

Pre-Visit
Lesson Plan



“Foreign” Miners



Autry National Center

Introduction

Between 1848 and 1854, close to 300,000 people from across the world came to the gold fields of California, more than tripling the 1847 population. Although the gold seekers spoke different languages and had various traditions, religions, and political beliefs, they all came with one hope—to strike it rich. Some succeeded and became fabulously wealthy; however, for most the experience was a disappointment at best and an unmitigated disaster at worst. Tempers flared, fights broke out, and cultures clashed in towns aptly named Hangtown and Rough and Ready. The gold rush changed the very face of California, as new economies rose to meet the needs of the miners, large corporations flourished where individual miners failed, and Native populations were decimated.

Before beginning this lesson, read the last section titled, **Background for Teachers**. It provides a foundation for the activities you will conduct with your students.

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about the people who had lived in California for generations before gold fever spread around the globe
- Use primary source materials based on the observations of Dame Shirley to consider how the discovery of gold and the arrival of prospectors impacted the native people of California
- Understand the impact of the Gold Rush on the native people of California
- Respond to discrimination faced by different groups during the Gold Rush era and then discuss ways that discrimination still exists today

Learners

This lesson plan introduces concepts that will be reinforced during your Gold Rush experience at the Museum of the American West. This lesson is designed for upper elementary grade students with suggestions to adapt it for younger and older grades. The main themes are anchored in history and social studies, but the lesson also involves language arts and writing.

Materials

- Excerpts from Dame Shirley's letters: First, Eighth, Fourteenth, & Seventeenth.

Content Standards **History-Social Science**

3.2 — Students describe the American Indian nations in their local region long ago and in the recent past.

3.3 — Students draw from historical and community resources to organize the sequence of local historical events and describe how each period of settlement left its mark on the land.

4.3 — Students explain the economic, social, and political life in California from the establishment of the Bear Flag Republic through the Mexican-American War, the Gold Rush, and the granting of statehood.

5.3 — Students describe the cooperation and conflict that existed among the American Indians and between the Indian nations and the new settlers.

English-Language Arts

Grade 4

1.0 — Writing Strategies

Students write clear, coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows they consider the audience and purpose. Students progress through the stages of the writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing successive versions).

Grade 5

2.4 — Writing Applications

Write persuasive letters or compositions:

- State a clear position in support of a proposal.
- Support a position with relevant evidence.
- Follow a simple organizational pattern.
- Address reader concerns.

Curriculum Frameworks

Chronological and Spatial Thinking

- Students explain how the present is connected to the past, identifying both similarities and differences between the two, and how some things change over time and some things stay the same.

Research, Evidence, and Point of View

- Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources.
- Students pose relevant questions about events they encounter in historical documents, eyewitness accounts, oral histories, letters, diaries, artifacts, photographs, maps, artworks, and architecture.
- Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.

Historical Interpretation

- Students identify and interpret the multiple causes and effects of historical events.
- Students understand and distinguish cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including the long-and short-term causal relations.

Procedure

Read the excerpts from Letter First, Letter Eighth, and Letter Seventeenth.

Dame Shirley writes about her impressions of the California Indians she observes.

- *What words does she use to describe the native people she sees?*
- *What are her thoughts on California Indians?*
- *Does she have conflicting views? Why do you think that is?*
- *What do learn about California Indians from her letters?*

Ask students to compare how the Indians are represented in each letter.

- *How does Dame Shirley's description of Native American traditions compare to what the students have learned in school about the different groups in California?*

Discuss the Foreign Miners' Tax with the students. This law ruled that any non-white person, even the *Californios* and California Indians, had to pay a tax in order to mine a claim.

- *Should California Indians have been included in the category of "foreign" when they had been living in California longer than any other group?*
- *Who should have been taxed according to the language, foreign?*
- *Why were these groups not taxed?*

2. Have students write to the editorial section of a newspaper protesting discrimination and other ill effects of the gold rush on Native Americans. Students may focus on issues such as the Foreign Miners' Tax, land and environmental issues, and other

kind of injustices against local people. Talk to the students about the elements of a good persuasive letter. They must include a description of their cause and one suggestion of a resolution to problem.

3. Please note: Review carefully to determine whether this activity is appropriate for your class. Create slips of paper with various dollar amounts from \$1 to \$200. These represent the amount of gold that each student mined in one day. Pass these slips out to your “miners.” Next, create a Foreign Miners’ Tax slip and a blank slip. Place these in a bag and pass it around your class. Students that pull the Foreign Miners’ Tax slip have to give back some of their earnings for the day, the rest get to keep all of their earnings.

- *How does it feel to be taxed in this manner?*
- *Compare this type of discrimination to situations today. Think of instances today where people are singled out based on race, or other factors? What can be done?*

Evaluation

Students should be able to review the effects of the Gold Rush on California Indians. They can hypothesize how history would change if gold had never been discovered. In pairs or teams, ask students to create scenarios showing how the United States would look without the 1848 California Gold Rush.

Extensions

Read the excerpt from Letter Fourteenth and discuss the presence and interaction between the other countrymen listed by Dame Shirley.

- *How many languages does she identify a Gold Rush town?*
- *How do you think all the groups got along?*

Based upon their reading of Dame Shirley’s letters and their own web-based or textbook research about the California Gold Rush, ask students to write their own first person account or letter imagining life in a Gold Rush camp.

People from every part of the world came to California. Identify their home countries on a map.

- *How did they get to California?*
- *What did they bring with them? What did they have to leave behind?*
- *What would you bring with you if you had to move?*
- *How would you feel moving to a new home away from your family?*

Variations

K-2 — Read aloud the excerpt from Letter First. Have the students draw a picture of the scene described in the letter and create a simple caption describing what is happening in their drawing.

9-12 — Dame Shirley's letters are an example of a primary source. Have your students come up with examples of and a definition for a primary source.

- *How are they different from secondary sources, or historical fiction?*
- *Why are they important for historians?*
- *What are some of the pros and cons of using primary sources?*

Have students collect five primary sources related to the Gold Rush, or another topic you are studying in class. Have them examine and report on each source.

- *Who is the author?*
- *Why was the source created?*
- *For whom was it created?*
- *What is the bias in the source?*
- *What can be learned from this source?*
- *What can't be learned from this source? Where would you have to go to find out the information?*

Have students present their sources and findings to the class in an oral presentation format.

Credits & References

Books

"Dame Shirley" (Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe). The Shirley Letters, Being Letters written in 1851-1852 from the California Mines. Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith Inc, 1970.

For younger students:

Blashfield, Jean F. The California Gold Rush. Minnesota: Compass Point Books, 2001.

Keyworth, C.L. California Indians. Facts on File, Inc. 1992.

O'Donnell, Kerri. The Gold Rush: A Primary Source History of the Search for Gold in California. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2003.

Stein, Conrad R. The California Gold Rush. Chicago: Children's Press, 1995.

For older students/adults:

Johnson, Susan Lee. Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

Kowalewski, Michael, editor. Gold Rush: A Literary Exploration. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1997.

Websites

www.pbs.org/goldrush

www.museumca.org/goldrush

Vocabulary

Californios

People of Mexican descent living in California

Foreign Miners Tax

1850 Law requiring foreign (non-white) miners to pay \$20 a month for a mining permit

Background for Teachers

Who was Dame Shirley?

Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, a.k.a. Dame Shirley, followed her husband first to San Francisco and then to the gold fields along the Feather River in 1851. While in California, she sent twenty-three letters to her sister, Molly, in Massachusetts. These letters were published under Clappe's pen name, Dame Shirley. They are an invaluable primary resource for learning about the daily life of the miners; the clothes they wore and the food they ate, as well as their perceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices. They also provide a unique perspective - a woman's thoughts in the nearly all-male world of the Gold Rush.

The People Who Were Here First

The Maidu, Miwok, Yokuts, Pomo, and other tribes had lived in California for thousands of years. Before 1848, Indians outnumbered whites by ten to one. The gold rush changed the lives of California Indians forever.

Central California contains an array of plant and animal communities allowing the people who lived there a host of dependable food. The Maidu, Miwok, Yokuts, Pomo, and other tribes collected wild plants such as nuts, seeds, berries, fruit, and greens throughout the year. Acorns, in particular, were dependable, plentiful, and nourishing; they formed the basis of the peoples' diet.

The riverine areas of the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys provided a variety of fish, including salmon. Grassland and foothills supported large communities of tule elk, deer, antelope, and waterfowl.

The high mountains in this region supported numerous plants and animals such as piñon nuts, manzanita berries, deer, elk, rabbit, caterpillars, and a large assortment of fish.

These dependable resources led to the formation of large, permanent villages and a great deal of leisure time.

Sutter's Fort

In 1840, a Swiss immigrant, Johann (John) Augustus Sutter, applied for a land grant in Mexican California. Governor Alvarado awarded him 48,827 acres of land in the middle of the state, which was considered very undesirable; as there was no access to sea commerce and what were thought to be hostile Indians lived in the region.

Sutter established a farm, a fort and trading post, a distillery, and a blacksmith shop on the land he acquired. In 1847, he set about to build a sawmill in Coloma, a land occupied by the Nisenan tribe. They permitted John Sutter and his partner James Marshall to cultivate land, cut timber, and build a sawmill without resistance. Many were workers at the site. Just before the completion of the building on January 14, 1848, gold was discovered at the site, possibly by a Native American worker.

The Gold Rush

This one event changed the demographics of California dramatically. By the early 1850's, whites outnumbered Indians by two to one. In Letter Eighth, Dame Shirley describes an incident in which a rumor that a local group was planning to attack the miners was debunked by the Indians responding "that they had never thought of such a thing; that the Americans were like grass in the valleys and the Indians fewer than the flowers of the Sierra Nevada."

California Indian tribes were aware of the presence of gold in the land, but had no use for it until the flood of non-native merchants brought trade goods like metal pots and pans, cloth, knives, and beads. Instead of animal skins, shells, or labor as currency, Indians could now obtain trade items with gold. Struck by gold fever, some Indian families panned for the elusive yellow metal. A basket, woven tightly from willow reeds, served as a pan until metal ones became readily available. Many Indians who had been working as *vaqueros* (cowboys) for the *Californios* headed to the gold fields to work for white mining companies. Some Valley Yokuts made about \$1 a day working for one company, but were usually paid in meat, beans, sugar, coffee, clothing and other supplies, although many miners made only \$3-\$6 a month.

Native American labor made a huge contribution to the success of the Gold Rush, but many of the white miners believed that the Indians were inferior. They labeled the California Indians "Diggers" because they dug for and ate wild roots. In Letter First, Dame Shirley describes the California Indians she observes as "degraded wretches," "poor creatures," and "wild-wood Cleopatras." The new Anglo immigrants had no long-term interest in California or its native population. The single young males had come to get rich and then return home to families in the East. Whereas the *Californios* had needed the native labor to operate their ranchos, the Anglos wanted to push the local tribes completely off the land. Indians were compared to animals and were cheated by merchants in trade transactions. Indians paying in gold for trade goods were charged more than white miners. Traders used the "Diggers Ounce" to measure their gold. In 1850, a law was passed requiring "foreign miners," including Native Americans, to pay twenty dollars a month for a mining permit. After much resistance, the Foreign Miners' Tax was reduced to three dollars a month in 1852.

When miners moved into an area, they physically changed the landscape. Boomtowns were built up on Indian land. The oak trees from which acorns were harvested were cut down for lumber and firewood. The miners brought horses, cattle, and mules that grazed on the Indian's food supply of plants and seeds. New technology like hydraulic mining caused soil erosion and polluted the water, harming the trout and salmon that the Indians once fished in the now muddy rivers. The Indians were effectively pushed out of the land that they had lived off of for centuries. Violent and deadly clashes between miners and Indians increased after 1850 to the point that many Indians retreated far away from the new towns that sprouted up on land that had once been occupied by them.

Letter First

Rich Bar, East Branch of the North Fork of Feather River

September 13, 1851

We passed one place where a number of Indian women were gathering flower-seeds, which, mixed with pounded acorns and grasshoppers, forms the bread of these miserable people. The idea, and the really ingenious mode of carrying it out, struck me as so singular, that I cannot forbear attempting a description. These poor creatures were entirely naked with the exception of a quantity of grass bound round the waist and covering the thighs midway to the knee perhaps. Each one carried two brown baskets (which, I have since been told, are made of a species of osier), woven with a neatness which is absolutely marvelous, when one considers that they are the handiwork of such degraded wretches. Shaped like a cone, they are about six feet in circumference at the opening, and I should judge them to be nearly three feet in depth. It is evident by the grace and care with which they handle them, that they are exceedingly light. It is possible that my description may be inaccurate, for I have never read any account of them, and merely give my own impression as they were received, while the wagon rolled rapidly by the spot at which the women were at work. One of these queer baskets is suspended from the back and is kept in place by a thong of leather passing across the forehead. The other they carry in the right hand, and wave over the flower seeds, first to the right and back again to the left alternately, as they walk slowly along, with a motion as regular and monotonous as that of a mower. When they have collected a handful of the seeds, they pour them into the basket behind, and continue this work until they have filled the latter with their strange harvest. The seeds thus gathered are carried to their rancherias and stowed away with great care for winter use. It was, to me, very interesting to watch their regular motion, they seemed so exactly to keep time with each other; and with their dark shining skins, beautiful limbs and lithe forms, they were by no means the least picturesque feature of the landscape.

Excerpted from:
Letter First, [The Shirley Letters](#)

Letter Eighth

From our Log Cabin, Indian Bar

October 20, 1851

There is a man camping here, who was one of Colonel Fremont's guides during his travels through California. He is fifty years of age, perhaps, and speaks several languages to perfection. As he has been a wanderer for many years, and for a long time was the principal chief of the Crow Indians, his adventures are extremely interesting. He chills the blood of the green young miners, who, unacquainted with the arts of war and subjugation, congregate around him by the cold-blooded manner in which he relates the Indian fights that he has been engaged in.

There is quite a band of this wild people herding a few miles below us; and soon after my arrival it was confidently affirmed and believed by many that they were about to make a murderous attack upon the miners. This man who can make himself understood in almost any language, and has a great deal of influence over all Indians went to see them, and told them that such an attempt would result in their own certain destruction. They said "that they had never thought of such a thing; that the Americans were like the grass in the valleys and the Indians fewer than the flowers of the Sierra Nevada."

Excerpted from:
Letter Eighth, [The Shirley Letters](#)

Letter Fourteenth

From our Log Cabin, Indian Bar

March 15, 1852

All along the side of the hill, rising behind the Bar, and on the latter also, glance spots of azure and crimson, in the forms of blue and red-shirted miners, bending steadily over a pick-axe and shovel;. . . Many of these men are toiling thus wearily for laughing lipped children, calm-browed wives, or saintly mothers gathering around the household hearth, in some far away country . . . From happiest homes, and such luxuriant lands has the golden magnet drawn its victims. From those palm-girdled isles of the Pacific . . . from the Indies . . . from the grand old woods of classic Greece . . . from the polished heart of artificial Europe . . . from the breezy back-woods of young America . . . from the tropical languor of Asian Savannah . . . they gather to the golden harvest.

You will hear in the same day, almost at the same time, the lofty melody of the Spanish language, the piquant polish of the French (which, though not a musical tongue, is the most useful of them all), the silver, changing clearness of the Italian, the harsh gangle of the German, the hissing precision of the English, the liquid sweetness of the Kanaka, and the sleep-inspiring languor of the East Indian. To complete the catalogue, there is the native Indian with his guttural vocabulary of twenty words . . .

Excerpted from:
Letter Fourteenth, [The Shirley Letters](#)

Letter Seventeenth

From our Log Cabin, Indian Bar

May 25, 1852

I should like to have visited the Indian encampment, which lies a few miles from the Junction, but was much too fatigued to attempt it. The Indian often visit us, and as they seldom wear anything but a very tight and very short shirt, they have an appearance of being, as Charles Dickens would say, all legs . . . A friend of ours, who has visited their camp several times, has just given me a description of their mode of life. Their huts, ten or twelve in number, are formed of the bark of the pine - conically shaped, plastered with mud, and with a hole in the top, whence emerges the smoke, which rises from a fire built in the center of the apartment. These places are so low that it is quite impossible to stand upright in them, and are entered from a small hole in one side, on all fours. A large stone, sunk to its surface in the ground, which contains three or four pan-like hollows for the purpose of grinding acorns and nuts, is the only furniture which these huts contain. The women, with another stone about a foot and a half in length and a little larger than a man's wrist, pulverize the acorns to the finest possible powder, which they prepare for the table (?) in the following manner, viz. Their cooking utensils consist of a kind of basket, woven of some particular species of reed, I should fancy, from the descriptions which I have had of them, and are so plaited as to be impervious to fluids. These they fill half full of water, which is made to boil by placing in it hot stones. The latter they drag from the fire with two sticks. When the water boils they stir into it, until it is about as thick as hasty-pudding, the powdered acorns, delicately flavored with dried grasshoppers, and lo! dinner is ready. . .

Excerpted from:
Letter Seventeenth, [The Shirley Letters](#)