

## The Gold Rush

In August of 1848 gold was discovered in the California territory. Newly acquired by the United States following the Mexican-American war, the territory was sparsely populated by American nationals. This would change rapidly in the coming years. President James K. Polk's fourth annual address to congress in Dec. of 1848 confirmed the rumors trickling in from the west of abundant gold in California. What followed was a mass migration of fortune seekers who braved difficult passages overland and sea. These new arrivals were referred to as 49ers.

The California Gold Rush had enormous social and economic impacts on American society. This lesson plan uses primary source documents to examine the experiences and challenges faced by the 49ers, explore the treatment of diverse populations impacted by the Gold Rush and the ensuing population growth, and identify the economic impacts of the gold rush for both miners and merchants.

### Objectives

1. Analyze primary source documents to determine the differing routes to California and the challenges faced by the 49ers.
2. Use primary sources to demonstrate the ways in which rapid population growth led to problems within the diverse populations of California.
3. Use primary and secondary sources to examine the economic impact of the Gold Rush on growing industries in California.
4. Combine collected sources into a short presentation, essay, or video to detail the history of the Gold Rush and its impact on the people and the economy of California and the United States.

### TN State Standards

4.24 Explain the significance of the California Gold Rush in westward expansion

8.55 Analyze the discovery of gold in California, its social and economic impact on the U.S. and the major migratory movement (including the forty-niners and Asian immigrants).

SSP.01-SSP.04

## Vocabulary

49er	The nickname given to the scores of settlers who travelled to California in search of Gold in 1849 or shortly after.
Compromise of 1850	A series of bills passed by the US Congress in 1850 that helped ease sectional tensions between slave-owning states and free states.
discrimination	The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.
Foreign Miners License	A document that allowed miners from outside the United States to mine for gold. These licenses were used to discriminate against nonwhite miners.
immigrant	A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.
James W. Marshall	Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California on January 24, 1848 sparking the California Gold Rush.
prospector	A person who explores an area in search of mineral deposits (i.e. gold)
settler	A person who moves with a group of others to live in a new territory..
Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo	A treaty signed between Mexico and the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War that added over 500,000 square miles of the territory to the United States.
Yerba Buena	The name of the San Francisco Bay area prior to American occupation during the Mexican-American War.

### Section 1 - The Discovery

On January 24th, 1848 [James W. Marshall](#) reported finding gold in Coloma, California on the American River. Marshall had been employed to build a sawmill for Johan Sutter. Sutter's sawmill would never be used for its intended purpose. Instead it became the first destination of the California Gold Rush.

The California Gold Rush began locally. Those already residing in California were the first miners to try their luck, but word of the discovery quickly spread. In December of 1848 President James K. Polk confirmed the discovery in his Fourth Annual Message to Congress.



**Primary Source:** [James K. Polk: December 5, 1848: Fourth Annual Message to Congress](#)

...The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation. Reluctant to credit the reports in general circulation as to the quantity of gold, the officer commanding our forces in California visited the mineral district in July last for the purpose of obtaining accurate information on the subject. His report to the War Department of the result of his examination and the facts obtained on the spot is herewith laid before Congress. When he visited the country there were about 4,000 persons engaged in collecting gold. There is every reason to believe that the number of persons so employed has since been augmented. The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large and that gold is found at various places in an extensive district of country.

What followed was mass migration of fortune seekers who braved long journeys from all over the United States and the world. The first wave of immigrants made their journey in 1849 earning them the nickname "49ers."



**Suggested Activity:** Lead the class in a quick [question the author](#) session to gauge understanding of the relevant excerpts from Polk's Annual Message. Then ask the students how they think the President's message contributed to the Gold Rush. Invite students to speculate how difficult the journey would be, how long it might take, who would want to go, and what would happen to those already living in California. Ask each student to write down their ideas in order to compare their ideas with knowledge they gain throughout the lesson.



## Section 2 - The Way They Go To California



In January of 1848 just 1,000 people lived in the port town of San Francisco. By the winter of 1849, that number ballooned to 25,000. Immigrants from the Eastern states and territories as well as immigrants from China and around the world flocked to California.

The journey was often long, difficult, and dangerous. Immigrants traveled by land and by sea, and the trip was grueling. Some ships traveled around Cape Horn and up the western coast of South America while others landed in Central America where fortune-seekers would portage overland to the western coast in hopes of catching a ship on its way north to California. Others chose to travel overland through the great plains and deserts of the Southwest facing tough terrain, weather, and deprivation. Many 49er's wrote letters or kept diaries chronicling their trials and adventures. Curious readers revelled in stories from California that were often printed in Newspapers or collected into books.



**Primary Source:** Excerpt from [letter printed in the Missouri Whig, June 17, 1849](#)  
(overland passage)

Last week we passed a small encampment at a time in the day when all other teams were in motion; and thinking they might be some acquaintances, I rode out to them to ascertain, and found six wagons from our county: Kirtly & Dudley, Mrs. Neighbower and son, Martin Gash and Young Ross and some others I did not know. I enquired if they were lying by on account of sickness, and they informed me, that they were all in good health, but that their cattle were failing and they were trying to recruit them. They left St. Joseph before us, and had travelled every day; their cattle were far better when they started than ours, but they had been rushing them on without rest and they expected to remain there three or four days, and then make up for lost time.

We shall be half of our journey in about three weeks, if we meet with no more obstruction than we have already met with; There is much less difficulty on the road than I expected; in fact since we left St. Joseph, we have had a good buggy road all the way. We hear of a great deal of sickness on the road, mostly Camp Dysentery, and occasionally we see a new made grave.

**Primary Source:** Excerpt from [Letter printed in the Missouri Whig, Palmyra November 8, 1849](#) (overland passage)

Of the six or eight thousand wagons that started through, not more than 1,500 or 2,000 will ever get over: what the others will do the Lord only knows. For when we passed the Sink of Mary's river, there was a perfect desert of a hundred miles. I have since learned that there was no grass for more than 250 miles above the Sink, making a desert utterly impassable of 350 miles. The last 45 miles is perfectly horrible--when we crossed, there was any number of wagons left all along it, and the number of dead mules, horses and cattle was over a hundred. A gentleman told me yesterday that the road had to be changed on account of the stench. We were all ignorant of the extent of the desert, so that we were taken completely by surprise, and suffered extremely from heat and thirst. I saw several with their tongues so much swollen that they could neither speak nor shut their mouths. We broke down all our mules and had to recruit four or five days on Carson's river before we could proceed. We were the first that came through without leaving our wagons on the desert and driving our mules to water. The next difficulty we encountered was the California mountains. Out of seven wagons that started over with us, four were smashed all to pieces. In many places six mules could not pull up our empty wagons. We were four days in travelling 23 or 24 miles.

**Primary Source:** Excerpt [J.M. Letts from California Illustrated, published 1853](#)  
(Nicaraguan/Panama Passage)

...We were soon under way, and soon the approaching day was proclaimed by the incessant howl of the animal creation, including the tiger, leopard, cougar, monkeys, &c., &c., accompanied by innumerable parrots and other tropical birds. All nature seemed to be in motion. The scene is indelibly impressed upon my memory. The trees on the margin of the river were of immense size, clothed to their tops with morning-glories and other flowers of every conceivable hue, their tendrils stooping down, kissing the placid bosom of the river. Birds of the most brilliant plumage were flying through the air, in transports of joy. All nature seemed to hail the sun with bursts of rapture. Everything appeared to me so new and strange. My transition from a northern winter to this delightful climate,

seemed like magic, and appeared like a scene of enchantment, like the dawning of a new creation

**Primary Source:** Excerpt [Samuel C. Upham from Notes of a Voyage to California Via Cape Horn published in 1878](#) (Cape Horn Passage)

Tuesday, April 10.— The wind of yesterday increased toward night, and at ten o'clock, P.M., it blew a furious gale. The brig shipped several heavy seas during the night, one of which capsized the steerage galley and broke it in several places. At midnight a huge wave broke over the forward cabin with such force as to cause several of the passengers to jump out of their berths and commence making preparations for a speedy departure for "Davy Jones's locker." The fair wind of yesterday impressed all hands with the belief that we would pass Cape Horn before midnight last night, and upon the strength of this supposition several of the after-cabin passengers had a jollification which lasted all night and a part of this forenoon. The participants were as drunk as Bacchus and as merry as lords. About the time they had gotten fairly under way with a full head of steam on, the gale commenced, and, with the roaring of the elements and the carousing of the revelers, the night was rendered hideous.

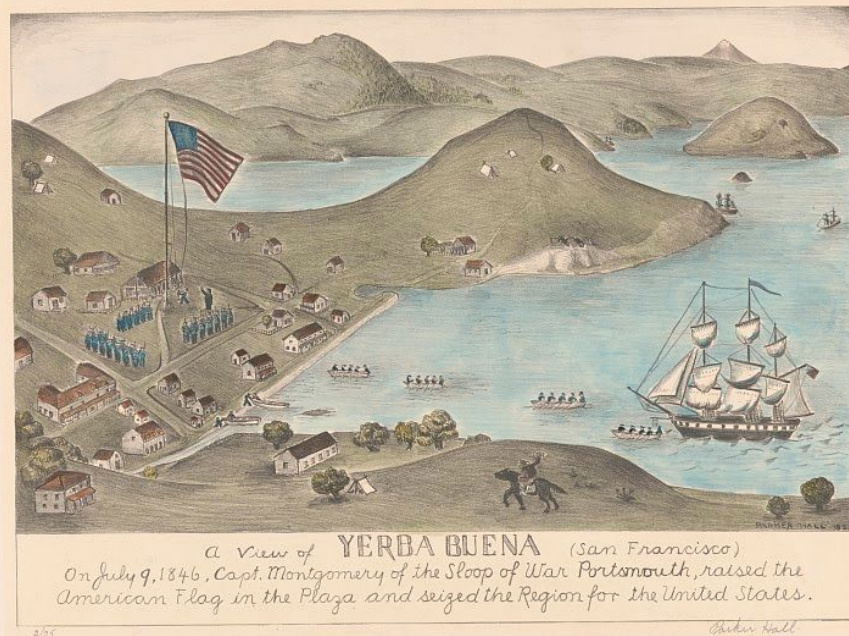
**Suggested Activity:** Employ the [jigsaw](#) method using primary source excerpts written by 49ers detailing the journey to California. Divide the class into groups. Give each group one excerpt making sure that overland and sea routes are represented. More primary source narratives are available in the Library of Congress collection, [California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900](#). Challenge the students to imagine themselves as companions traveling with their 49er. *Example questions: What would it have been like? Was it scary? Exciting? What would you take along?*

Ask each group to share their excerpt and their observations about the journey. When all groups have shared, take a class poll to find out which route your students would have taken to California. Ask the students for an [exit slip](#) in the form of a diary entry or letter from the perspective of a 49er.



The California Gold Rush brought unprecedented population growth to California. The San Francisco Bay was the primary entry point for prospectors sailing into California transforming the sleepy port town into a bustling city in less than decade. The rapid expansion of the town provided both challenges and opportunities. Some of the greatest fortunes of the Gold Rush were not made in the mines, but instead by merchants who sold goods and services to the new arrivals at inflated prices.

**Primary Source:** [A view of Yerba Buena \(San Francisco\). On July 9, 1846, Capt. Montgomery of the Sloop of War Portsmouth, raised the American Flag in the plaza and seized the region of the United States](#) (1846)





**Primary Source:** [Vue de San-Francisco Vista de San-Francisco / dessiné et lithog. par Deroy.](#) (1860)



**Suggested Activity:** Compare the two lithographs from 1846 and 1860. Lead the students in a [close-looking exercise](#) over each object. Challenge the students to connect the objects to other concepts covered in their social studies curricula such as urbanization, the Mexican-American War, social history, and manifest destiny. Example questions: *Who are the artists? Do you think the artist viewed San Francisco positively? Why does the earlier lithograph refer to San Francisco as Yerba Buena? What forces caused these changes? Who is pictured in the Lithographs?*

### Section 3 - The People of the Rush



As news of the discovery of Gold in California traveled the globe, tens of thousands of people of differing nationalities, faiths, and skin color undertook the journey in search of fortune. The influx of immigrants arrived in a territory occupied by Native Americans, Californios who had settled the land before the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and contingents of Europeans and US Nationals. This excerpt from the memoir of William Shaw shows the international nature of the 49er's. Shaw was an English national who sailed across the Pacific from Australia.

**Primary Source:** [William Shaw, \*Golden dreams and waking realities; being the adventures of a gold-seeker in California and the Pacific islands, 1851\*](#)

Commencing within a few feet of the water's edge I handled a pick and spade, shovelling out the earth to Mac, whose shoulders were best able to carry a burden; he delivered the soil to the Celestial (Chinese Person), who stood in the water shaking to and fro the rocker; he then handed the auriferous sediment to the inspection of the sharp-eyed Malay boy, who washed it in 'Mambrino's helmet' till nothing but pure gold dust remained...

Unremitting labour from sun-rise till sun-set was necessary; our very existence depending on the day's produce. Indeed, but for the excitement and the hope of great gain, gold-digging might be pronounced the severest, and most monotonous of all labour. We changed our digging occasionally, but we generally obtained sufficient gold-dust to procure us the necessaries of life.



**Primary Source:** [California Gold Diggers, 1849](#)



While most historians frame the California Gold Rush as a predominately male enterprise. Women were involved as well. Approximately 10% of all new arrivals to California were women. From mining, to maintaining homes, to running businesses, women were involved in all levels of society.

**Secondary Source:** [Glenda Riley, \*Feminizing the History of the Gold Rush\*](#)

Women were present among the forty-niners in all the roles in which one might expect to find them: as wives, mothers, sisters, consorts, prostitutes, entertainers, laundresses, cooks, and boardinghouse keepers. Wherever there were men, women were also found. In addition, women appeared in far less usual capacities: as journalists, newspaper editors and publishers, assayers, miners, saloon and shopkeepers, booksellers, milliners, and other small entrepreneurs. Women were as quick as men to take advantage of the possibilities that California offered.

By 1851, 25,000 Chinese had immigrated to California. Rumors circulating in China referred to the territory as *gam saan* or “gold mountain.” However, like most fortune

seekers they found that the rumors of abundant gold were exaggerated. Mining was difficult and uncertain, racism and prejudice made finding work difficult, and many Chinese found it hard to survive. A series of laws targeting foreign nationals further complicated life in America for Chinese and immigrants of color.

The Foreign Miners Tax of 1850 imposed a monthly \$20 tax (several hundred dollars in today's money) for all miners who were not US citizens. The bill was amended to exclude white miners from European countries, leaving an exorbitant tax that specifically targeted Chinese and Mexican minors. The tax was eventually repealed. Instead foreign miner's licenses charged monthly fees to non-whites for the right to mine.

Primary Source: [Foreign Miner's License, 1853](#)



Primary Source: Excerpt [Pun Chi, "A Remonstrance from the Chinese in California to the Congress of the United States](#) (1860)

We are natives of the empire of China, each following some employment or profession—literary men, farmers, mechanics or merchants. When your honorable government threw open the territory of California, the people of other lands were welcomed here to search for gold and to engage in trade. The ship-masters of your respected nation came over to our country, lauded the equality of your laws, extolled the beauty of your manners and customs, and made it known that your officers and people were extremely cordial toward the Chinese. Knowing well the harmony which had existed between our respective governments, we trusted in your sincerity. Not deterred by the long voyage, we came here presuming that our arrival would be hailed with cordiality and favor. But, alas! what times are these!—when former kind relations are forgotten, when we Chinese are viewed like thieves and enemies, when in the administration of justice our testimony is not received, when in the legal collection of the licenses we are injured and plundered, and villains of other nations are encouraged to rob and do violence to us! Our numberless wrongs it is (sic) most painful even to recite...



California during the Gold Rush was a diverse place rife with racial and ethnic tension. Many white Americans and Europeans shared racist ideologies. These beliefs led to prejudice and violence against black, Chinese, Mexican, and native people in California. In fact, as California struggled to cope with complex racial dynamics, the United States wrestled with the issue of slavery. A debate raged between the slave-holding states and free states over how the new territory acquired during the Polk presidency would be incorporated into the Union.

The Compromise of 1850 was a series of five different bills passed by the United States Congress to alleviate sectional tensions over slavery. This legislation organized the New Mexico and Utah territories and admitted California as a free state. However, being a free state did not make California a welcoming place for black Americans.



California's first governor Peter Hardeman Burnett was a white supremacist who enacted legislation that persecuted Chinese immigrants. He also advocated for excluding free blacks from the state and for the extermination of American Indians.

**Primary Source:** [Peter Burnett, State of the State Address, 1851](#)

#### Excerpt 1:

The white man, to whom time is money, and who labors hard all day to create the comforts of life, cannot sit up all night to watch his property; and after being robbed a few times, he becomes desperate, and resolves upon a war of extermination. This is the common feeling of our people who have lived upon the Indian frontier. The two races are kept asunder by so many causes, and having no ties of marriage or consanguinity to unite them, they must ever remain at enmity.

That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with

painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert...

### Excerpt 2:

In my former message to the Legislature I recommended the necessity and propriety of excluding free persons of color from the State...Our Constitution excludes this class of persons from the right of suffrage, and from all offices of honor or profit under the State; and our laws exclude them from serving on juries, and from appearing as witnesses against a white man. Although it is assumed in the Declaration of Independence, as a self-evident truth, that all men are born free and equal, it is equally true that there must be *acquired* as well as *natural* abilities to fit men for self-government. Without considering whether there be any reason for the opinion entertained by many learned persons that the colored races are by nature inferior to the white, and without attaching any importance to such opinion, still it may be safely assumed, that no race of men, under the precise circumstances of this class in our State, could ever hope to advance a single step in knowledge or virtue... That there are excellent and intelligent person of color is doubtless true; but our legislation must regard them as a class, and not as individuals. While our laws professedly admit *all* of this class to reside in the State, they are so framed as effectually to exclude the better portion; for surely there can exist no intelligent and independent man of color, who would not promptly scorn the pitiful boon we offer him of a residence in the State, under conditions so humiliating.

**Suggested Activity:** Share the primary and secondary source excerpts with the students to create a snapshot of society in Gold Rush California. Then ask the students to use textual evidence to answer the question, "*What was the impact of the Gold Rush on groups such as women, Chinese immigrants, Native Americans, and black Americans?*" This exercise can be done through discussion or, for older students, an [ACE paragraph](#).

Divide the class into small groups. Have them discuss their thoughts on the way immigrants, native people, and people of color were treated in California during the Gold Rush. Start with a question like, "*How have things changed in California since the days of the 49ers? Do people still believe the things Governor Burnett said? Why do you think people hold prejudice?*" Ask the groups to imagine Gold (or something better) was discovered in fictional land and they are in charge of making the rules for new minors coming from around the world. What laws would they enact to protect miners of different nationalities, skin color, and genders?

## Section 4 - The Economic Impact of the California Gold Rush

The Gold Rush transformed the United States and the world. The influx of miners also brought merchants, bankers, and investors eager to capitalize on the rapidly expanding population. The acquisition of Oregon and California during the Polk administration provided access to valuable trade routes in the Pacific. Even as the profits from gold diminished, many settlers remained in the state turning to trades and agriculture for work.

The first millionaire of the gold rush was not a miner, but instead a journalist and merchant named Samuel Brannan. Brannan owned a store in Sutter's Fort near the site of James Marshall's gold discovery. Upon hearing the news, Brannan bought picks, shovels, and pans to sell to the 49er's. Like many merchants he charged inflated prices.



Some Gold Rush merchants would go on to become household names. Levi Strauss made his fortune selling work pants. John Studebaker made money building wheelbarrows. Henry Wells and William Fargo got their start in the banking business buying gold in San Francisco.

The rapid population growth spurred by the Gold Rush made for an instant economy of sorts. With this new industry came political power. California was quickly made a state and within a decade work was underway on the transcontinental railroad. Once completed Californian businesses were connected to East Coast markets. Trade continued to grow into the 20 century establishing California as one of the most powerful economies in the world.



Primary Source: [Mr. Golightly, Bound to California, c1849](#)

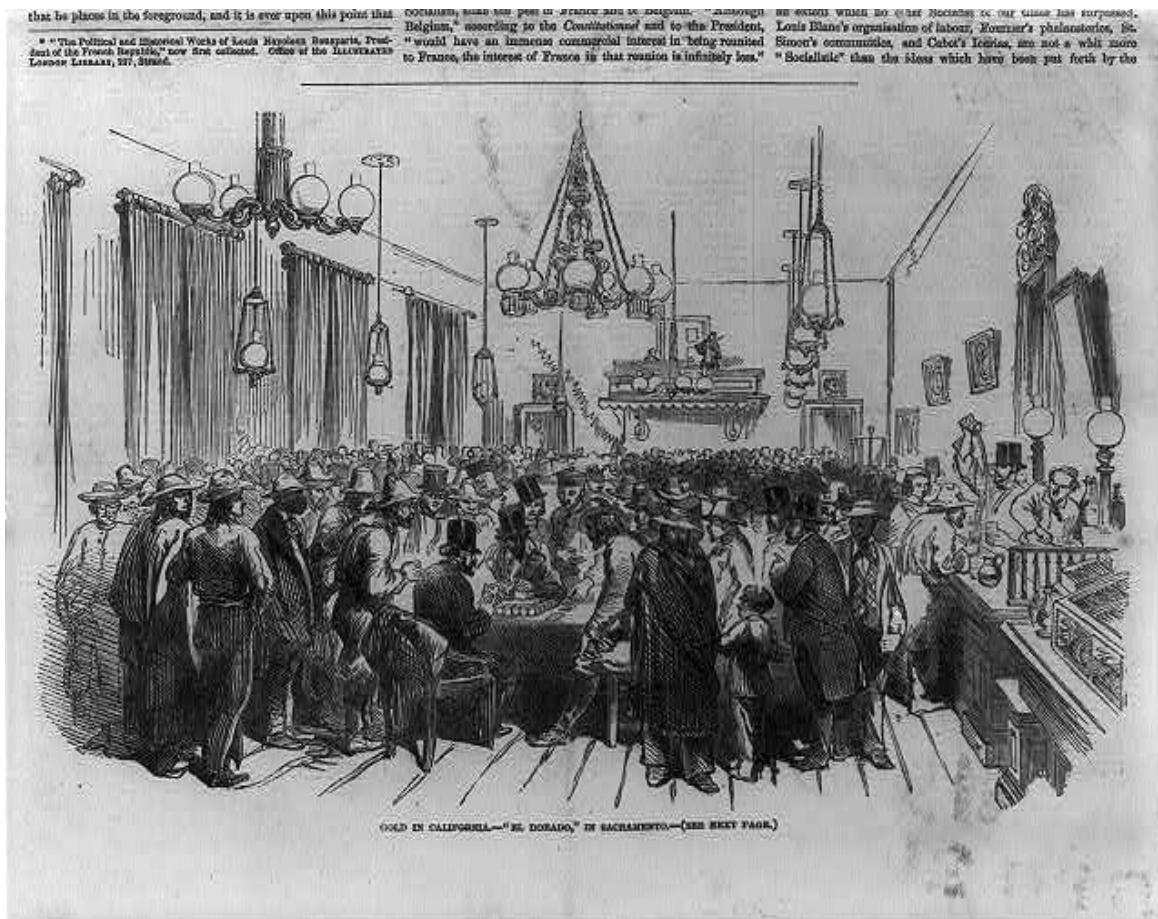
This cartoon shows a man on a flying contraption zooming to California. However, he is not a miner. His vehicle is loaded with supplies to sell to the miners. Many merchants raised prices on mining supplies, food, and clothing to take advantage of miners who had little choice in the marketplace.





### Primary Source: [“El Dorado” in Sacramento, 1852](#)

This illustration shows a crowded gambling hall in Sacramento during the Gold Rush. Restaurants, hotels, boarding houses, brothels, and gambling houses provided vice and entertainment for the 49er's.



**Suggested Activity:** As a class, look closely at each illustration. Ask the class to think about who is pictured. *Example Questions:* Why is the merchant zooming to California so quickly? Why is the gambling hall crowded? Do you think the gambling hall owners have a lot of money? What evidence do you see to support your idea? Do you think the 49er's were making money from gold? What happened to the money they made?

Ask the students to write a short paragraph to explain how they think the Gold Rush created business and opportunity using evidence from the pictures.



**Secondary Source:** [“Biddy Mason,” BOSS: The Black Experience in Business, 2019](#)

(Video Transcript) Hello, I'm Bonnie Boswell, here in the heart of Downtown Los Angeles on property once owned by Biddy Mason. Biddy Mason was an African American woman who started her life as a slave. But she became a businesswoman, a mogul, and ended up owning lots of property in Downtown LA.

This is Spring Street between Third and Fourth Street today. Biddy Mason bought lots here in 1866 for \$250. Money she'd saved from work as a midwife and nurse. And she continued to buy and sell land, making her one of the wealthiest women in Los Angeles.

**Secondary Source:** [After the Gold Rush, National Geographic, 2011](#)

Eventually, the effects of mining began to harm a new industry developing in California's Central Valley during the mid-1800s. “The major impact it had was on agriculture, because the mining involved digging up the rivers and producing all this silt,” Rohrbough says. “It also involved, in many cases, using mercury in the process of separating the gold out. All of this flowed downstream, and it heavily damaged the rivers as far as agricultural use is concerned.”

Rohrbough says that throughout the 1860s and 1870s, a fierce conflict developed between the mining and agricultural industries. By the mid-1870s, the California government realized that agriculture was more lucrative than mining. They passed a series of laws that restricted the impact of mining on rivers.

**Secondary Source:** [Shaping California History, James N. Gregory, 1993](#)

The gold rush was, as John Caughey put it some years ago, “the cornerstone,” the seminal event in the creation of American California, indeed in the whole later history of the far west. As an economic event, it transformed the meaning and purpose of the frontier West. The old West, the Mississippi Valley, had been a frontier of trappers and farmers whose slowly developing commerce with the rest of the nation depending on river towns and river boats. The new West that gold-rush California introduced was not really a frontier at all. It was a ready-made enterprise zone of miners and ranchers followed almost immediately by cities and railroads. There was nothing gradual about it. As Carey McWilliams put it, for California “the lights went on all at once.” (*California: The Great Exception* [1976], p.25) In 1848 California had been a sleepy port of call on the hide and tallow trade. Two years later, with a hundred thousand new residents and one of the busiest ports in the world, California had become the newest state in the United States--the only one west of Missouri. That was just the beginning. This instant state also claimed a sophisticated economy based not just on mining but on a dynamic urban sector that ultimately provided the financial and commercial services to begin the development of the rest of the west. And it started off with political muscle too: within ten years Congress would be talking about building a transcontinental railroad.

**Suggested Activity:** The three secondary sources give examples of how the Californian economy shifted from gold mining to other businesses over time. Ask the class what they think happened to the economy of California after the 49ers arrived. *Example*



*Questions: Do you think the Gold Rush lasted for a long time or short time? Do you think that miners continued to make lots of money? Who else do you think made money in California?* Divide the class into groups of four. Assign each group an excerpt from one of the secondary sources. Use a [reciprocal teaching](#) exercise to practice comprehension and summarizing skills. Then ask each group to share their excerpt with class.

**Suggested Activity: Putting it all together**

Ask the students to work alone or in small groups to create a presentation, essay, or video that explains the history of the Gold Rush and its impact on the people and economy of California and the United States using their own research and the sources collected in this unit.