

PARADISE “Ho, for California!” From 1841 to 1869 over 250,000 people traveled the 2,000-mile California Trail through Great Plains prairies, Great Basin deserts, and Sierra Nevada peaks seeking land, adventure, and wealth.

Americans of the 1700s viewed the West as a blank canvas for their nation's future, overlooking the Native peoples who already called it home. After Lewis and Clark's 1804–6 expedition, fur traders followed Indigenous trails through western mountain passes and river valleys, completing maps and preparing the way for an American migration. By the late 1830s trappers and mountaineers had established most of the routes that would become Americans' main overland trail west.

An 1837 economic panic spurred people to take to the California Trail. Guides and promoters talked up the West's prospects for health and wealth. The first migrants, numbering in the hundreds, included single men and families seeking fertile farmland and a chance at a better life. The 1848–55 gold rush increased traffic on the trail to thousands per year. This mass migration via the trail forever changed the West's landscapes and populations—and Native homelands and lifeways.



Well into the 1800s, California was promoted as a beautiful paradise with fertile land for the taking. The poster above lured migrants there by promising ample farmland and bountiful harvests. For some the call west was hard to resist. One young person felt “just crazy to move out there, for I thought such a country must be a paradise.”

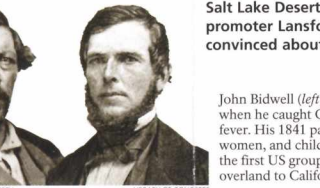
Left: City of Rocks
NPS

WHY GO WEST? Mountain man James Clyman saw “one continual stream” of “honest looking open hearted people” going west in 1846. He wondered why “so many of all kinds and classes of People should sell out comfortable homes in Missouri and Elsewhere pack up and start across such an immense Barren waste to settle in some new Place of which they have at most so uncertain information.” The reason, he concluded, was “the character of my countrymen.”

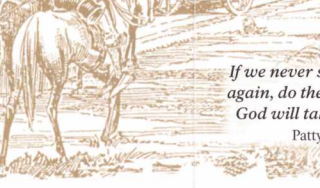
Trail travelers of the 1840s were people of all classes with varying motives. Some hoped to own farms, build permanent homes, amass wealth, or escape hardship. An 1846 traveler said his companions “agreed in the one general object—that of bettering their condition.”

Some viewed the mass migration along the California Trail as proof of “Manifest Destiny,” the idea that white Americans were meant to dominate the continent from coast to coast. Similar ideas were used to justify taking Native American lands and to expand slavery as the nation grew.

While many Americans had doubts about national expansion, most trail migrants did not view their journey as a political statement. Concerned mainly with bettering their lives, they followed their dreams west without considering the effects on the future of slavery or on the many Indigenous peoples already there.



Born enslaved, Jim Beckwourth of Virginia (right) went west when freed by his white father. He became a wagon train guide, mountaineer, and trail blazer.



John Bidwell (left) was 21 when he caught California fever. His 1841 party of men, women, and children became the first US group to travel overland to California.

OPENING ROUTES The first American settlers to migrate to California on an overland trail were from the Bidwell-Bartleson party. The 69-person group left Missouri in May 1841. At Soda Springs, Idaho, some continued to Oregon while others—knowing only “that California lay to the west”—struggled across the Great Salt Lake Desert. They abandoned their wagons before reaching the Humboldt River, packed livestock and necessities, and in November reached California.

The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party in 1844 was the first wagon train to reach California, taking the Truckee Route over the Sierra Nevada to Sutter's Fort. In 1845 John C. Fremont explored a new Great Basin route across the Great Salt Lake Desert. The next summer, promoter Lansford W. Hastings convinced about 80 late-starting

travelers to try this cutoff. The last of them was the ill-fated Donner-Reed party. In 1846 a Willamette Valley party opened Applegate Trail from Nevada to Oregon. In 1848 Peter Lassen branched off this route to northern California.

The California Gold Rush led to more new trails. Thousands took Sierra Nevada routes established by Jim Beckwourth and William Nobles. Others crossed Mexico and the Southwest to reach the goldfields. Cherokee from Arkansas and Oklahoma opened the first route through the Rockies that did not use South Pass. Not everyone on the trail went west. In 1848 Mormon Battalion veterans of the war with Mexico, who later opened the preferred wagon route through Carson Pass, left on an eastward journey from Sutter's Fort to the Great Salt Lake valley.

While building a sawmill in January 1848, a group of Native and white workers led by James W. Marshall discovered gold in the South Fork of the American River at the Nisenan village site Kolo-ma (now Coloma, California). The news spread across the Pacific Coast. Gold hunters from Oregon, California, and Mexico and large numbers of Native miners converged on the goldfields.



At the end of 1848, US President James K. Polk confirmed the gold discovery in a report to Congress. Publications across the country enticingly described the “California Gold Mines.” By the spring of 1849 California gold fever was a national epidemic. The stage was now set for one of the largest migrations in US history.



A Miner's Creed, 1855
BANCROFT LIBRARY

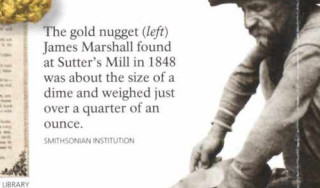
WESTWARD WAYS The California Trail offered many ways to get to the West Coast (map, other side). Its vast network of cutoffs and variants came to resemble a rope with frayed ends.

Westward travelers who departed from towns on the Missouri River converged at the Platte River in Nebraska. Most took the same general route overland through the Great Plains from Fort Kearny in Nebraska to South Pass in Wyoming. South Pass ended a long ascent up the Continental Divide and marked the California Trail's halfway point.

From here travelers could either go to Idaho and the Raft River area, where the trail's main line split from the Oregon Trail, or to Utah and the settlements of



Thousands clogged the California Trail. Single men eager for wealth and adventure went in droves. Married men left families and jobs, hoping to return in a year or so with enough money to last a lifetime (few succeeded). Nearly all the grass along the trail was trampled to dust under wagons and herds. Unsanitary conditions at overcrowded camps spread cholera and disease.



It was awful coming up those mountains. There were great rocks, waist high, that the wheels had to bump over, and it was all the poor oxen could do to drag the lightened loads.
Frances Anne Cooper

the Latter-day Saints. Most who visited Salt Lake City followed the Salt Lake Cutoff back to the main trail at City of Rocks in Idaho.

After the aptly named Parting of the Ways in Wyoming, various routes bypassed Great Salt Lake and converged again in the Great Basin of Nevada. The Humboldt River valley was the best practical wagon road through this basin-and-range country, though overlanders continually sought easier ways across the formidable Great Basin. Near the Humboldt Sink the trail fanned out into several routes to California and the goldfields. By 1860 US freight and mail companies, military expeditions, new settlements, trading posts, and travelers by the thousands had transformed the California Trail into a two-way road.



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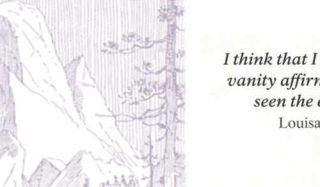


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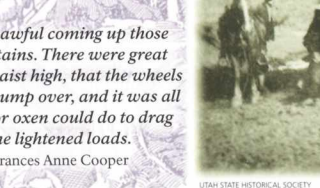
THE ELEPHANT Forty-niners, as the California gold rushers were nicknamed, adopted the phrase “see the elephant.” The expression, which predated the gold rush, refers to the thrill of experiencing something immense and exotic, like an elephant—and being forever changed by it.

For California Trail travelers the phrase symbolized the adventure of a lifetime, one full of wonder and amazement. Before their long journey west, most migrants had never seen anything like the vast prairies, deserts, canyons, and rugged mountains along the trail.

The phrase also spoke to the trail's dangers: hunger, thirst, and death. Most travelers “saw the elephant” along the stretch of Great Basin



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WAGON TRAINS Going west on the California Trail could be expensive. Travelers needed supplies like food, stoves, utensils, bedding, and lanterns; hardware like axes, wagon parts, shovels, and rope; livestock that also needed food, water, and rest; and money to last many months.

Most travelers used light farm wagons that came to be called prairie schooners because their canvas tops were like sails on a ship. Prairie schooners could carry about 2,000 pounds. Travelers packed belongings, supplies, and food into every bit of space. When the load was too heavy, larger items like china, heirlooms, and furniture were left behind.

Oxen were preferred to pull the wagons. They were slower than horses but cheaper, more reliable,



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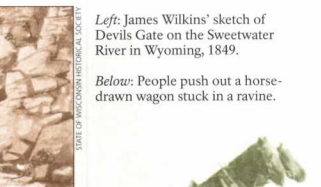


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deserts and Sierra Nevada barriers that made this America's most difficult overland trail. Those who made it through the Great Basin with animals and outfit intact were almost certain to “see the elephant” among the Sierra Nevada's steep passes.

Challenging places along the trail in Nevada included the Fortymile Desert, east of today's Reno, and the Humboldt River. The Humbug, as some called it in disgust, grew more sluggish and alkaline as it bent west and south before it disappeared into a shallow lake.

Many who quit mid-journey said they “saw the elephant's tail” as they turned around for home. One traveler who turned back after 700 miles said “he had seen the Elephant and eaten its ears.”



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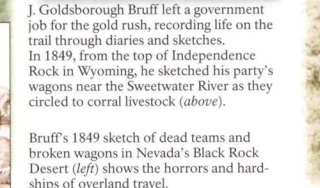
WOMEN AND KIDS Most early California Trail travelers and forty-niners were single men, but over time more women and families joined and played important roles in the journey.

Among the Bidwell-Bartleson party was Nancy Kelsey, age 18, who carried her baby over the Sierra Nevada mountains after her party abandoned its wagons. She may have been the first woman to take the entire trail to California.

Births and deaths were common during the difficult journey west. “Three days after my little sister died,” one girl said, “we stopped for a few hours, and my sister Olivia was born.”



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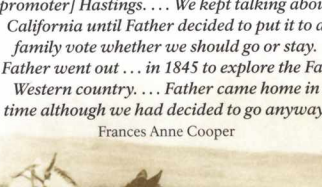


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NATIVE PEOPLES Lands along the California Trail corridor have been home to Native Americans since time immemorial. Imagine the rapid changes brought to them by the sudden influx of people traveling the trail to the West.

Before 1849 US trail traffic was minimal. The earliest trail users brought metal pots, ammunition, beads, and cloth to trade with Native Americans for bison pelts, moccasins, and food. Some trail travelers would not have survived their journeys without local Native Americans to help them navigate unfamiliar country and cross treacherous rivers. In 1844 a Paiute chief named Truckee guided migrants along a route and river; the migrants later named both after him.

By 1852 women made up about a third of California Trail travelers. Five years later, wagon parties of mostly women and children were a common sight on the trail.



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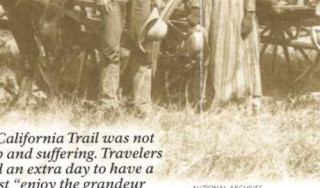
Catherine Haun and her husband caught California fever in 1849, longing to find gold and then return home to pay debts. The women and children in their 25-person wagon party “exerted a good influence,” she said, because they made the men “more alert about the care of the teams and seldom had accidents.” She said the women ensured “more attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation” and “the meals were more regular and better cooked thus preventing much sickness.”

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While Native Americans saw the West as their home, many Americans saw it as theirs for the taking, as depicted above in John Gast's American Progress, 1872.



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LASTING LEGACY The transcontinental railroad led to the demise of the California Trail. In 1869 the tracks of the Union Pacific from the east and the Central Pacific from the west connected at Promontory Summit in Utah. This exciting new way to travel across the continent meant people could reach the West in days, not months. A golden spike was tapped to symbolize the union of the railways—and of the United States, from ocean to ocean, after the Civil War.

While dust from the wagons has long since settled, the heritage of this era lives on. The famed trail that followed Indigenous routes to goldfields is today traced by railroads, highways, and power lines. It transformed the lives and cultures of Native Americans whose lands were crossed, stolen, or forever changed.

To commemorate their journey, these migrants saved a souvenir.



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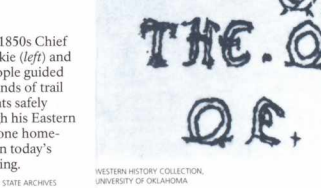
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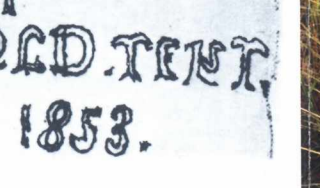
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MORE INFORMATION

National Park Service (NPS)
National Park Service
National Trails Regions 6, 7, 8
www.nps.gov/cal

Bureau of Land Management
www.blm.gov/learn/interpretive-centers/national-historic-trails-interpretive-center
www.blm.gov/visit/california-trail-center

Forest Service
www.fs.usda.gov/r4
www.fs.usda.gov/r5

Oregon-California Trails Association
PO Box 1019
Independence, MO 64051-0519
www.octa-trails.org

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