Learning A–Z	level R	Multi-level	O R U
Grade	3	Word Count	1,170
Lexile	930L	Nonfiction • Informational	

Refer to the Focus Question on page 2 of this title to guide discussion and support additional learning connected to the text.

January 24, 1848, marked an important event in United States history when James Marshall discovered gold in California. The gold fever that followed this discovery overcame people from all over the world, causing them to flood the American West in search of wealth. **1849: The California Gold Rush** offers a detailed look at the unfolding of the gold rush and the way in which it shaped the United States. The book can also be used to teach students how to make inferences and draw conclusions as well as to identify subject-verb agreement. The book is also available for levels O and U.

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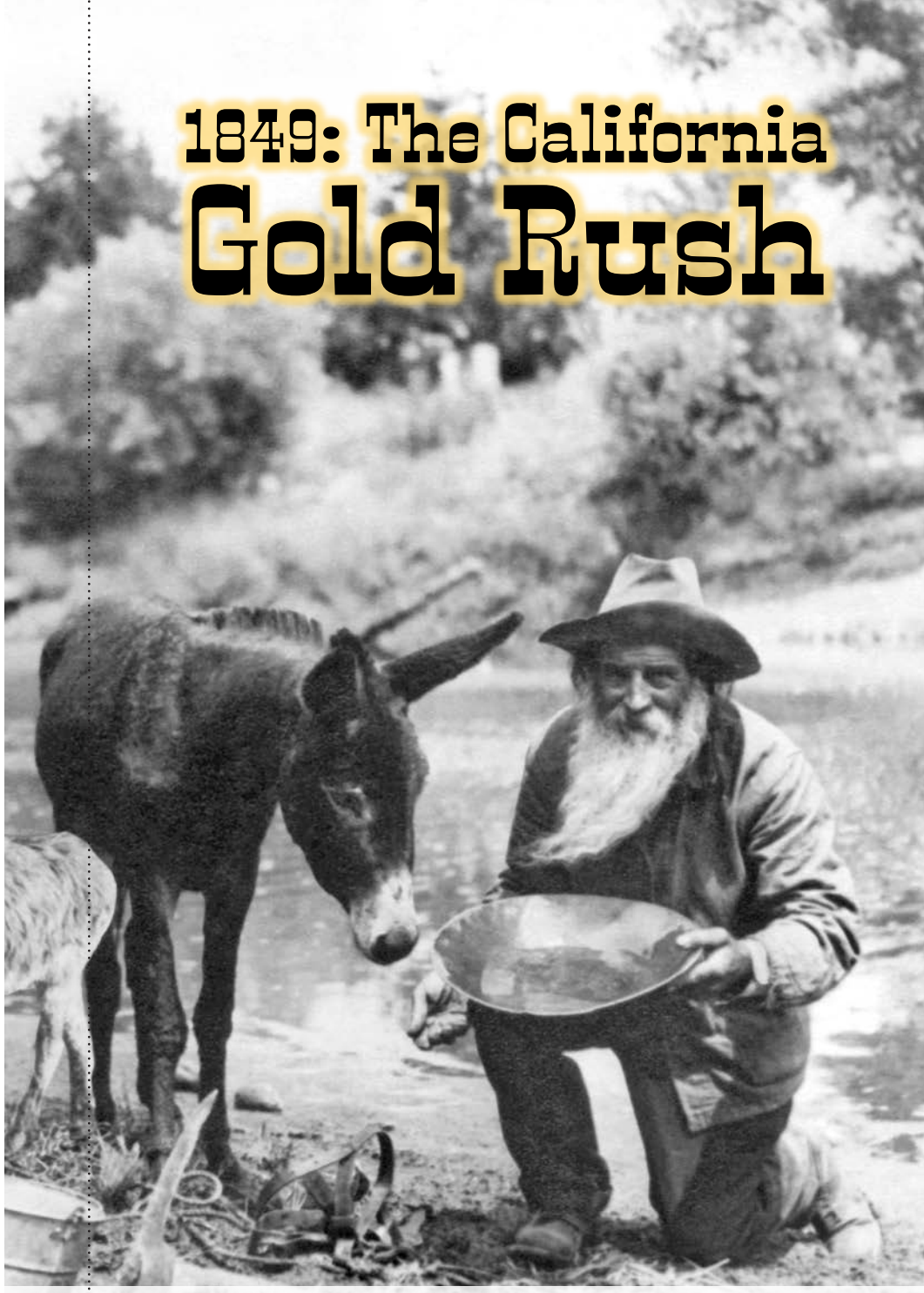
1849: The California Gold Rush



Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

Glossary

economy *(n.)* page 15
the circulation of money in industry, trade, and finance in a country or area

erosion *(n.)* page 6
the natural removal of rock or soil by water, wind, or ice

gravel *(n.)* page 6
a loose mixture of rock fragments

greed *(n.)* page 7
a selfish and intense desire for more of something than is needed

rumors *(n.)* page 7
stories passed from person to person that have not been proven true

settlers *(n.)* page 8
people who make a new, permanent home on a frontier

starvation *(n.)* page 11
a state of extreme hunger or dying because of a lack of food

taxed *(v.)* page 12
collected a fee to pay for government services, operations, or functions

wealthy *(adj.)* page 15
having a large amount of money or possessions

1849: The California Gold Rush

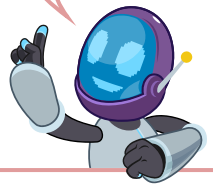
Above: Miners found more than 750,000 pounds (340,000 kg) of gold during the Gold Rush.

Cover: A miner poses with his donkey and pan.

Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

Focus Question

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



Words to Know

economy
erosion
gravel
greed
rumors
settlers
starvation
taxed
wealthy

Connections

Writing

Write a paragraph explaining what the author wants readers to learn from the Prices Gone Wild chart on page 14.

Social Studies and Art

Create a poster that shows the tools for placer mining and how these tools were used to find gold in California.

San Francisco in 1851 (top) and today (bottom)

The Golden State

White settlers, the U.S. government, and **wealthy** people came out on top after the Gold Rush. Native peoples had a much different experience. The Gold Rush brought around three hundred thousand settlers, mostly white, to what were once Native lands.

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.

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 2021 dollars (adjusted for inflation):

	1849		2021
one can of peas	$6	=	$206
one egg	$1	=	$34
one breakfast	$43	=	$1,479
one pound (.45 kg) of coffee	$3	=	$103
one mule	$360	=	$12,384
one pair of boots	$96	=	$3,302

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

Some people made a fortune by selling to the miners. Sam Brannan became one of the first millionaires in the United States. Levi Strauss made his fortune selling pants tough enough to handle the work—blue jeans. Women started businesses cooking, running boarding houses, and washing clothes.

Mary Ellen Pleasant

Mary Ellen Pleasant

Mary Ellen Pleasant was a Black American businesswoman who became a millionaire during the Gold Rush. A lot of what Pleasant did is a secret. Some people say she worked as a cook and a housekeeper during the Gold Rush and that while she worked, she listened to what wealthy people were talking about. Pleasant made a lot of money buying and selling buildings and businesses.

Prospectors mine in California around 1852.

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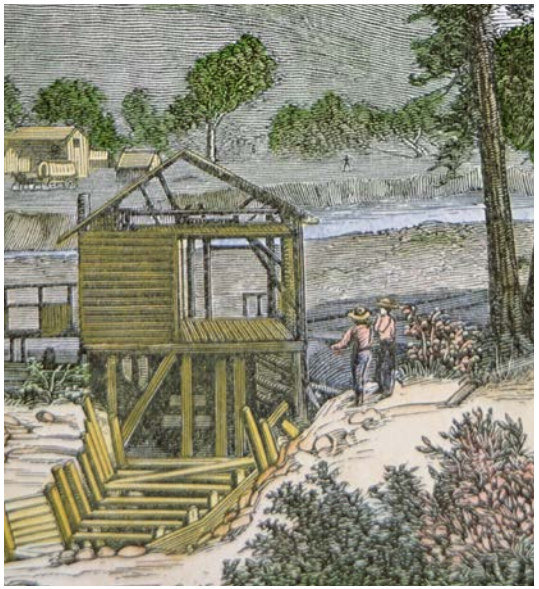
Keeping a Secret

On the morning of January 24, 1848, James Marshall went to inspect a ditch. It carried water through the new sawmill his crew was building in California. At the end of the ditch, he spotted something shiny under the water. It was gold!

Four days later, Marshall showed the gold to the owner of the mill, John Sutter. Sutter had taken land from the Nisenan people and made a deal with the Mexican government, which controlled the area at the time. Sutter had also kidnapped and enslaved many Native people to work the land. Sutter tried to get everyone to keep the secret that gold had been discovered in California.



Sutter's Mill was a water-powered sawmill, where logs were cut into lumber, or wood, to be sold.

Once California became a state in 1850, the government took land from Native peoples. Soon fear and hatred led to thousands of Native peoples becoming enslaved. New laws allowed settlers to arrest Native people for minor wrongdoings. The government then forced them to pay their fines by working on ranches. Around three hundred thousand Native peoples lived in California before the Gold Rush. More than one hundred thousand were dead twenty years later.

Finding gold didn't make life easy. Those who found it often lost it. Robbers were common. Prospectors often gambled. Goods cost much more money than people were used to paying. Some early prospectors were successful. Most of the riches from gold went to large companies. They were able to mine for the deeper gold.

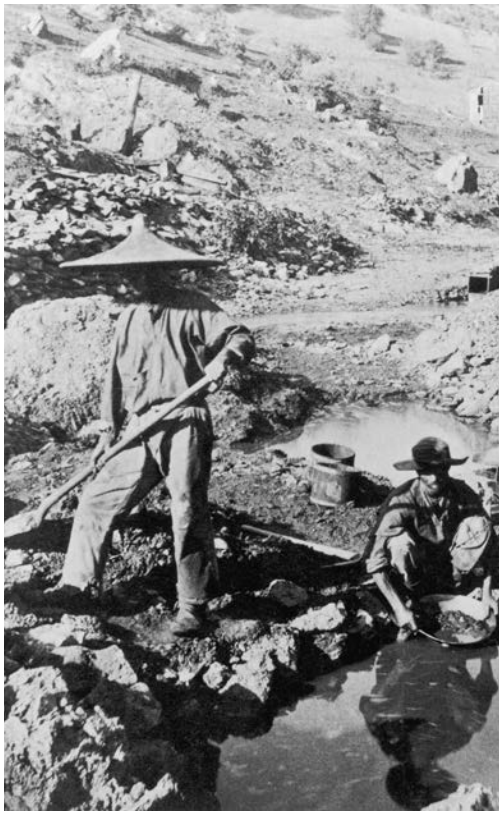
Good Prospects, Bad Endings

Several of the men involved in the original discovery of gold ended up with nothing to show for it. John Sutter lost his golden property when the United States would not recognize his land grant from Mexico. Sutter, along with Sam Brannan and James Marshall, eventually lost their fortunes.

Equal Opportunity?

As the hills filled with prospectors, white miners began to treat other groups hunting for gold badly. White prospectors sometimes forced prospectors from other countries to leave the mines. California **taxed** miners who came from other countries, such as China.

Many different groups of Native peoples lived in California. They spoke around eighty different languages. As forty-niners flooded the area, attacks forced Native peoples off their land. Thousands were killed outright, and thousands more died of disease.



Chinese miners search for gold in California around 1850.

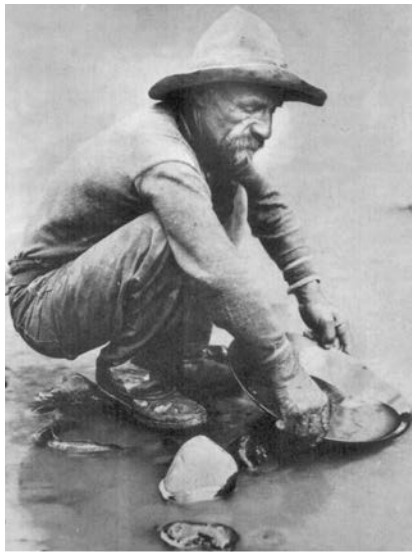
Territory Lost to the U.S. in the Mexican-American War

Six days after Marshall found the gold, Mexico signed a treaty to end the Mexican-American War. The treaty gave California to the United States.

Sam Brannan, who ran a store near Sutter's Mill, soon let out the secret. Brannan 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 the tools they needed to find gold—picks, axes, pans, and shovels—at very expensive prices.

Panning

Unlike gold in most places, California's gold wasn't locked deep under the ground. **Erosion** had long ago washed the metal down the mountains and into rivers. Miners used a technique called *placer mining*. It allowed them to sift gold out of the riverbed using a shallow, flat pan. Prospectors stood in rivers and shoveled **gravel** into their pan. 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.



Most days, miners only found gold worth between $10 and $15 today.

Word Wise

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

The forty-niners had to get the wagons across rivers, up mountains, down cliffs, and across deserts. They were pounded by rain, wind, and snow.

Even worse dangers facing forty-niners came from disease, **starvation**, and accidents. For those who made it to California, life did not get easier. Prospectors lived in tents and worked twelve hours a day. Many fell ill. They didn't want to give up—the next pan of gravel might be worth a fortune!

Gold miners stand in their camp at El Dorado, California, around 1850. The original El Dorado in South America is a mythical place of immense wealth.

A drawing from around 1900 shows people traveling together in a group of wagons called a *train*.

By Wagon

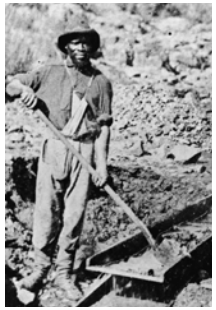
It took about the same amount of time to get to California by wagon. Much of the land that stood between forty-niners on the East Coast and California was still the land of Native peoples. Settlers moving out West often hunted without permission, stole from Native peoples, and attacked them.

Most people left from Saint Louis, Missouri, the westernmost U.S. city at the time. Wagons followed the California Trail for 2,100 miles (3,380 km) across the flat prairie. A wagon could travel about 15 miles (24 km) in a day—if it didn't break down, there wasn't much rain, and the oxen stayed healthy.

The Forty-Niners

Rumors soon reached the eastern states about gold out West. 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—**greed** and contagious excitement brought on by the discovery of gold—took hold of many people. At the time, many workers earned less than a dollar a day. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. In 1849, around ninety thousand people—called *forty-niners*—joined the Gold Rush. The forty-niners came from across the United States as well as from Mexico, Central and South America, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Around 10 percent of the forty-niners were women. Black people were among the forty-niners as well. Some were enslaved and were forced by their enslavers to go to California. Free Black people also traveled west in hopes of finding gold.



By 1852, around 2,000 Black people lived in California, which was about 1 percent of the population. A gold miner shovels gravel in California in 1852.

The trip to the gold mines could take months—and it was not cheap. People had to pay for transportation and supplies. Many forty-niners left behind jobs and families. They planned to make a fortune quickly and return home. Others were ready for adventure.

People from California and Oregon showed up first at the rivers near Sutter's Mill. Locals only had to travel short distances with their pack animals. It took longer for immigrants to arrive by boat from Asia, Australia, and South America, and for people to cross the United States.

By Ship

About half of the forty-niners decided to travel by ship to avoid crossing the lands of Native peoples. 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. The passengers suffered as a result of shipwrecks, seasickness, and disease as well as from crowding and boredom.

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 many dangers, including bad weather and wild animals. Many fell ill and died. If they made it across, it might take weeks or months to catch a ship on the other side.

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