

# 1849: The California Gold Rush

*A Reading A-Z Level U Leveled Book*  
Word Count: 1,285

## Connections

### Writing

Write a paragraph explaining what the author wants readers to learn from the Prices Gone Wild chart on page 13.

### Social Studies

Create a timeline of the California gold rush. Include at least five events.

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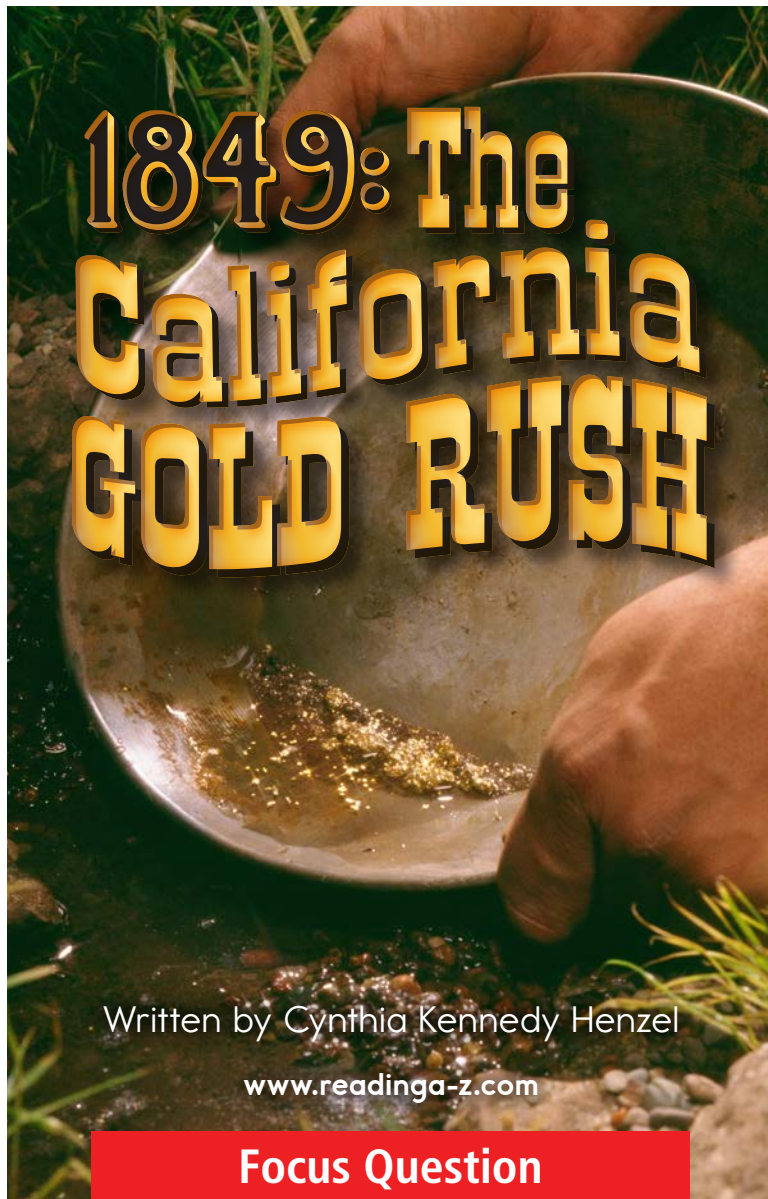
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# 1849: The California GOLD RUSH

**Multi  
level  
O•R•U**

Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

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## Focus Question

What was the effect of the gold rush on westward expansion?

## Words to Know

cholera	immigrants
economy	overrun
entrepreneurs	placer mining
erosion	populated
fortune	prospectors
gold rush	sanitary

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Level U Leveled Book  
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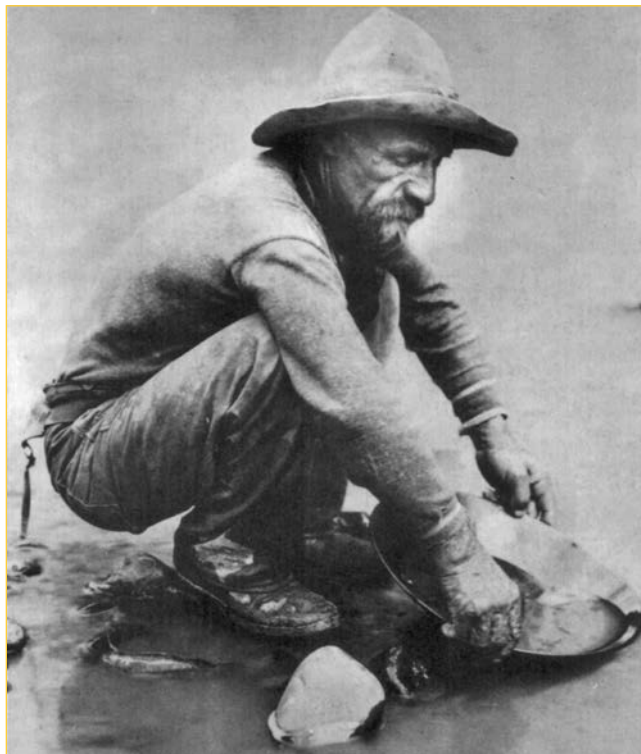
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## Correlation

### LEVEL U

Fountas & Pinnell	Q
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40





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## Sutter's Mill, California



## Gold!

On the morning of January 24, 1848, James Marshall went to inspect the ditch that carried water from the American River through the new mill his crew was building. The crew had deepened the part that ran out of the mill so the water would flow more quickly. At the end of the ditch, about six inches under the water, he spotted something shiny.

He collected several pieces and showed his crew. They tested the pieces. It was gold! Four days later, Marshall went to show John Sutter, who owned the mill. Sutter had forty-eight thousand acres and no wish to be **overrun** with gold hunters.

Everyone agreed to keep the secret: gold had been discovered in California.

## Keeping a Secret

In 1848, the world was very different from today. There were no phones, TVs, or radios. Back then, it was harder to get a message from the East Coast to California than it is to get a message to Mars today. There were no roads or railroads connecting California with the states in the East. Almost all of California's people were Native Americans. At the time of Marshall's discovery, California belonged to Mexico. Nine days later, Mexico signed the treaty that ended the Mexican-American War. The treaty gave California to the United States, and neither side knew about the gold.

Sam Brannan let out the secret. Brannan had come to California as a Mormon missionary. He had started a newspaper and flour mill in San Francisco, then opened a store at Sutter's Fort, where John Sutter lived. Brannan wanted to cash in when he heard the news, but he wasn't interested in mining. Instead, he bought all the shovels in San Francisco. Then he filled a bottle with gold dust and ran through the streets yelling about the great discovery. The city of 850 people almost emptied—after Brannan sold them each a very expensive shovel.



Sam Brannan

## Panning

Unlike the gold in most places, California's was not locked deep under the ground. **Erosion** had long ago washed the metal down the mountains into the rivers. All people needed for **placer mining** was a shovel and a shallow, flat pan.

Placer mining works because gold is much heavier than gravel. The **prospectors** stood in the rivers and shoveled gravel into their pans. They removed large rocks, then carefully swirled the pan. The dirt and gravel spilled over the edges with the water. The shiny flakes of gold stayed at the bottom of the pan.

People from California and Oregon soon showed up to work the rivers near Sutter's Mill. Some of them were European, and some were Native American. Others came from Mexico. Next came **immigrants** from Asia and South America. At that time it was easier to get to California from China than from the East Coast.

## Word Wise

The term *prospector* was born out of the gold rush. It means a person who moves to a spot with the prospect, or possibility, of finding gold and becoming rich.

*Gold fever* was the greed and contagious excitement brought on by the discovery of gold.

## The Forty-Niners

Rumors soon swirled in the eastern states about the gold. Most people didn't believe them, but a California official sent a report about the gold to Washington, D.C.—along with a sample. In December 1848, the president told Congress about the discovery. It was true!

Gold fever took hold. At the time, many workers earned less than a dollar a day. For them, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. In 1849, ninety thousand people—called forty-niners—joined the **gold rush**.

The trip to the gold mines for these forty-niners would take months—and it was not cheap. People had to buy transportation and supplies to last until they arrived in California. Many gold

seekers were clerks, teachers, or lawyers. Nine out of ten were men. Many couldn't cook, wash a shirt, build a shelter, or harness oxen to pull a wagon. Many left behind families. They planned to quickly make a **fortune** and come home.

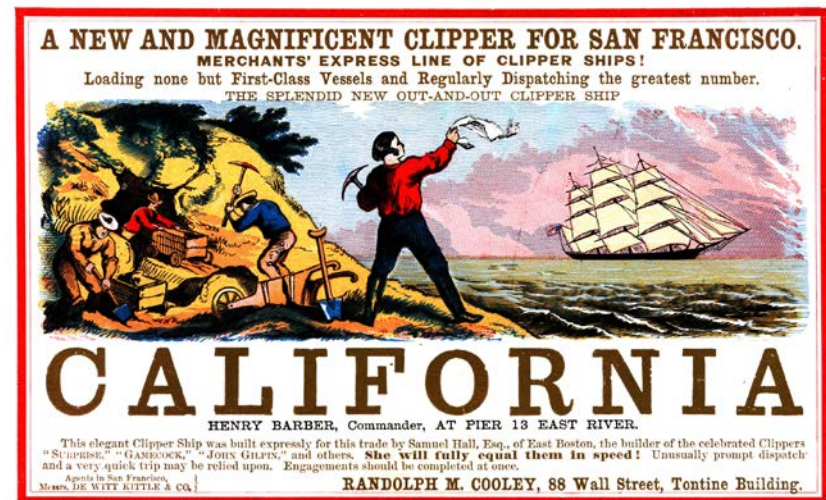


forty-niner portrait

## Around the Tip

About half of the forty-niners decided to go by ship. More than five hundred ships left eastern and Gulf ports in 1849 for California. Ships took from five to eight months to sail from the East Coast, around the tip of South America, and back up to California.

The cheapest ticket was \$75—about \$2,300 in today's money. At that price, lodging was a tiny bunk in the dark, crowded bottom of the ship. Food was dried meat, hard biscuits with weevils, and water. The passengers suffered shipwrecks, seasickness, and disease. Many reported that the worst things were crowding and boredom. Day after day, they saw nothing but water.



Posters like this one advertised ships that would carry forty-niners from New York City to San Francisco.

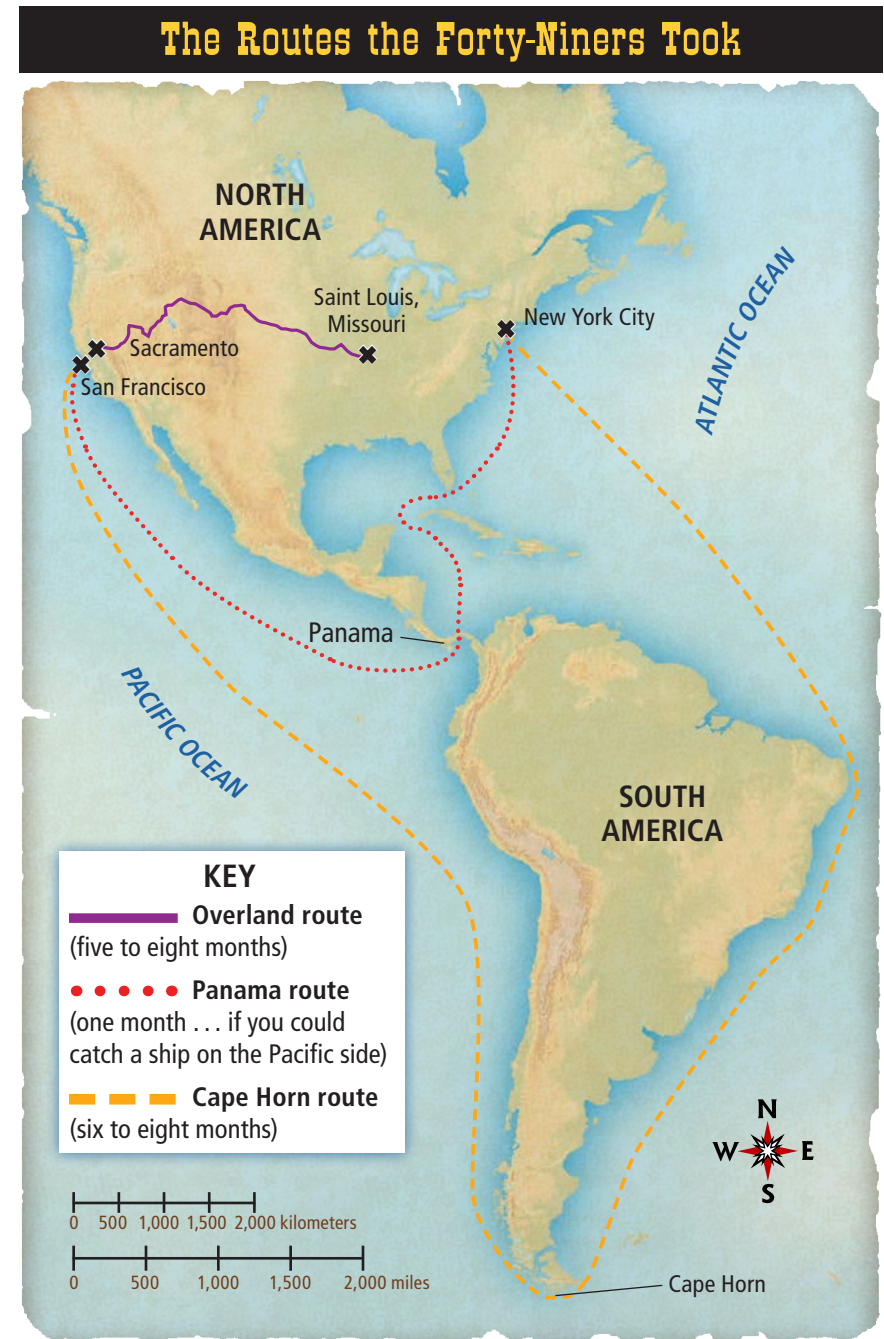


Some passengers decided to save time by taking a shortcut through Panama. They could canoe and hike across 60 miles (97 km) of jungle, then catch another ship. These forty-niners faced deadly snakes and mobs of mosquitoes. Many fell ill with malaria or yellow fever. If they made it across, they might wait weeks or months to catch a ship on the other side.

### *Wagons Ho!*

It took about the same amount of time to get to California by wagon. Most people left from Saint Louis, Missouri, the westernmost city. Many looked forward to the adventure almost as much as finding gold, but the adventure proved more than they'd bargained for.

Wagons followed the California Trail across the flat prairie. A wagon could travel about 15 miles (24 km) in a day—if it didn't break down, if there wasn't much rain, and if the oxen stayed healthy. Once they reached the mountains, the forty-niners had to get the wagons across rivers. They had to push and pull their wagons up mountains. At times they had to lower wagons by rope down steep cliffs. They crossed deserts with no water. They were pounded by wind and rain. If they weren't fast enough, they were slowed by blizzards in the high passes.



For many, their greatest fear was clashes with Native Americans, but death came from disease, starvation, and accidents. **Cholera** killed many people. The forty-niners carried the disease with them as they drove their wagons the 2,100 miles (3,380 km) to California. Thousands died. By the fall of 1849, the trail was lined with possessions people had thrown away, dead oxen, and graves.



An 1850 engraving depicts a wagon train moving toward California, probably via the Sierra Nevada mountains.



### The Losers, the Winners

For those who made it to California, life did not get easier. The prospectors lived in mining camps made of tents and rough shelters. They ate poorly. They worked twelve hours a day shoveling gravel or breaking rocks with picks. Many fell ill, often due to poor **sanitary** conditions and diet, but they kept working. The next pan of gravel might be worth a fortune!

### Equal Opportunity?

As the hills filled with prospectors, white miners began to oppose other groups hunting for gold, especially the Chinese. California taxed foreign miners \$20 a month to prospect. White prospectors sometimes forced them from the mines with more violent tactics.

For Native Americans, the gold rush was disastrous. It opened the gateways to the West, which led to huge numbers of Native Americans dying of diseases or being displaced or killed. In California, roughly 120,000 Native Americans died of disease, starvation, or homicide during the gold rush.



## Prices Gone Wild

Forty-niners could get what they wanted—for a steep price. Here's what some items cost in 1849 San Francisco and in 2016 dollars (adjusted for inflation):

	1849		2016
one can of peas	\$6	=	\$181
one egg	\$1	=	\$26
one breakfast	\$43	=	\$1,294
one pound (.45 kg) of coffee	\$3	=	\$103
one mule	\$360	=	\$10,835
one pair of boots	\$96	=	\$2,890

Source: *The Rush: America's Fevered Quest for Fortune, 1848–1853*, by Edward Dolnick

According to the *Sacramento Bee*, one in every five miners who came to California in 1849 was dead within six months. Even those who found gold often lost it to robbers, gambling, or paying high prices for everyday goods.

Some early prospectors were successful. Once the placer gold was gone, though, most of the riches from gold went to large companies. They were able to mine with high-pressure jets of water or dig deep mines.

### Good Prospects, Bad Endings

Several of the men involved in the original discovery of gold ended up with nothing to show for it. John Sutter lost his property when the United States would not recognize his land grant from Mexico. He died broke. So did James Marshall.

Sam Brannan made his fortune, then lost it all due to bad investments and bad temperament. He died broke, too.

**Entrepreneurs** made a fortune by selling to the miners. Sam Brannan became one of the first millionaires in America.

Levi Strauss made his fortune selling pants tough enough to handle the work—blue jeans. Women, especially, had many more opportunities in the West. They started businesses cooking, running boarding houses, and washing clothes for the prospectors.



Levi Strauss



Levi's jeans were popular by the 1880s. Here, two miners wear theirs outside an underground mine.





The biggest winner was the United States. The gold rush brought about three hundred thousand people to California. The West was **populated** in a few years instead of decades. In 1850, California became a state. By 1863, the country began building the transcontinental railway, which would link East and West.

Today, California has more people than any of the other forty-nine states. It has a huge **economy**—larger than that of most countries. Nearly two centuries after the gold rush, California still lives up to its nickname: the Golden State.

## Glossary

<b>cholera</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a serious and often deadly disease of the digestive system (p. 11)
<b>economy</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the circulation of money in industry, trade, and finance in a country or area (p. 15)
<b>entrepreneurs</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who start and operate their own business (p. 14)
<b>erosion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the natural removal of rock or soil by water, wind, or ice (p. 6)
<b>fortune</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large amount of money or possessions (p. 7)
<b>gold rush</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the sudden movement of many people to an area where gold has been discovered (p. 7)
<b>immigrants</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who come to live in a new country, especially for the purpose of settling there (p. 6)
<b>overrun</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	entered or taken over by large numbers of something (p. 4)
<b>placer mining</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the process of extracting valuable minerals from streambed or glacial deposits (p. 6)
<b>populated</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	lived in; filled with inhabitants (p. 15)
<b>prospectors</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who search for minerals such as gold and silver (p. 6)
<b>sanitary</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	of or relating to cleanliness and health (p. 12)