The California Gold Rush

Gold was found in California, and thousands rushed to that territory. California quickly became a state.

The gold rush made California grow rapidly and helped bring about California’s cultural diversity.

Terms & Names
- forty-niner
- Californio
- Mariano Vallejo
- John Sutter
- James Marshall
- California gold rush

ONE AMERICAN’S STORY

Luzena Wilson said of the year 1849, “The gold excitement spread like wildfire.” The year before, James Marshall had discovered gold in California. Luzena’s husband decided to become a forty-niner—someone who went to California to find gold, starting in 1849.

Most forty-niners left their families behind, but Luzena traveled to California with her husband. She soon discovered that women—and their homemaking skills—were rare in California. Shortly after she arrived, a miner offered her five dollars for the biscuits she was baking. Shocked, she just stared at him. He quickly doubled his offer and paid in gold. Luzena realized she could make money by feeding miners, so she opened a hotel.

In this section, you will read about the forty-niners like the Wilsons and what their mining experiences were like. You will also discover how the gold rush boosted California’s economy and changed the nation’s history.

California Before the Rush

Before the forty-niners came, California was populated by as many as 150,000 Native Americans and 8,000 to 12,000 Californios—settlers of Spanish or Mexican descent. Most Californios lived on huge cattle ranches. They had acquired their estates when the Mexican government took away the land that once belonged to the California missions.

One important Californio was Mariano Vallejo (mah•RYAH•noh vah•YEH•hoh). A member of one of the oldest Spanish families in America, he owned 250,000 acres of land. Proudly describing the accomplishments of the Californios, Vallejo wrote, “We were the pioneers of the Pacific coast . . . while General Washington was carrying on the war of the Revolution.” Vallejo himself had been the commander of Northern California when it belonged to Mexico.
When Mexico owned California, its government feared American immigration and rarely gave land to foreigners. But **John Sutter**, a Swiss immigrant, was one exception. Dressed in a secondhand French army uniform, Sutter had visited the Mexican governor in 1839. A charming man, Sutter persuaded the governor to grant him 50,000 acres in the unsettled Sacramento Valley. Sutter built a fort on his land and dreamed of creating his own personal empire based on agriculture.

In 1848, Sutter sent a carpenter named **James Marshall** to build a sawmill on the nearby American River. One day Marshall inspected the canal that brought water to Sutter’s Mill. He later said, “My eye was caught by a glimpse of something shining... I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump for I felt certain it was gold.”

**Rush for Gold**

News of Marshall’s thrilling discovery spread rapidly. From all over California, people raced to the American River—starting the **California gold rush**. A gold rush occurs when large numbers of people move to a site where gold has been found. Throughout history, people have valued gold because it is scarce, beautiful, easy to shape, and resistant to tarnish.

Miners soon found gold in other streams flowing out of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Colonel R. B. Mason, the military governor of California, estimated that the region held enough gold to “pay the cost of the present war with Mexico a hundred times over.” He sent this news to Washington with a box of gold dust as proof.

The following year thousands of gold seekers set out to make their fortunes. A forty-niner who wished to reach California from the East had a choice of three routes, all of them dangerous:

1. **Sail 18,000 miles around South America and up the Pacific coast**—suffering from storms, seasickness, and spoiled food.
2. **Sail to the narrow Isthmus of Panama, cross overland** (and risk catching a deadly tropical disease), and then sail to California.
3. **Travel the trails across North America**—braving rivers, prairies, mountains, and all the hardships of the trail.

Because the adventure was so difficult, most gold seekers were young men. “A gray beard is almost as rare as a petticoat,” observed one miner. Luzena Wilson said that during the six months she lived in the mining city of Sacramento, she saw only two other women.
Life in the Mining Camps

The mining camps had colorful names like Mad Mule Gulch, Hangtown, and Coyote Diggings. They began as rows of tents along the streams flowing out of the Sierra Nevada. Gradually, the tents gave way to rough wooden buildings that housed stores and saloons.

Mining camps could be dangerous. One woman who lived in the region wrote about camp violence.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

In the short space of twenty-four days, we have had murders, fearful accidents, bloody deaths, a mob, whippings, a hanging, . . . and a fatal duel.

Louise Clappe, quoted in Frontier Women

The mining life was hard for other reasons. Camp gossip told of miners who grew rich overnight by finding eight-pound nuggets, but in reality, such easy pickings were rare. Miners spent their days standing knee-deep in icy streams, where they sifted through tons of mud and sand to find small amounts of gold. Exhaustion, poor food, and disease all damaged the miners’ health.

Not only was acquiring gold brutally difficult, but the miners had to pay outrageously high prices for basic supplies. In addition, gamblers and con artists swarmed into the camps to swindle the miners of their money. As a result, few miners grew rich.

Miners from Around the World

About two-thirds of the forty-niners were Americans. Most of these were white men—many from New England. However, Native Americans, free blacks, and enslaved African Americans also worked the mines.

Thousands of experienced miners came from Sonora in Mexico. Other foreign miners came from Europe, South America, Australia, and China. Most of the Chinese miners were peasant farmers who fled from a region that had suffered several crop failures. By the end of 1851, one of every ten immigrants was Chinese.

Used to backbreaking labor in their homeland, the Chinese proved to be patient miners. They would take over sites that American miners had abandoned because the easy gold was gone. Through steady, hard work, the Chinese made these “played-out” sites yield profits. American miners resented the success of the Chinese and were suspicious of their different foods, dress, and customs. As the numbers of Chinese miners grew, American anger toward them also increased.

LEVI’S BLUE JEANS

Nearly everyone in the United States owns at least one pair of faded, comfortable blue jeans. The first jeans were invented for California miners.

In 1873, a man named Levi Strauss wanted to sell sturdy pants to miners. Strauss made his pants out of the strongest fabric he could buy—cotton denim. He reinforced the pockets with copper rivets so that they could hold heavy tools without ripping.

For more than 125 years, jeans have remained popular. Levi Strauss’s pants have proved to be durable in more ways than one.

Reading History

B. Making Inferences Why do you think life in the mining camps was so rough?

C. Analyzing Causes Why did some Americans resent Chinese miners?
Surface Mining

Gold is found in cracks, called veins, in the earth’s rocky crust. As mountains and other outcrops of rock erode, the gold veins come to the surface. The gold breaks apart into nuggets, flakes, and dust. Flood waters then wash it downhill into stream beds. To mine this surface gold, forty-niners had to use tools designed to separate it from the mud and sand around it. American miners learned some technology from Mexicans who came from the mining region of Sonora.

Miners shoveled dirt into the sluice. The rushing water carried lightweight materials along with it. Heavy gold sank to the bottom and was trapped between the ridges.

A sluice was a series of long boxes with ridges on the bottom. Water ran through the sluice, which angled downward.

Although this photograph shows American and Chinese miners working together, in many places Americans chased the Chinese away.

Mexican miners introduced the use of the pan. A miner would fill a pan with dirt and water. Then he would swirl the pan. Water sloshed over the sides, carrying lightweight minerals with it. Gold settled in the bottom.

**CONNECT TO HISTORY**

1. **Drawing Conclusions**
   Which mining method could be used by an individual miner and which needed a group of miners? Explain your answer.


2. **Researching**
   How is gold mined today?

   For more about the California gold rush . . .

**CONNECT TO TODAY**

**CALIFORNIA STANDARDS**

8.6.1 Discuss the influence of industrialization and technological developments on the region, including human modification of the landscape and how physical geography shaped human actions (e.g., growth of cities, deforestation, farming, mineral extraction).
Conflicts Among Miners

A mixture of greed, anger, and prejudice caused some miners to cheat others. For example, I. B. Gilman promised to free an enslaved African American named Tom if he saved enough gold. For more than a year, Tom mined for himself after each day’s work was done. When he finally had $1,000, Gilman gave him a paper saying he was free. The next day, the paper suspiciously disappeared. Even though Tom was certain he had been robbed, he couldn’t prove it. He had to work for another year before Gilman would free him.

Once the easy-to-find gold was gone, American miners began to force Native Americans and foreigners such as Mexicans and Chinese out of the gold fields to reduce competition. This practice increased after California became a state in 1850. One of the first acts of the California state legislature was to pass the Foreign Miners Tax, which imposed a tax of $20 a month on miners from other countries. That was more than most could afford to pay. As the tax collectors arrived in the camps, most foreigners left. Driven from the mines, the Chinese opened shops, restaurants, and laundries. So many Chinese owned businesses in San Francisco that their neighborhood was called Chinatown, a name it still goes by today.

The Impact of the Gold Rush

By 1852, the gold rush was over. While it lasted, about 250,000 people flooded into California. This huge migration caused economic growth that changed California permanently. The port city of San Francisco grew to become a center of banking, manufacturing, shipping, and trade. Its population exploded from around 400 in 1845 to 35,000 in 1850. Sacramento became the center of a productive farming region.

However, the gold rush ruined many Californios. The newcomers did not respect Californios, their customs, or their legal rights. In many cases,
Americans seized their property. For example, Mariano Vallejo lost all but 300 acres of his huge estate. Even so, their Spanish heritage became an important part of California culture.

Native Americans suffered even more. Thousands of them died from diseases brought by the newcomers. The miners hunted down and killed thousands more. The reason was the Anglo-American belief that Native Americans stood in the way of progress. By 1870, California’s Native American population had fallen from 150,000 to only about 58,000.

A final effect of the gold rush was that by 1849 California had enough people to apply for statehood. Skipping the territorial stage, California applied to Congress for admission to the Union and was admitted as a free state in 1850. Although its constitution outlawed slavery, it did not grant African Americans the vote.

For some people, California’s statehood proved to be the opportunity of a lifetime. The enslaved woman Nancy Gooch gained her freedom because of the law against slavery. She then worked as a cook and washerwoman until she saved enough money to buy the freedom of her son and daughter-in-law in Missouri. Nancy Gooch’s family moved to California to join her. Eventually, they became so prosperous that they bought Sutter’s sawmill, where the gold rush first started. Bridget “Biddy” Mason similarly gained her freedom in 1856 when her master moved to California. Mason moved her family to Los Angeles and became a wealthy landowner in the area.

On a national level, California’s statehood created turmoil. Before 1850, there was an equal number of free states and slave states. Southerners feared that because the statehood of California made free states outnumber slave states, Northerners might use their majority to abolish slavery. As Chapter 18 explains, conflict over this issue threatened the survival of the Union.

**Reading History**

**E. Recognizing Effects** What impact did the gold rush have on the people who lived in California before the forty-niners came?

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**Section 4 Assessment**

1. **Terms & Names**
   - Explain the significance of:
     - forty-niner
     - Californio
     - Mariano Vallejo
     - John Sutter
     - James Marshall
     - California gold rush

2. **Using Graphics**
   - Use a chart like the one shown to review and record hardships faced by the forty-niners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HARDSHIPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the camps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At work mining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Which hardships would you have found most difficult? (REP4)

3. **Main Ideas**
   - a. How did the California gold rush get started? (HI1)
   - b. Why didn’t many forty-niners become rich? (HI1)
   - c. How did women and people of different racial, ethnic, or national groups contribute to the California gold rush? (HI1)

4. **Critical Thinking**
   - **Recognizing Effects**
     - What were some of the effects of the California gold rush? (HI2)
   - **Think About**
     - changes in San Francisco
     - California’s bid for statehood

**Activity Options**

- **Science**
  - Research the hazards of mining gold and either plan a science exhibit or give an electronic presentation. (HI6)
**Chapter 13 ASSESSMENT**

**TERMS & NAMES**
Briefly explain the significance of each of the following.
1. mountain man
2. Oregon Trail
3. Stephen Austin
4. Tejano
5. Antonio López de Santa Anna
6. manifest destiny
7. Bear Flag Revolt
8. Mexican Cession
9. forty-niner
10. California gold rush

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Trails West** (pages 393–399)
1. What were three reasons why people moved west? (HI2)
2. What were the three main trails that led to the West? (HI1)
3. How did the Mormons make the land in Utah productive? (HI1)

**The Texas Revolution** (pages 400–405)
4. Why were Texans unhappy with Mexican rule? (HI1)
5. Why were the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto important to the Texas Revolution? (CST1)

**The War with Mexico** (pages 406–411)
6. What areas did the United States gain as a result of Americans’ belief in manifest destiny? (HI1)
7. How is the Bear Flag Revolt related to the War with Mexico? (CST1)
8. What lands did the United States acquire as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo? (HI1)

**The California Gold Rush** (pages 412–417)
9. Who were four groups of people who became forty-niners? (HI1)
10. What were three ways California changed because of the gold rush? (HI2)

**CRITICAL THINKING**

1. **USING YOUR NOTES: CATEGORIZING INFORMATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of people who entered these areas</th>
<th>Why they went there</th>
<th>Key events that allowed the U.S. to take ownership of the territory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mountain men and traders</td>
<td>Mountain men</td>
<td>Mexican Cession, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Manifest Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneers</td>
<td>Pioneers</td>
<td>Oregon Trail, Mexican Cession, Manifest Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tejanos</td>
<td>Tejanos</td>
<td>Bear Flag Revolt, Mexican Cession, Manifest Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Austin</td>
<td>Stephen Austin</td>
<td>Mexican Cession, Bear Flag Revolt, Manifest Destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antonio López de Santa Anna</td>
<td>Antonio López de Santa Anna</td>
<td>Mexican Cession, Bear Flag Revolt, Manifest Destiny</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using your completed chart, answer the questions below. (HI2)

a. In what ways were the reasons people went west similar?
b. Which of the five regions listed on your chart entered the United States peacefully?
c. Which event added the most territory to the United States?

2. **ANALYZING LEADERSHIP**

Think about the leaders discussed in this chapter. What characteristics did they have that made them good leaders? (HI1)

3. **THEME: EXPANSION**

How did the idea of manifest destiny help bring about the expansion of the United States? (HI2)

4. **DRAWING CONCLUSIONS**

How did the War with Mexico and the California gold rush contribute to the cultural diversity of the United States? (HI3)

5. **APPLYING CITIZENSHIP SKILLS**

What were the different viewpoints that people held about the War with Mexico? (REPS)

**Interact with History**

Based on this chapter, what do you think you would have gained or lost by going west?
STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT

Use the map and your knowledge of U.S. history to answer questions 1 and 2.

Additional Test Practice, pp. S1-S33.

1. The area around which city in Texas was settled first? (8.8.6)
   A. Houston
   B. Dallas
   C. San Antonio
   D. El Paso

2. In what general direction was Texas settled? (8.8.6)
   A. north to south
   B. east to west
   C. west to east
   D. south to north

John O’Sullivan describes settling the United States in this quotation. Use the quotation and your knowledge of U.S. history to answer question 3.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Our manifest destiny[is] to overspread and possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and . . . self-government.

John O’Sullivan, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*

3. The passage supports which of the following points of view? (8.8.2)
   A. Continental expansion by the United States is bound to happen.
   B. Continental expansion is limited by self-government.
   C. The claims of other countries to the same territory must be respected.
   D. Expansion across the entire continent will require some limits on liberty.

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT

1. **WRITING ABOUT HISTORY**
   Suppose that you are a reporter for a newspaper in northern California in 1849. Write a news article about the discovery of gold. The article should follow the basic organization of a news article by answering the questions Who? What? Where? When? And How? (REP3)
   - You can research your article by looking in books about the California gold rush, in general histories of California, and on the Internet.

2. **COOPERATIVE LEARNING**
   Work with a group of three or four other students to create a panel discussion that explores the different viewpoints surrounding the Mexican War. Research attitudes toward the war. Then outline and participate in the panel discussion for the class. (REP5)

INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY ACTIVITY

**DOING INTERNET RESEARCH**

Life on the wagon trains was not like life “back east.” (REP4)
- On the Internet or in other sources, find primary sources about life on the wagon trains, such as letters, diaries, journals, newspaper articles, and books.
- Once you have collected a number of primary sources, present your findings to your class.