

EUROPEAN HISTORY IN CALIFORNIA

Exploration

When Spanish navigator Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo became the first European to sight the region that is present-day California in 1542, there were about 130,000 Native Americans inhabiting the area. The territory was neglected by Spain for more than two centuries (until 1769) because of reports of the region's poverty and a general slowdown of Spanish exploration. The merchant Sebastián Vizcaíno sailed from Mexico to the southern California coast in 1602, naming San Diego, Santa Catalina Island, Santa Barbara, and Monterey. Working with inaccurate maps, Vizcaíno and several later explorers believed that California was an island and were discouraged when they were unable to chart its surrounding seas.

Settlement

Pressure for settlement came from missionaries eager to convert the Native Americans to Christianity, from the intrusion of Russian and British traders, primarily in search of sea otter pelts, and from the quest for the Northwest Passage across the North American continent. In 1769 the Spanish viceroy dispatched land and sea expeditions from Baja California, and the Franciscan friar Junípero Serra established the first mission at San Diego. Gaspar de Portolá set up a military outpost in 1770 at Monterey. Colonization began after 1773 with the opening of an overland supply route across the southwestern deserts that was intended to link other Spanish settlements in what are the present-day states of Arizona and New Mexico to the coast.

The 21 missions established by Serra and his successors were the strongest factors in developing California. While attempting to Christianize the Mission Indians, the padres taught them farming and crafts. With the forced labor of the Mission Indians, the padres irrigated vast ranches and traded hides, tallow, wine, brandy, olive oil, grain, and leatherwork for the manufactured goods brought by Yankee trading vessels around Cape Horn.

U.S. Colonization and Acquisition

Secularization of the missions was sought by Spanish Mexican settlers known as Californios when Mexico became independent of Spain in 1821. Between 1833 and 1840 the mission ranches were parceled out to political favorites by the Mexican government. The padres withdrew, and the Native Americans were cruelly exploited and diminished. In 1841 the first wagon train of settlers left Missouri for California. The colony grew slowly, but in 1846 the Northwest became a part of the United States, and settlers at Sonoma proclaimed an independent California republic during the Bear Flag Revolt. In May the United States declared war on Mexico, and in July the U.S. flag was raised at Monterey. Minor skirmishes occurred before the Californios surrendered to troops under John C. Fremont near Los Angeles in January 1847. Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ceding to the United States a vast area of the Southwest that included all of present-day California.

The Gold Rush

Early in 1848 James Wilson Marshall, a carpenter from New Jersey, picked up nuggets of gold from the American River at the site of a sawmill (John Sutter's Mill) he was building near Coloma. By August the hillsides above the river were strewn with the tents and wood huts of the first 4,000 gold miners. From the East, prospectors sailed around Cape Horn or risked disease hiking across the Isthmus of Panama. The hardest took the 2,000-mile (3,220-km) overland route, on which cholera proved a far greater killer than the Native Americans. About 40,000 people arrived at San Francisco by boat in 1849. Some 6,000 wagons, carrying about 40,000 more fortune seekers, moved west that year over the California Trail. Few of the prospectors struck it rich. The work was hard, prices were high, and living conditions were primitive. The wiser immigrants became farmers and storekeepers.

The Gold Rush hastened statehood in 1850 (as a part of the Compromise of 1850); and, though the Gold Rush peaked in 1852, the momentum of settlement did not subside. Nearly \$2 billion in gold was extracted from the earth before mining became virtually dormant.

The Civil War and after

The Compromise of 1850 did not settle the slavery issue in California - free state or a slave state. One movement, led by the backers of California Sen. William M. Gwin, sought to divide California into two states, one slave and one free. The same group also attempted to promote a Pacific Coast republic. At the onset of the Civil War, however, California sided with the North and provided it with material and soldiers.

After the war, control of the governor's office passed back and forth between Democrats and Republicans to the end of the century. The political climate after 1876 was distinguished by labor problems and the activity of those seeking to control mining, irrigation, and fruit growing through state funding. An economic slump in the 1870s brought increased discontent among the labor unions, one result of which was a demand for the exclusion of Chinese laborers, who worked for lower rates of pay than did "whites."

The problems and agitation of the period resulted in the constitution of 1879, which included reforms but discriminated against the Chinese. An exclusion law passed by the U.S. Congress that year was killed by presidential veto, but in the next year a treaty agreement with China allowed U.S. regulation of Chinese immigration. This was followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years. In 1902 Congress reenacted exclusion legislation against the Chinese. By cutting off cheap labor, exclusion helped make the huge single-crop ranches unprofitable and led to the proliferation of smaller farms growing varied crops.

Japanese farm workers were brought in to replace the Chinese, but as they grew successful the "yellow peril" outcry rose once again. Japanese agitation, focused largely in San Francisco, affected domestic and international policies. The Gentlemen's Agreement between Japan and the United States in 1907 halted further Japanese immigration to the United States. In 1913 the Webb Alien Land Law, designed to keep the Japanese from owning land, was the culmination of anti-Japanese lobbying.