials by Steamboats of the Thompson and Shuswap. In the summer of 1885, Onderdonk's workers ran out of rail at a location that was later called Craigellachie. The railway construction from the east reached that point in November and the last spike was hammered home on November 7, 1885.

Other Work

After his work for the Canadian Pacific Railway, he continued doing railway and canal contracts, mostly in eastern Canada and the United States. In 1895, Onderdonk obtained a contract from the Canadian government to build sections of the Trent-Severn Waterway in Ontario