



# California History

---

## A STORY OF PEOPLE AND PROGRESS

**I**t was March 28, 1776, and Father Pedro Font stood on a hill overlooking the sea. Father Font and two hundred forty Spanish settlers had just completed a five-month march across 1,700 miles of mountains and desert. They had left Spain's settlements in Mexico to start a fort and a religious mission in the Spanish colony of California. They would name the mission and fort after a Catholic saint, Saint (San) Francisco.

### A Beautiful Site

Father Font praised the site the settlers had chosen for the mission. In his diary, he wrote, "Although in my travels I saw very good sites and beautiful country, I saw none which pleased me so much as this. And I think if it could be well settled like Europe there would not be anything more beautiful in all the world."

Indeed, the Spanish were just beginning to discover the beauty of California. The first Spanish explorer had set foot in California in 1540, but at the time, Spain had not thought the area worth settling. Spain's headquarters in the New World were in central Mexico, and California seemed too far away.

In 1578, the English sea captain Francis Drake landed in California. Drake claimed the land for England, but no English settlers came there. During the 1600s, the English were busy building colonies on the East Coast of North America. Once again, California seemed too far away.

---

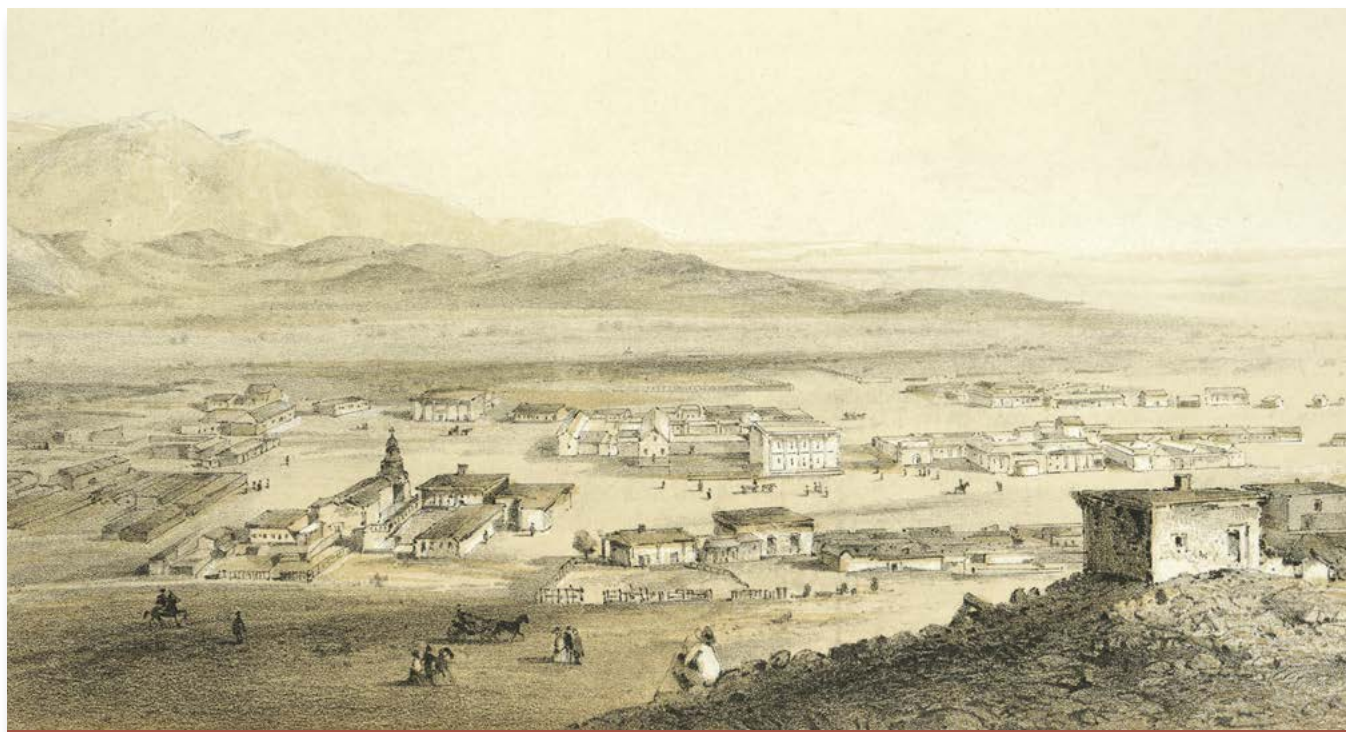
Father Pedro Font and 240 Spanish settlers started the mission of San Francisco in 1776, shown above as it looked in the 1830s.

## Spanish Roots

When Spain sent settlers to California in 1769, the only people living there were the Native Americans whose ancestors had settled there thousands of years before. One reason Spain sent its settlers was to make sure the area became a Spanish colony, and not an English or Russian one. (Russian fur traders had been exploring the region in hopes of advancing their own fur trade.) The Spanish decided to start a series of missions all along the California coast. In these missions, priests would teach the original inhabitants, Native Americans, about the Catholic religion, and show them how Europeans lived. By 1804, there were 21 Spanish missions in California.

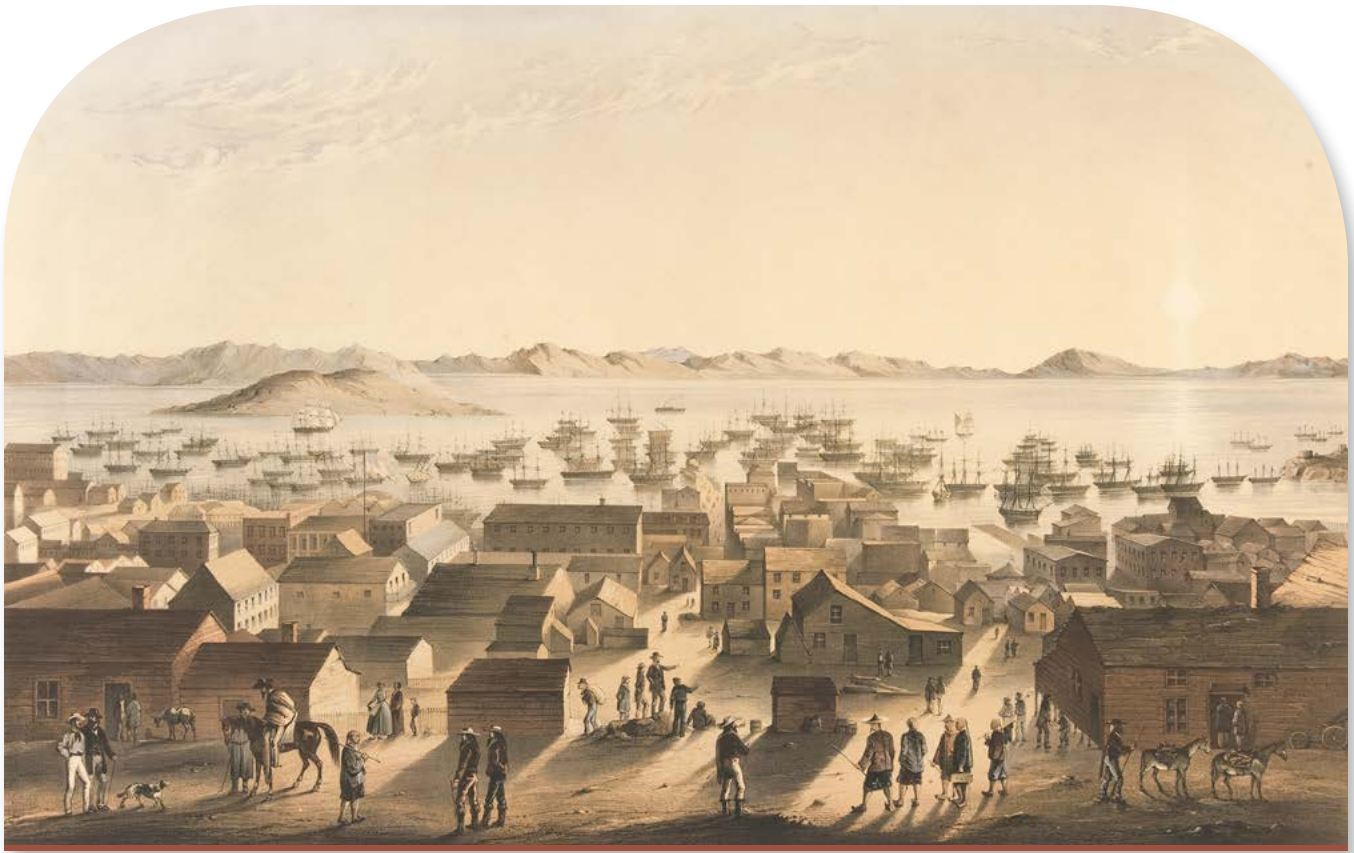
In addition to the missions, the Spanish built presidios, or forts, and pueblos, or towns. In 1781, forty-four men, women, and children left the San Gabriel mission to found a pueblo where they could grow food for the mission's priests. The settlers started their community on a site not far from the mission, and gave the town a 14-word name which was eventually abbreviated to just two words—Los Angeles, meaning “the angels.”

Despite new pueblos like Los Angeles, California grew slowly. By 1845, there were only 7,000 non-native people living in the colony. But California had become a popular stopping place for trading ships from the United States and other nations. American sailors who visited California wrote exciting letters and stories about the area. For the first time, people in the United States became interested in the mysterious land across the continent.



From The New York Public Library

Los Angeles was founded by a small group of settlers in 1781. This illustration shows Los Angeles in its early years, as well as the nearby farmland that provided food for the growing community.



This lithograph of San Francisco, created around the time of the Gold Rush, shows the crowded harbor and the diverse population of the young city.

### Shifting Borders

California had come under Mexico's rule in 1821. Mexico had won its independence from Spain in 1821, and had also won control of Spain's other territories in North America. In 1846, the United States went to war with Mexico. The United States won the war in 1848, and took over the California territory as part of its victory.

### Glittery Dreams

Just one week before California became part of the United States, a carpenter from New Jersey made a tremendous discovery. The carpenter, James Marshall, was building a sawmill in Sutterville, California, when he noticed some shiny pebbles at his feet. Marshall brought the pebbles to his employer, John Sutter, who proved that they were nuggets of gold. News of this discovery spread east, and the Gold Rush was on. Historians believe that between 100,000 and 200,000 people migrated west after learning of Marshall's discovery.

California entered the Union as the 31st state on September 9, 1850, at the height of the Gold Rush. At the time, it took weeks to travel to this state from the rest of the nation. In the 1860s, two railroad companies decided to do something about that. They hired thousands of Chinese and Irish workers to build a transcontinental railroad, one that would join the East and West coasts of the United States. On May 10, 1869, the railroad was completed.

## East Meets West

With the transcontinental railroad to make transportation easier, California grew quickly. The state's population jumped from 546,000 in 1870 to 1,480,000 in 1900. In the meantime, California became a leading grower of oranges, grapes, and other farm products. It became a leading oil producer too, after Californians struck oil in the 1860s.

California has long been the home for newcomers to the United States. Beginning in the 1850s, thousands of Chinese immigrants fled war and hard times in China to work on the railroad, look for gold, and start their own businesses in California. Newcomers from Japan started arriving in the late 19th century, and once in California, they became some of the state's most successful farmers. Yet life in California was not always easy for these and other groups of immigrants. Their different habits and customs caused some Californians to treat them cruelly. Only recently have Chinese and Japanese Americans started to receive credit for their important contributions to California's history.



These Chinese children walk along the sidewalk in San Francisco's Chinatown in the early 1900s. Chinatown continues to be a vibrant community in San Francisco today.