

## California Pioneer Certificate Program Early California History Overview

Colin Whitney, May 2023

### Introduction

The early history of California can be divided into five distinct phases spanning from pre-historic times to the present. The initial phase, the Native American Period (15,000 BC-1542), existed until the arrival of the first Europeans. At this time, the population of original inhabitants who had arrived from Siberia at the end of the last ice age is estimated to have been between one hundred thousand and three hundred thousand, living in one hundred tribes. The second phase, the European Exploratory Period (1542-1769), lasted around two hundred years. Europeans explored the riches of California but did not settle. They were engaged in the trade between Mexico and China, stopping along the California coast to replenish supplies. Phase three, the Spanish Colonial California Period (1769-1821), began with the arrival of Gaspar de Portola's expedition from Spain and ended when Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. The fourth phase, the Mexican Colonial California Period (1821-1848), witnessed the incorporation of Baja and Alta California as territories under Mexican rule. In 1846, the Mexican-American war broke out two years later, resulting in an American victory starting the present phase of California's history. At the end of the war, Baja California remained under Mexican jurisdiction, while Alta California was administered by American military authority until admission to the Union on September 9, 1850, as the 31st state.

### Native American Period (15,000 BC-1542 AD)

The first Native Americans arrived on this continent around 15,000 BC, about twenty-five thousand years after humans emerged from Africa. The passage from Asia to North America across the Bering land bridge was impeded by ice sheets formed during the last ice age. As the ice melted, a passage into the North American continent formed allowing southward migration.

The tribes which settled in California were separated from other North American tribes by the rugged Rocky Mountains and the austere desert terrain. Consequently, Californian tribes developed



1. *Pomo Dancer, (Kal-si-wa, Rosa Peters)* by Grace Hudson

different cultures, languages, and appearances. They spoke as many as one hundred thirty-five dialects. The largest tribes when Europeans arrived in California were the Karok, Maidu, Cahuilla, Mojave, Yokuts, Pomo, Paiute, and Modoc.

Native Americans were skilled Hunters. They ate large animals such as deer, elk, bears, and mountain sheep. They also consumed small animals such as rabbits and squirrels. Fish from rivers, lakes, or oceans formed part of their diet.

Since rain was not plentiful, agriculture was often impractical. The plants they ate included acorns, mushrooms, seaweed, flowering plants, seeds, berries, and nuts.

Native Americans were skilled craftsmen, fabricating tools for hunting, cooking, and building houses. Construction of housing depended on the location of the tribe and the materials available. It varied from elaborate wooden structures in the north to thatched or adobe dwellings in the south and desert areas.



2. Yurok hunting bow



3. Pomo sling for killing ducks



5. Cahuilla kish



4. Modoc wooden plank house.



6. Finely woven Pomo basket

## European Exploratory Period (1542-1769)



7. Ulloa, Cabrillo, and Vizcaino's exploration of the California coast

Spanish explorers arrived in California seeking to expand the Spanish Empire and harvest potential riches. Vasco Núñez de Balboa reached the Pacific Ocean as early as 1513 and started the settlement of Mexico under Spanish rule. In 1533, more Spanish ships sailed north to search for new territories and reached the peninsula of Baja California, which was believed to be an island. (Fig. 8.) Hernán Cortéz launched another expedition two years later, but strong ocean currents and hostile terrain forced him to abandon it. In 1539, Cortéz organized another expedition led by Francisco de Ulloa. He sailed north and established that Baja California was a peninsula, not an island, as previously believed.

It was not until three years later, in 1542, that Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo reached Alta California,

today's California. He sailed into San Diego Bay before continuing up the coast to San Francisco. On his way, he had peaceful encounters with the Native Americans.

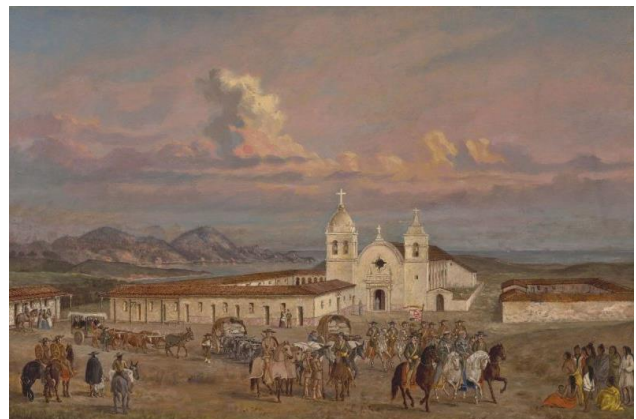
In 1602, Sebastián Vizcaino sailed further north along the coast in search of natural harbors and entered Monterey Bay. At this point, further exploration halted until settlement began in 1769.



8. Early map of California, cir. 1650.

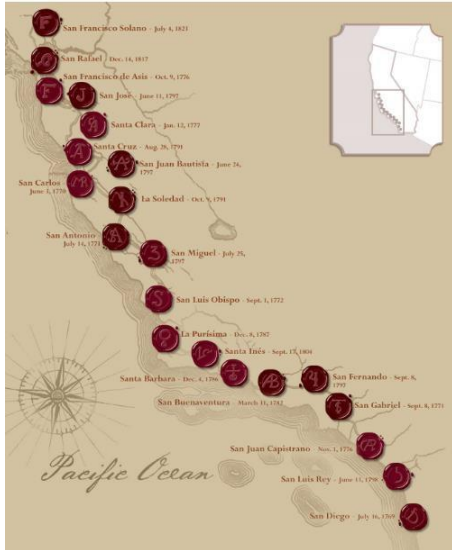
## Spanish Colonial California (1769-1821)

Spanish mariners developed extensive trading ties between Manila, Callao, and Acapulco, often stopping along the California Coast. However, the first Spanish settlement of California did not occur until Gaspar de Portolá arrived overland in San Diego on June 29, 1769. There he established the Presidio of San Diego and became the first governor of Las Californias. Father Junípero Serra, a Franciscan monk who arrived with Portolá, established the first California mission, San Diego de Alcalá. The following year he founded a second mission at Monterey, San Carlos Borroméo. (Fig. 9.)



9. Mission San Carlos Borroméo de Carmelo, est. 1770, Monterey, California. Missions Headquarters, 1797-1833.

Between 1769 and 1821, twenty-one missions were established, each along the coast and spaced a day's journey apart. (Fig. 10.) Their purpose was to convert the native population to Christianity. Typically, about 5,000 Native Americans lived in and around each mission, and many were forced into agricultural servitude.



10. Locations of the California Missions

The California Mission era ended in 1834 after the passage of the Mexican Secularization Act. The Spanish established four presidios, or military forts, each housing a small group of soldiers to protect these missions and the pueblos. They were in San Diego (1769), Monterey (1770), San Francisco (1776), and Santa Barbara (1786). A fifth presidio was constructed at Sonoma (1823) after Mexican independence.

The Spanish government encouraged the settlement of Alta California by issuing large land grants, called ranchos, to settlers. There the settlers raised both sheep and cattle. Even until the mid-nineteenth century, cow hides and tallow (cow fat) were the main exports from California. Usually, Native Americans were the ranch workers, although some land grants were provided

directly to them. This was true for Rancho El Escorpión and Rancho Little Temecula. Due to the growth of the California population, Las Californias was divided into Alta and Baja California in 1804.

### Mexican Colonial California (1821-1848)

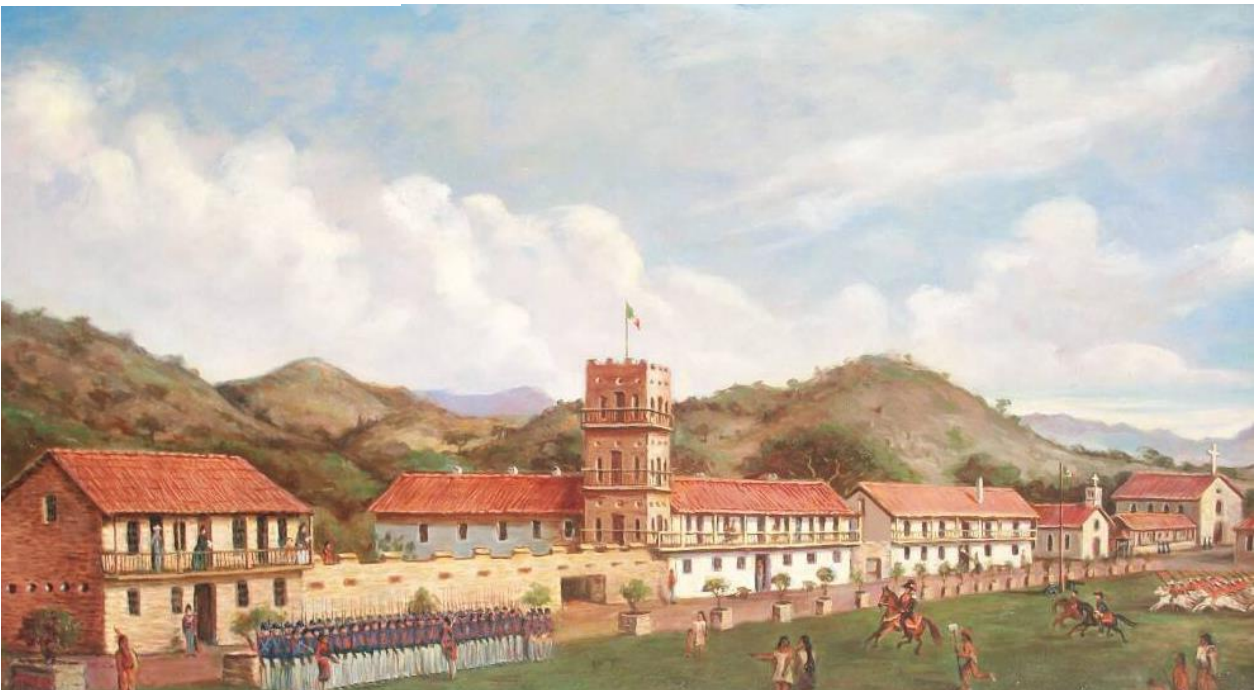
Mexico's quest for independence from Spain resulted in a protracted armed conflict from 1810-1821. The Mexican cause was aided by the collapse of Spanish authority following the invasion of Spain by French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and the capture of King Charles IV in 1808. In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a Roman-Catholic priest, led an uprising that sparked the Mexican War of Independence. For this, he was acknowledged as the father of Mexican Independence.

On September 27, 1821, the First Mexican Empire was established with Augustín de Iturbide at its head. It included both Baja and Alta California as territories. At that time, Alta California spanned present-day California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. It was not until 1825 that the first governor of Alta California, José Mariá de Echeandía, was assigned. Under his leadership, Native Americans were emancipated from mission servitude. He initiated the dismantling of the mission system by removing the most influential missionaries. In 1827, the Mexican General Law of Expulsion declared that persons born in Spain were illegal immigrants and required them to leave Mexico. Many missionaries were in that category.



11. Bear Flag Rebellion Monument in Sonoma.

By the 1840s, European and American settlers began to arrive in Alta California, and initially coexisted peacefully with the resident Californios. However, in 1846 when reports of the annexation of Texas by Mexico reached California, American settlers in northern California captured the Mexican town of Sonoma and declared independence. Meanwhile, war had started between the United States and Mexico, with the United States Navy taking the ports of Monterey and San Francisco. The Californios formed an army in response but were eventually defeated and surrendered at the Treaty of Cahuenga in 1847. The following year, Alta California was ceded to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.



12. General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo Reviewing Troops in Sonoma. Artist, Oriana Day, 1879. Public domain.

### **Present Period (1848-Present)**

After its Admission to the Union in 1850, California continued to prosper and expand, with San Francisco designated the official port of entry. Two events significantly affected California's history and development. The first was the Gold Rush beginning in 1848. The hope of finding gold brought thousands of people worldwide to California and hastened its admission to statehood. The second event was the deadliest natural disaster in United States history, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.

## California Gold Rush (1848-1860)

On January 24, 1848, James W. Marshall's discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California, instigated a mass migration of over three hundred thousand people to California. They came from North America, Latin America, Europe, Australia, and China. Half came by land and half by sea. The first to arrive were from Oregon, Hawaii, and Latin America. This large influx of people spurred the growth of towns such as San Francisco and accelerated the building of roads, churches, and schools. Farming and agriculture grew to meet the needs of an expanding population.

The historic gold rush era lasted twelve years, from 1848 to 1860. Gold was mined in two central regions around Shasta and Yreka in the north and the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the state's central portion. (Fig. 13.)



13. Historic Gold Rush fields.

Many miners left the fields penniless while others made their fortune, often buying land with their newfound wealth and engaging in farming.

## The San Francisco Earthquake 1906

On April 18, 1906, San Francisco was hit by the most devastating earthquake in United States history. A three-hundred-mile-long rupture in the San Andreas Fault caused a magnitude 7.9 earthquake. Its effects were felt within a three-hundred-mile radius from Oregon to Los Angeles. Buildings crumbled city-wide, and extensive fire damage occurred, especially in the Mission District. (See Figs. 14, 15, and 16.) More than eighty percent of the city was destroyed,

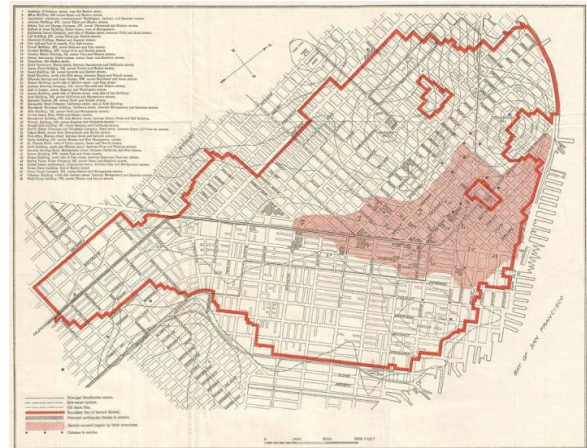


14. San Francisco earthquake damage near Post and Grant Avenues.

killing more than three thousand people in the Bay area, mainly San Francisco. Three-quarters of the area's approximately four hundred thousand residents were left homeless. Tents were erected in Golden State Park, the Presidio, and the Panhandle. Many fled across the bay to Oakland and Berkeley.



15. Buildings burning in the Mission District of San Francisco.



16. Map of San Francisco, 1906. Red line shows the burn area.

*Citations:*

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