

Summary: Trails to California

Explorers Cross the Frontier

Sea traders brought back amazing stories about California to the United States. Pioneers began crossing the western frontier. The first to reach Alta California were hardy mountain men who explored the mountains and deserts.

An early mountain man, Jedediah Strong Smith, was the first American to reach Alta California by land. In 1826, Smith crossed the Mojave Desert to the mission of San Gabriel and then went north to the Central Valley. The next year, he was the first American to cross the Sierra Nevada.

In 1844, John C. Frémont, a United States Army explorer, led a team to the San Joaquin Valley. In 1850, James Beckwourth, a trapper and trader, found the lowest mountain pass through the Sierra Nevada.

Pioneers Move West

American pioneers came to Alta California in hopes of finding cheap land to farm. They used land routes, crossing prairies, rivers, deserts, and mountains. The pioneers followed the routes of the mountain men. In 1841, John Bidwell, a young teacher, organized a wagon train from Missouri. They reached the San Joaquin Valley in about six months. His route became known as the California Trail.

The Donner party set off in 1846 from Illinois, but none of these pioneers knew how to cross the mountains. When winter came, the party became trapped in snow. Seven people managed to cross the mountains and send back help to the starving group. Stranded for four months, only about half of the group had survived.

Sutter's Fort

Another famous pioneer was John Augustus Sutter, who arrived in California in 1839. He received a land grant of 50,000 acres from the government and called his land New Helvetia, "New Switzerland," because he was Swiss. He built Sutter's Fort on the land. Sutter's Fort became an arrival point for pioneers, who were welcomed by Sutter. Meanwhile, Mexico was losing control over Alta California, as wealthy ranchers resisted Mexican rule. In 1845, Pío Pico became governor and failed to slow the flood of pioneers.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

frontier *noun*, a natural area that settlers start moving into

trapper *noun*, someone who hunts animals for their fur

pioneer *noun*, one of the first to enter or settle a place



After You Read

REVIEW What parts of Alta California did Americans explore and what did they find? Draw a box around the two paragraphs that describe the journeys of two trappers and an explorer.

REVIEW What dangers did the early pioneers face? Highlight two sentences that describe what pioneers had to do to get to Alta California.

REVIEW What was the importance of Sutter's Fort to pioneers? Underline the sentence that explains the importance of Sutter's Fort.