

Summary: The Gold Rush

News of Gold

Around the time California became part of the United States in 1848, John A. Sutter hired carpenter John Marshall to build a sawmill on the American River. Marshall hired Indians to dig a ditch for water to power the mill. On January 24, 1848, they found some tiny, shiny rocks. Marshall took them to Sutter, who tested them. The rocks were gold.

The men tried to keep it a secret, but word got out. Sam Brennan, a San Francisco merchant, wanted to sell shovels. He announced the discovery of gold to people in the streets, and the gold rush began. Many of the first miners were Californios. Nearly half were Indians hired to work for Californios or Americans.

In December 1848, President Polk announced in a speech that there really was more gold in California than people had thought. Suddenly, thousands got “gold fever” and headed west. During 1849, 80,000 people joined the California Gold Rush. They were called forty-niners.

Three Routes

Forty-niners came from many places, especially the eastern United States. They arrived by three routes. The most popular and cheapest was by land. It took six months by wagon. People had to cross swift rivers and high mountains, facing harsh weather, hunger, and thirst. The second most popular route was by sea. People sailed around the tip of South America and up to California. Boat tickets were more expensive, but sailing was less difficult and dangerous.

A third route combined land and sea travel. People sailed to Central America and crossed the isthmus by riverboat and mule. After reaching the Pacific Ocean, travelers took ships to California. This journey took about three months.

Between 1848 and 1854, about 300,000 people came to California. About 75,000 were immigrants from Chile, China, Great Britain, and other countries. These immigrants brought great diversity, changing the culture of California.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

gold rush *noun*, when many people rush to a place in search of gold

forty-niner *noun*, someone who went to California in 1849 to look for gold

isthmus *noun*, a narrow strip of land between two larger pieces of land



After You Read

REVIEW Why did the forty-niners head to California? Draw a box around the paragraph that explains why people headed west.

REVIEW What three routes brought miners from the East Coast to California? Highlight the sentences that tell how miners traveled to California.