

How California Became “American”: Since the time of the Franciscan Missions along the California coast in the late 18th century, Mexico assumed California was simply a northwest extension of its country. With the provincial capital at Monterey, great but often corrupt Hispanic landowners governed most of what is the present State of California. They sometimes had to defend against Indians but were tolerant of a few English-speaking settlers, explorers such as John C. Fremont and passive Russians who had a fort in the north. That was the situation until the mid-1840s.

An outstanding and probably the most benevolent of the landowners of Mexican descent was Mariano Vallejo, whose holdings included several million acres around and north of San Francisco Bay. The government of Mexico, in great turmoil itself, did not govern California well, and the landowners debated whether they should become a part of Spain or that of another European power. Vallejo inserted his considerable political influence on the side of the United States, and because this effort succeeded, he eventually lost most of his fortune and nearly all his land. When the U. S. government sent troops to California to defend the territory, young officers such as Ulysses S. Grant were stationed there and, unofficially at least, had to report to Vallejo.

When gold was discovered by James Marshall at Sutter's Mill east of Sacramento in 1848, that changed everything. The lure of quick fortunes brought thousands of prospectors from the east in a wave that was called the Forty-Niners' Gold Rush. Using a portion of the Oregon Trail and then branching south to cross Utah and the Sierras where the Donner party had perished two years earlier, forts and villages with temporary buildings sprang up everywhere. More permanent possessions had to come by ship around Cape Horn to the natural port of San Francisco, which journey took nearly two months from the East Coast. In less than two years, the City by the Bay had modern hotels with dining delights to match the best hotels in America. Fortunes were being made, not only from gold but from shipping, the cutting of virgin timber, construction, and all businesses that prospered from the rapid expansion. In 1850, it was time for California to become a state.

The “big four” of California's early entrepreneurs were Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, and Charles Cropper. All built large Victorian mansions on Nob Hill in San Francisco (most were destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906). Stanford and Huntington were railroad men, founders of the Central Pacific Railway, and Stanford was one of the early governors of California. They realized the importance of connecting their thriving new state in the West with the rest of the country (Oregon to the north had become a state in 1858) to eliminate the two-month journey around South America. The Pony Express, whose young horseback riders covered the distance between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento in 10 days, carried light mail, but this adventure lasted only 17 months when most expansion was halted to fight the American Civil War.

In the years immediately following the war, construction started on the Union Pacific Railroad, pushing west from Omaha, and the Central Pacific, pushing east from Sacramento. A Chinese crew of “gandy-dancers” laid 10 miles of rail in one day! When the lines met at Promontory Point, Utah, a special ceremony was held there on May 10, 1869, when a golden railroad spike was driven by dignitaries from both railroads, who arrived aboard their respective special trains. Despite herds of buffalo on the tracks and Indian raids on the trains, California now had ready access to eastern markets and vice versa.

In 1850, the population of California was estimated at 92,000. By 1860, it was 400,000, and by 1900 it was 1½ million. When I first visited in 1941, it was about 7½ million. In the census of 1970, it surpassed New York as our most populous state at 20 million, and today it is estimated to contain 40 million people. Through the 19th century and into the 20th, San Francisco was the most important city, but the drier and warmer climate of the Los Angeles basin attracted many new arrivals and business enterprises, and when the movie industry chose Hollywood, greater Los Angeles soon became California's most populated city. Today it ranks second in population behind New York as our country's largest city.