To learn who we are in California and how we live, we need to ask: How did we get here? How might we better understand California?

Historians are like detectives. By studying evidence, historians try to understand some of the most important events, people, and ideas that have shaped our state. Historical evidence can be anything that provides information about a person or time in the past. Evidence can be found in photographs, newspaper articles, diaries, art, and anything that gives clues about the past.

Be a detective! As you read through this booklet, look for the historical evidence that helps you to understand California.
Within California’s 155,959 square miles are fertile valleys, high mountains, freshwater lakes, and wind-swept deserts. Prior to the arrival of Spanish settlers, the land and its diverse and abundant plant and animal life supported more than 300,000 Native Americans. California had the largest and most diverse indigenous population in what is today the United States of America.

No one knows the exact origins of the first Californians. Some scientists and historians believe that they came from an ancient people who traveled from Asia into North America over 15,000 to 20,000 years ago. Many of the creation stories told by California’s native peoples say that since their creation they have lived in California. When Europeans arrived, California’s native peoples spoke more than 100 different languages and lived in more than 500 areas around the state.

Most of these groups survived by hunting and gathering. Recently, environmental historians learned that native peoples also carefully burned, weeded, and planted seeds to have successful harvests of their favorite foods.

Environmental History in California: The First Farmers

Environmental historians study the environment. They want to know how people use their environment and how the uses change over time. New studies are revealing how Native Americans used the land for many centuries. They not only gathered what was available, but discovered ways of producing more of what they needed with early farming methods.
No one knows for certain which European expedition was the first to see California. A group of Spanish explorers may have first traveled by land from Mexico into southern California. However, there is not enough historical evidence to prove this. So, the credit for the first European “discovery” of California goes to Captain Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo of Spain.

Cabrillo and his men sailed up from Mexico into the San Diego harbor in 1542. They were searching for the Strait of Anián, a water passage that was supposed to be a shortcut to Asia. Traders wanted the valuable silk and spices from Asia but needed a quicker way to get there. Explorers believed the strait was the shortcut they needed. But, it did not exist and Cabrillo left California disappointed. He eventually died on the journey, and his ships and men returned to Mexico unaware that California held riches of its own.

Sir Francis Drake, from England, made the next known landing in California. In 1579 he made an emergency stop to repair his leaking ship and probably landed at what is now called Drake's Bay, located north of San Francisco. Historians continue to disagree about the location of the landing. It would be another 227 years before any Europeans settled in California.
When Did Europeans Settle in California?

The Spanish established the first European settlements in California. In 1769 Father Junípero Serra began the “Sacred Expedition,” a trip by land and by sea from New Spain (Mexico). He brought with him Spanish missionaries, Mexican-Indian farm workers, and cooks, carpenters, and soldiers of mixed European, Indian and African descent. Under great difficulties they built California’s first mission in San Diego. The mission was not just a church but also a town. Hundreds of Native Americans lived at the mission and were taught the Spanish way of life and the Catholic religion.

Mission life was hard on the Native Americans. Many were brought to the missions against their will. Many died of diseases caught from the Europeans. Though some Native Americans settled into mission life, others ran away. Some even led deadly revolts in attempts to force the Europeans to leave.
In 1822 Mexico won independence from Spain. California was now under Mexican rule and the missions were closed. The new Mexican government wanted to give some of the mission lands to the Native Americans who lived and worked there. Instead, Spanish Californian ranchers, called Californios, turned the lands into huge cattle ranches selling hides and tallow. The Native Americans living at the missions became servants and laborers for the Californio families. They cooked and cleaned the large homes of the Californios and managed the farms and herds of cattle.

American settlers from the eastern United States had been trickling into Mexican California for years. They farmed land, traded goods, and started small businesses. Then, in 1846 the United States declared war on Mexico. The Americans won the war and in 1848 an agreement was signed making California part of the United States.

Tallow: a hard fat obtained from body parts of cattle, sheep, or horses, used in food or to make candles and soap.

The quiet town of San Francisco had only a few hundred settlers in 1835. In 1848, John Marshall found a nugget of gold at John Sutter’s Mill in the American River near the Sierra Nevada Mountains. This changed everything! By 1850 thousands of fortune seekers had arrived in California from all over the world. San Francisco became the tenth largest city in the entire United States by the early 1870s.

This population boom brought many new faces and cultures to the West. People came from all over the world, including Mexico, Chile, France, and China, to name a few. But they increased pressure on the
Native Californians and Mexican citizens already in California. Along the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, gold miners clashed with native communities. Immigrants were settling on lands that Native Americans used for food and cultural purposes. The land was often damaged by mining, hunting, or building “boom towns.” Loss of their land, diseases, and racial attacks meant a high death toll for California’s native peoples. California’s native population fell from 150,000 in 1845 to less than 30,000 by 1870.

The diversity of California’s people during this time resulted in other racial conflicts as well. American miners who came to California did not want to share gold or land with Mexican and Chinese miners. In 1849, the California legislature passed discriminatory mining and land laws. Two “Foreign Miners License Tax” laws were also passed that further discriminated against non-white miners. The new laws forced Mexican and Chinese miners to pay heavy taxes to mine for gold.

Most fortunes made during the Gold Rush were not from mining. Merchants, shopkeepers, laundresses, cooks, and hotel and saloon owners got rich by serving the needs of the growing California population. Four men, Collis P. Huntington, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, and Mark Hopkins who later founded the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific Railways, became known as the “railroad kings.” They made their early fortunes providing services to the miners and other immigrants in California.

Ethnic History in California: Ishi and the Yahi

The study of ethnic history is the study of racial or cultural groups. This includes regional communities, Native Americans, and immigrants. The Yahi were Native Americans. They resisted American settlement near Mount Lassen where they lived. Gold seekers thought they had murdered the entire Yahi population, but in 1911 the last Yahi man appeared in a town called Oroville. Anthropologists called him “Ishi,” the Yahi word for man. From him they learned about the lost traditions and culture of the Yahi people.
How did California become part of the United States?

California was made an official territory of the United States of America at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. Following a constitutional convention held in Monterey, the new California legislature asked the United States Congress to make California a state. When the Compromise of 1850 was signed on September 9, 1850, California became the 31st state. Sacramento became California’s capital in 1854.

Diplomatic and Political History in California: “The Compromise of 1850”

California’s population did not want slavery to be allowed in their new state. The issue of slavery in America created many heated debates and politicians tried to keep the number of free and slave states equal. If California joined the United States as a free state, there would be more non-slave than slave states. So, Senator Henry Clay wrote the "Compromise of 1850," a deal that allowed California to enter the Union as a free state, but only if runaway slaves caught in California, and elsewhere, were even more harshly punished than already allowed by law.
What was life like in the new state during the 1850s?

California’s gold rush is often described as romantic and exciting, but it was also a violent and unmanageable time. Governing the new state was difficult because of fast population growth and fierce competition among the state’s young, male citizens. Immigrants and minorities were often harassed by groups of rough, angry citizens, known as vigilantes.

The dramatic and dangerous lifestyle in California encouraged many people to write about their experiences. By 1860, 132 newspapers and magazines had started in San Francisco alone! Observant locals such as Amelia Knapp Smith Clapp, also known as “Dame Shirley,” wrote letters home describing the beauty and danger in the new state of California. In one of her letters she describes how a group of vigilantes killed a suspected thief. She writes, “. . . think kindly as you can of the dear California, even though her lustrous skies gaze upon such barbarous deeds.”
Between 1865 and 1869 more than 10,000 Chinese came to California to build the Central Pacific railroad. Their hard work resulted in the completion of the transcontinental railroad linking California to the rest of the United States in 1869. Travel and communication became more efficient. California's farmers used the railroad to transport delicate, fresh produce, such as lettuce and oranges, to other states.

Everyone hoped that the new railroad would immediately bring more money to California. But, new settlers from the East did not arrive to buy high priced land as was expected. Instead, the railroad brought products from the East Coast that competed with local California markets. It was not until the 1880s that the railroad, through successful advertising, was able to convince more Americans to journey to California to buy land.
In 1900, just about fifty years after the Gold Rush, the population of California was almost one-half million people. **Popular culture** was changing rapidly. California’s residents were enjoying life and were interested in new forms of entertainment. The growing middle class had more time and money to spend on leisure, books, and art. They also enjoyed their first automobiles and telephones.

Amusements, like San Francisco’s Sutro Baths and Boardwalk, were becoming very popular. New amusement parks around the state offered everything from swimming pools to roller coasters and restaurants. In the 1910s, people in Hollywood made silent films and became famous. Suddenly Hollywood, and California, had a reputation as the movie-making capital of the world, a reputation that continues today.

Californians began to think about preserving their diverse natural environment. In 1892, a naturalist named John Muir founded the Sierra Club. His club and others like it worked with the government to save California’s natural beauty by creating national parks. One of these parks, Yosemite National Park, was created in 1905 and became a popular tourist destination. Visitors flocked to picnic near the amazing waterfalls, rock formations, and meadows.

In 1914 World War I broke out in Europe. More than 150,000 Californians fought in the war. Need for food and wartime products, such as steel and cotton, helped California’s industries continue to prosper into the 1920s.
How did the Great Depression affect California?

The Great Depression in 1929 hurt many of California’s industries, such as agriculture, real estate, oil production, construction, tourism, and the movies. Thousands of people not only lost their jobs, but also their money when the banks closed. Camps were set up to house the thousands of newly unemployed men and homeless families. With so many people out of work, racism and discrimination against non-white workers increased.

Under the new leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the government developed programs to put people back to work. These workers built campgrounds and fire roads for the national parks. They built bridges, including the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. And the world’s largest water projects, at the time, were built bringing water to Southern California—the Colorado River Aqueduct and the Hoover Dam.

Water History in California: Owens Valley and Mono Lake

California’s cities and farms depend on water. Moving water from one location to another causes passionate battles between farmers, city residents, and environmentalists. During the droughts of the 1920s, Los Angeles took extra water from the Owens Valley, leaving the river and farms there almost dry. People living in the Owens Valley fought back by destroying the aqueduct. The two sides compromised by tapping into another water source, Mono Lake. This provided enough water for both Los Angeles and Owens Valley residents. However, this is harming Mono Lake and conservationists still fight today to preserve this unique lake.
Women’s History in California: “Rosie the Riveter”

“Rosie the Riveter,” popularized in a 1942 song, referred to women who worked in wartime industries. These jobs included building ships, airplanes, and weapons for the military. Federal war offices recruited women into the labor force after male workers went off to war. Some women had never worked outside the home before, but were drawn to the better paying jobs previously available only to men.

Labor History in California: Farm Workers and Agribusiness

To keep labor costs down, large California growers hire primarily low-wage workers. The first groups of unorganized labor used by the agribusiness industry were Chinese and Japanese immigrants. During the Great Depression, workers from Oklahoma and Arkansas came to California to work in the fields. In the 1940s during World War II, California needed more workers because so many men went off to war. An agreement with Mexico allowed Mexican workers, braceros (“strong-armed ones” in Spanish), to come to California. Leaders such as César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and Larry Itliong fought for the farm workers rights in the 1960s. They established unions to improve the living and working conditions of the laborers.

World War II brought many changes to California. As the government spent more money building ships and airplanes manufacturing businesses grew, and replaced agribusiness as the state’s largest industry. This growth created jobs and attracted new workers. African American men and women migrated from the rural southern states to work in California, where they struggled for non-discriminatory labor rights. Women across the state, many encouraged by “Rosie the Riveter” advertising, went to work as electricians, welders, and steamfitters.

Though the war brought some positive changes to California, prejudice increased against Japanese Americans. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, there was concern about another attack. The U.S. government feared there were enemies among Japanese Americans. So, government officials forced 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent to live in concentration camps in California and other states from 1942-1946. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act providing money and an apology to those who suffered the injustice of living in the camps.
How did California change after 1950?

By the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, California was enjoying postwar prosperity. It was a time of building everything from super highways, to planned communities, to large industrial parks. Yet civil rights protests, racial conflicts, and student protests against the Vietnam War made the 1960s a restless time for all Californians.

Business activity slowed during the 1970s and 1980s, but reversed in the 1990s. A new technology industry was born in California’s “Silicon Valley” creating another “gold rush.” Inventions like personal computers and Internet-based e-commerce created new wealth throughout the state.
What is California today?

California’s people, industry, and environment continue to be diverse. Currently in California, there are more citizens of Hispanic, Asian, African, and mixed race backgrounds than of European descent. Federal census takers in 1900 recorded California’s population at 1,458,053. They could hardly have imagined that in the year 2000, 35 million people would call California home! California continues to grow making it the most populous state in the nation.

From almonds to zucchini, California’s agriculture boasts produce for practically every letter of the alphabet! California’s technological industries and natural resources include everything from movie making and computers, to gas and oil. If California were an independent country, it would have the fifth largest economy in the world!

California contains a variety of natural and urban environments almost unmatched by any other state. Visitors flock to famous urban landmarks such as San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, Disneyland, or Hollywood’s Chinese Theater. They journey to such natural wonders as the giant northern redwoods, the rocky Pacific coastline, and the stark Mojave Desert. Not surprisingly, nearly 25 percent of all people visiting the United States come to California!
What do you think California's future will be?

As the 21st century unfolds, California continues to be a leader in world trade and industry, moving into new areas of electronic technology, aerospace, and agriculture. Throughout the state, changes occur every day that shape California's future. Whether you’re aware of it or not, you, your friends, and your family contribute to events that historians will study in the future. What are some of the important issues and events that California’s residents face today? What evidence will we leave behind for future historians?

Discover California’s History for Yourself!

Here are a few places for you to visit to learn more about the events mentioned in this booklet. There are hundreds of other places you can explore so be sure to check out your local museums, historical societies, botanical gardens, libraries, and parks.

Northern California

Oakland Museum of California, Oakland
A great place to appreciate California’s diversity, this museum is dedicated to the art, natural sciences, and history of California. Visit their website at www.museumca.org or call 510.238.2200.

Ishi and the Yahi, Lassen National Forest
Pick up an Ishi brochure from the Almanor Ranger District, 530.258.2141 or the Lassen National Forest Supervisor's Office, 530.257.2151.

Rosie the Riveter National Park, Richmond
You can visit the only memorial to honor women’s WWII labor at the Rosie the Riveter National Park in the historic Kaiser Shipyard, the largest and most productive shipyard of WWII. For information please visit www.rosietheriveter.org.

Mono Lake Tufa State Reserve, near Lee Vining
Mono Lake covers about 60 square miles and is one of the oldest lakes in North America. It is located east of Yosemite National Park. For more information visit www.cal-parks.ca.gov.
Central California

The National Steinbeck Center, Salinas
Explore the rich history of the Salinas Valley through the literary works of John Steinbeck. Exhibits and programs focus on literature, history, agriculture and the arts. For more information call 831.796.3833 or visit www.steinbeck.org.

Monterey Bay Aquarium, Monterey
Experience California's rich marine life at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. They are located in a converted cannery on the waterfront and offer exhibits on the Monterey Bay and the oceans beyond. Visit their website at www.mbayaq.org for more information.

The Golden State Museum, Sacramento
The Golden State Museum uses the California State Archives to illustrate California's diverse history by mixing traditional exhibits with cutting edge technology. While you are there be sure to visit the State Capitol to learn about California's political history too! For information visit www.goldenstatemuseum.org or call 916.653.7524.

California State Railroad Museum, Sacramento
Experience lavishly restored trains, engaging exhibits, and unique special events. Every weekend April-September, ride behind a steam locomotive on the Museum's Sacramento Southern Railroad. For more information visit www.csrmf.org.

Southern California

Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, Santa Barbara
The Botanic Garden exhibits sixty-five acres of California flora and eight different native habitats including redwood forests, oak and canyon woodlands, meadows and deserts. For information please call 805.682.4726 or visit www.santabarbarabotanicgarden.org.

Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles
With one of the most comprehensive collections of western history and art, the seven permanent galleries and special exhibitions offer material gathered from the many cultures and events that have shaped the legacy of the West. For more information visit www.autry-museum.org or call 323.667.2000.

Mission San Diego de Alcalá, San Diego
Mission San Diego is the oldest mission in California, founded in 1769. For more information call 619.281.8449 or www.missionsandiego.com.

Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles
Through exhibits and programs the museum strives to provide a voice for Japanese Americans and a forum that enables all people to explore their own heritage and culture. Visit www.janm.org or call 213.625.0414.

Bibliography


This booklet was written by Alison Field and Lilly C. Vallee for the California Historical Society, with contributions by Diane Barclay and Chelsea Pickslay. Graphic design by Marian Ueki.

Acknowledgements:
The authors would like to thank Joshua Paddison, Craig Zaim, Keir Lenihan, John Williams, and Lillian B. Vallee for their help preparing this booklet.

This project was made possible by the Silver Giving Foundation, The C.A.W. Foundation, the Morris Stulsaft Foundation, and the Louise M. Davies Foundation.

Founded in 1871, the California Historical Society is the state’s official historical society. Its San Francisco galleries, museum store, and research library offer art, artifacts, publications and statewide educational activities on California’s dynamic and evolving history.