

The California Gold Rush

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. The discovery of gold brought settlers to California.
2. The gold rush had a lasting impact on California's population and economy.

The Big Idea

The California gold rush changed the future of the West.

Key Terms and People

John Sutter, *p. 365*

Donner party, *p. 365*

forty-niners, *p. 365*

prospect, *p. 366*

placer miners, *p. 366*

TAKING NOTES

As you read, take notes on the California gold rush in a chart like the one below.

Gold Rush	
How was gold first discovered?	
How was a stake claimed?	
What was life like in camps?	
Who came to California for gold?	

If YOU were there...

You are a low-paid bank clerk in New England in early 1849. Local newspaper headlines are shouting exciting news: "Gold Is Discovered in California! Thousands Are on Their Way West." You enjoy having a steady job. However, some of your friends are planning to go west, and you are being influenced by their excitement. Your friends are even buying pickaxes and other mining equipment. They urge you to go west with them.

Would you go west to seek your fortune in California? Why?

BUILDING BACKGROUND At the end of the Mexican-American War, the United States gained control of Mexican territories in the West, including all of the present-day state of California. American settlements in California increased slowly at first. Then, the discovery of gold brought quick population growth and an economic boom.

Discovery of Gold Brings Settlers

In the 1830s and 1840s, Americans who wanted to move to California started up the Oregon Trail. At the Snake River in present-day Idaho, the trail split. People bound for California took the southern route, which became known as the California Trail. This path ran through the Sierra Nevada mountain range. American emigrants and traders on the California Trail tried to cross these mountains before the season's first snows.

Although many Americans traveled along the California Trail, few actually settled in California. American merchants were usually more interested in trading goods made in factories than in establishing settlements. They traded for gold and silver coins, hides, and tallow (animal fat used to make soap and candles) from Mexico. California became a meeting ground for traders from Mexico and the United States.

Before the Mexican-American War, California's population consisted mostly of Mexicans and Native Americans. When Mexico

controlled California, Mexican officials did not want many Americans to settle there. However, in 1839 they did give Swiss immigrant **John Sutter** permission to start a colony. Sutter's Fort, located near the Sacramento River, soon became a popular rest stop for many American emigrants. These new arrivals praised Sutter's hospitality and helpfulness. By the mid-1840s some Anglo Californians were publishing newspaper advertisements and guidebooks encouraging other settlers to move West.

The **Donner party** was a group of western travelers who went to California but were stranded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during winter. The party began its journey West in the spring of 1846. Trying to find a shortcut, the group left the main trail and got lost. When the Donner party reached the Sierra Nevada Mountains, they became trapped by heavy snows. They were stuck and had almost no food.

A rescue party found the starving and freezing group in February 1847. Of the original 87 travelers, 42 had died.

Gold in California

In January 1848, Sutter sent a carpenter named James Marshall to build a sawmill beside a nearby river. While working near Sutter's Mill, Marshall glanced at the ground. "I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold."

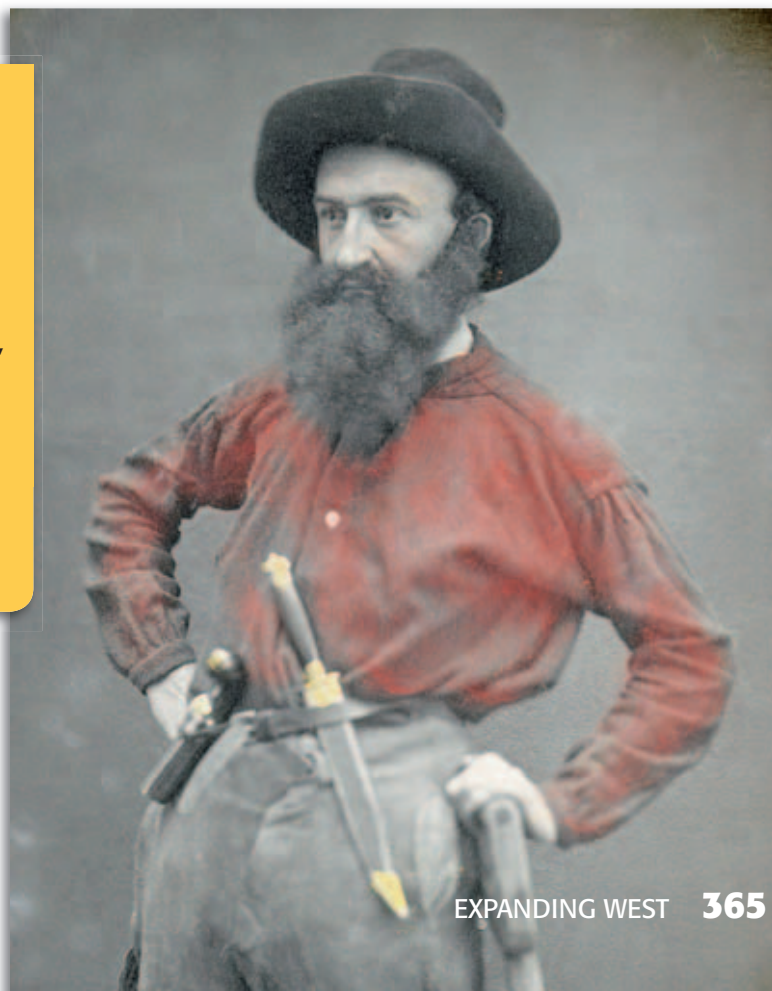
Sutter and Marshall agreed to keep the discovery a secret. However, when they examined the work site the next day, they met a Spanish-speaking Native American worker holding a nugget and shouting, "Oro [gold]! Oro! Oro!"

Sutter's workers soon quit to search for gold. Stories of the discovery rapidly spread across the country. President Polk added to the national excitement by confirming the California gold strike in his farewell message to Congress in December 1848. In 1849 about 80,000 gold-seekers came to California, hoping to strike it rich. These gold-seeking migrants to California were called **forty-niners**. As one Iowa woman who

"Gold Fever"

"Gold fever" brought 80,000 people, like this miner, to California in 1849 alone. One California newspaper captured the excitement: "The whole country, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevadas, resounds with the cry of 'gold, GOLD, GOLD!' while the field is left half planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes." Below is a piece of jewelry made from nuggets found in California.

Why was everything neglected except for "the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes"?



Staking a Claim



left to find gold recalled, “At that time the ‘gold fever’ was contagious, and few, old or young, escaped the malady [sickness].” Nearly 80 percent of the forty-niners were Americans, while the rest came from all over the world.

Most forty-niners braved long and often dangerous journeys to reach California. Many easterners and Europeans arrived via sea routes. Midwestern gold-seekers usually traveled West in wagon trains. Most forty-niners first arrived in San Francisco. This port town became a convenient trade center and stopping point for travelers. As a result, its population increased from around 800 in March 1848 to more than 25,000 by 1850.

Staking a Claim

Few of the forty-niners had any previous gold-mining experience. The work was difficult and time-consuming. The forty-niners would **prospect**, or search for gold, along the banks of streams or in shallow surface mines.

The early forty-niners worked an area that ran for 70 miles along rivers in northern California.

The first person to arrive at a site would “stake a claim.” Early miners frequently banded together to prospect for gold. The miners agreed that each would keep a share of whatever gold was discovered. When one group abandoned a claim, more recent arrivals often took it over, hoping for success. Sometimes, two or more groups arrived in an area at the same time. In the early gold-rush days, before courts were established, this competition often led to conflict. Occasionally, violent disputes arose over competing claims.

Mining methods varied according to the location. The most popular method, placer (PLA-suhr) mining, was done along rivers and streams. **Placer miners used pans or other devices to wash gold nuggets out of loose rock and gravel.** To reach gold deposits buried in



Miners came to California from around the world to make their fortune. In the photo on the left, Anglo and Chinese miners work together in Auburn Ravine in 1852. Above, a woman joins men to look for gold. Fewer women than men moved west to search for gold, but the ones that did often found greater social and economic opportunity than they had in the east.

Why might people leave their homes and travel long distances in search of gold?

the hills, miners had to dig shafts and tunnels. These tasks were usually pursued by mining companies, rather than by individuals.

In 1853 California's yearly gold production peaked at more than \$60 million. Individual success stories inspired many miners. One lucky man found two and a half pounds of gold after only 15 minutes of work. Two African American miners found a rich gold deposit that became known as Negro Hill in honor of their discovery. The vast majority of miners, however, did not become rich. Forty-niner Alonzo Delano commented that the "lean, meager [thin], worn-out and woe-begone [sorrowful] miner... might daily be seen at almost every point in the upper mines."

Life in the Mining Camps

Mining camps sprang up wherever enough people gathered to look for gold. These camps had colorful names, such as Hangtown or Poker Flat.

Miners in the camps came from many cultures and backgrounds. Most miners were young, unmarried men in search of adventure. Only around 5 percent of gold-rush immigrants were women or children. The hardworking women generally made good money by cooking meals, washing clothes, and operating boardinghouses. One such woman, Catherine Haun, recalled her first home in California.

“We were glad to settle down and go house-keeping in a shed that was built in a day of lumber purchased with the first fee... For neighbors, we had a real live saloon. I never have received more respectful attention than I did from these neighbors.”

—Catherine Haun, quoted in *Ordinary Americans*, edited by Linda R. Monk

Haun's husband was a lawyer. He concluded that he could make more money practicing law than he could panning for gold. He was one of many people who made a good living supplying miners with food, clothing, equipment, and other services. Miners paid high prices for basic necessities because the large amounts of gold in circulation caused severe inflation in California. A loaf of bread, for example, might cost 5 cents in the East, but it would sell for 50 to 75 cents in San Francisco. Eggs sometimes sold for \$1 apiece.

Some settlers took full advantage of these conditions for free enterprise. Biddy Mason and her family, for instance, had arrived in California as slaves. A Georgia slaveholder had brought them during the gold-rush years. Mason quickly discovered that most Californians opposed slavery, particularly in the gold mines. She and her family gained their freedom and moved to the small village of Los Angeles. There she saved money until she could purchase some land. Over time, Mason's property increased in value from \$250 to \$200,000. She became one of the wealthiest landowners in California, a community leader, and a well-known supporter of charities.

Westward Movement in the United States

QUICK FACTS

Causes

- Americans believe in the idea of manifest destiny.
- The United States acquires vast new lands in the West.
- Pathfinders open trails to new territories.
- Gold is discovered in California.

Effects

- Native Americans are forced off lands.
- Americans travel west to settle new areas.
- The United States stretches to the Pacific Ocean.
- California experiences a population boom.

Immigrants to California

The lure of gold in California attracted miners from around the world. Many were from countries that had seen few immigrants to the United States in the past. They were drawn to California by the lure of wealth. For example, famine and economic hardship in southeastern China caused many Chinese men to leave China for America. Most hoped to find great wealth, and then return home to China. These immigrants were known in Chinese as *gam saan haak*, or “travelers to Gold Mountain.” Between 1849 and 1853 about 24,000 Chinese men moved to California. “From far and near we came and were pleased,” wrote merchant Lai Chun-chuen in 1855.

Chinese immigrants soon discovered that many Americans did not welcome them, however. In 1852, California placed a high monthly tax on all foreign miners. Chinese miners had no choice but to pay this tax if they wanted to prospect for gold in California. Some Chinese workers were the targets of violent attacks. If the Chinese

miners dared to protest the attacks, the legal system favored Americans over immigrants.

Despite such treatment, many Chinese immigrants still worked in the gold mines. Some looked for other jobs. Others opened their own businesses. A newspaper reported Chinese working as “ploughmen, laundrymen, placer miners, woolen spinners and weavers, domestic servants, cigar makers, [and] shoemakers.”

In 1849 alone, about 20,000 immigrants arrived in California not only from China but also from Europe, Mexico, and South America. Like most Americans who sought gold, these new arrivals intended to return home after they had made their fortunes. However, many decided to stay. Some began businesses. For example, Levi Strauss, a German immigrant, earned a fortune by making tough denim pants for miners.

READING CHECK **Categorizing** What types of people came to California hoping to benefit from the gold rush?

Impact on California

During the Spanish and Mexican periods of settlement, California’s population grew slowly. The arrival of the forty-niners changed this dramatically.

Population Boom

California’s population explosion made it eligible for statehood only two years after being acquired by the United States. In 1850 California became the 31st state.

However, fast population growth had negative consequences for many Californios and California Native Americans. One early observer of the gold rush described why.

“The Yankee regarded every man but [his own kind] as an interloper [trespasser], who had no right to come to California and pick up the gold of free and enlightened citizens.”

—W. Kelly, quoted in *The Other Californians*, by Robert F. Heizer and Alan F. Almqvist

THE IMPACT TODAY

Today California is the nation’s most populous state.

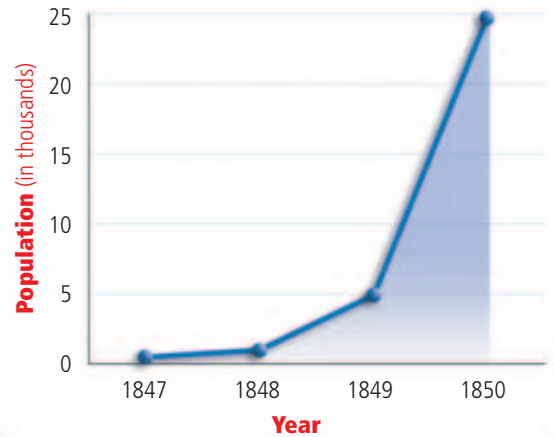
San Francisco Grows

San Francisco boomed in the early years of the gold rush.

What factors led to San Francisco's population growth?



San Francisco Population, 1847–1850



Economic Growth

In addition to rapid population growth, a flood of new businesses and industries transformed California's economy. Gold mining remained an important part of the state's early economy. But Californians soon discovered other ways to make a living. Farming and ranching, for example, became industries for those willing to do the necessary hard labor.

California faced an obstacle to growth, though. The state was isolated from the rest of the country. It was difficult to bring in and ship out goods. The answer to the isolation problem was to bring the railroad all the way to California. Californians would have to wait almost 20 years for that. Completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 at last gave Californians the means to grow a stronger economy.

READING CHECK Analyzing Information

What political effect resulted from California's rapid population growth?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW Americans moved west to create new lives and seize new opportunities. In the next chapter you will learn about the Industrial Revolution in America.

Section 4 Assessment

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Online Quiz

KEYWORD: SC7 HPT1

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** Why was Sutter's Mill important?

b. Summarize What types of people participated in the California gold rush, and how did they take part in it?

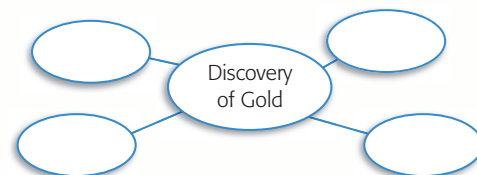
c. Elaborate What are some possible problems caused by the arrival of so many new settlers to California?
- a. Describe** How did some people hope to solve the problem of California's isolation from the rest of the country?

b. Draw Inferences What effect did California's rapid population growth have on Californios and Native Americans?

c. Evaluate Overall, do you think that the gold rush had a positive or negative effect on California? Explain.

Critical Thinking

- Evaluating** Review your notes on the gold rush. Then copy the graphic organizer below. Use it to show how the discovery of gold changed California.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- Describing the California Gold Rush** As you read this section, take note of significant events and effects of the gold rush. Consider also how your film can convey the excitement of that time in American history.