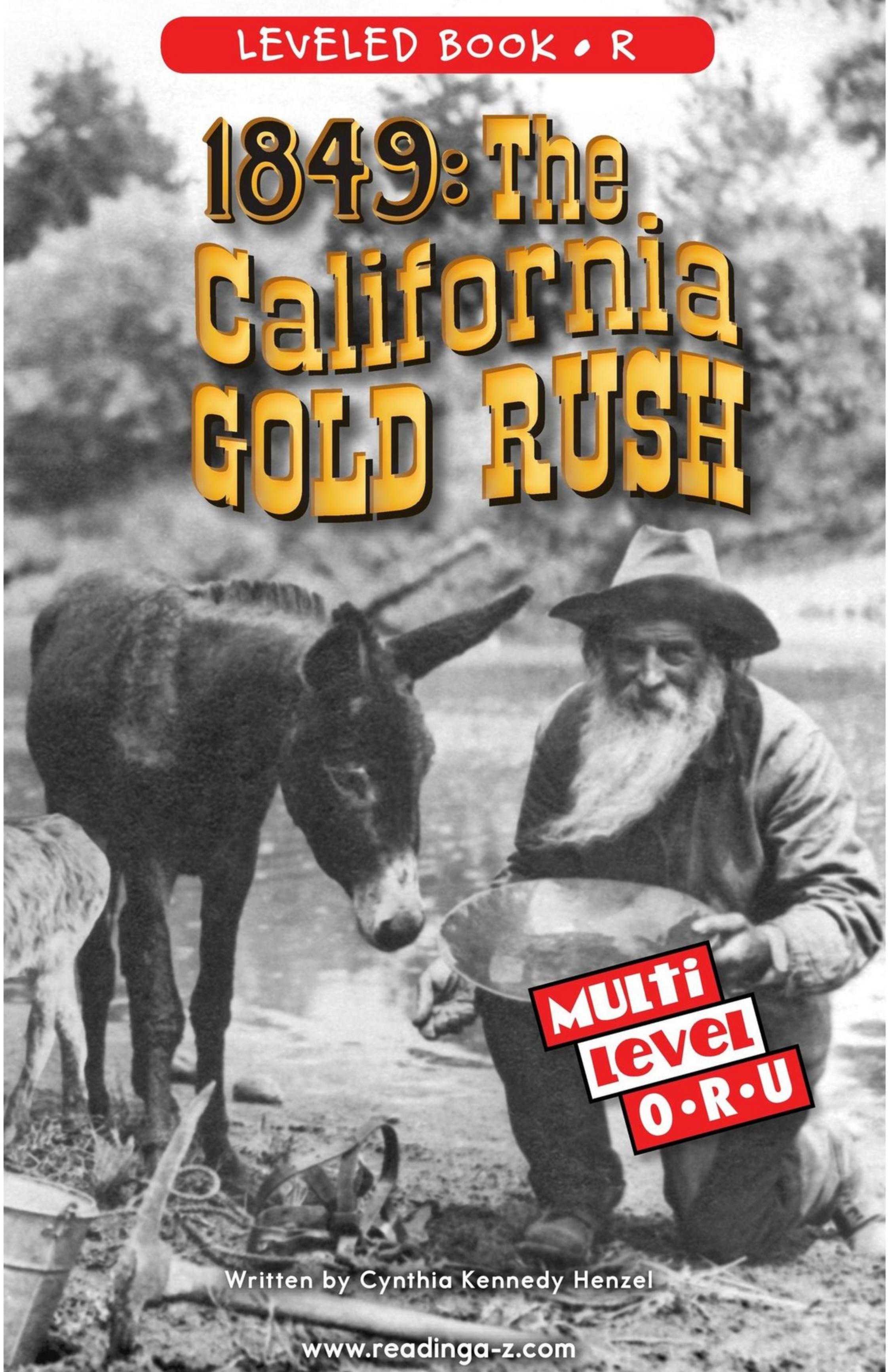


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1849: The California Gold Rush

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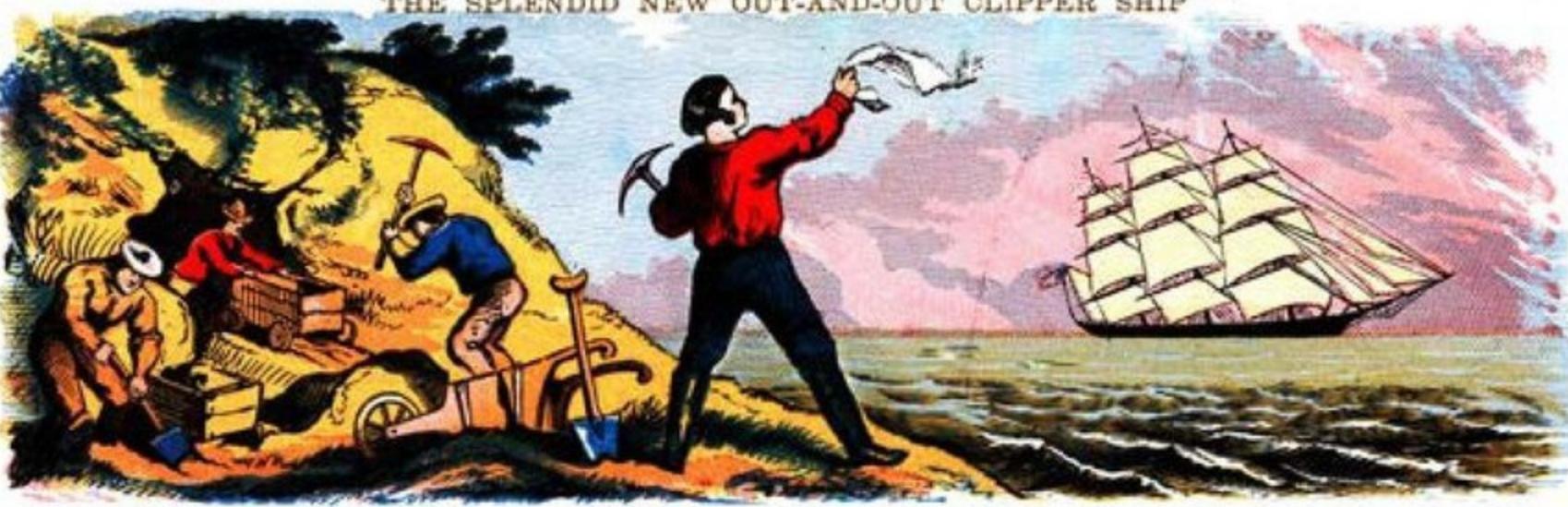


Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

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1849: The California Gold Rush

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Focus Question

What was the effect of the gold rush on westward expansion?

Words to Know

economy

overrun

entrepreneurs

placer mining

erosion

prospectors

fortune

treaty

gold rush

Title page: Posters like this one advertised ships that would carry forty-niners from New York City to San Francisco.

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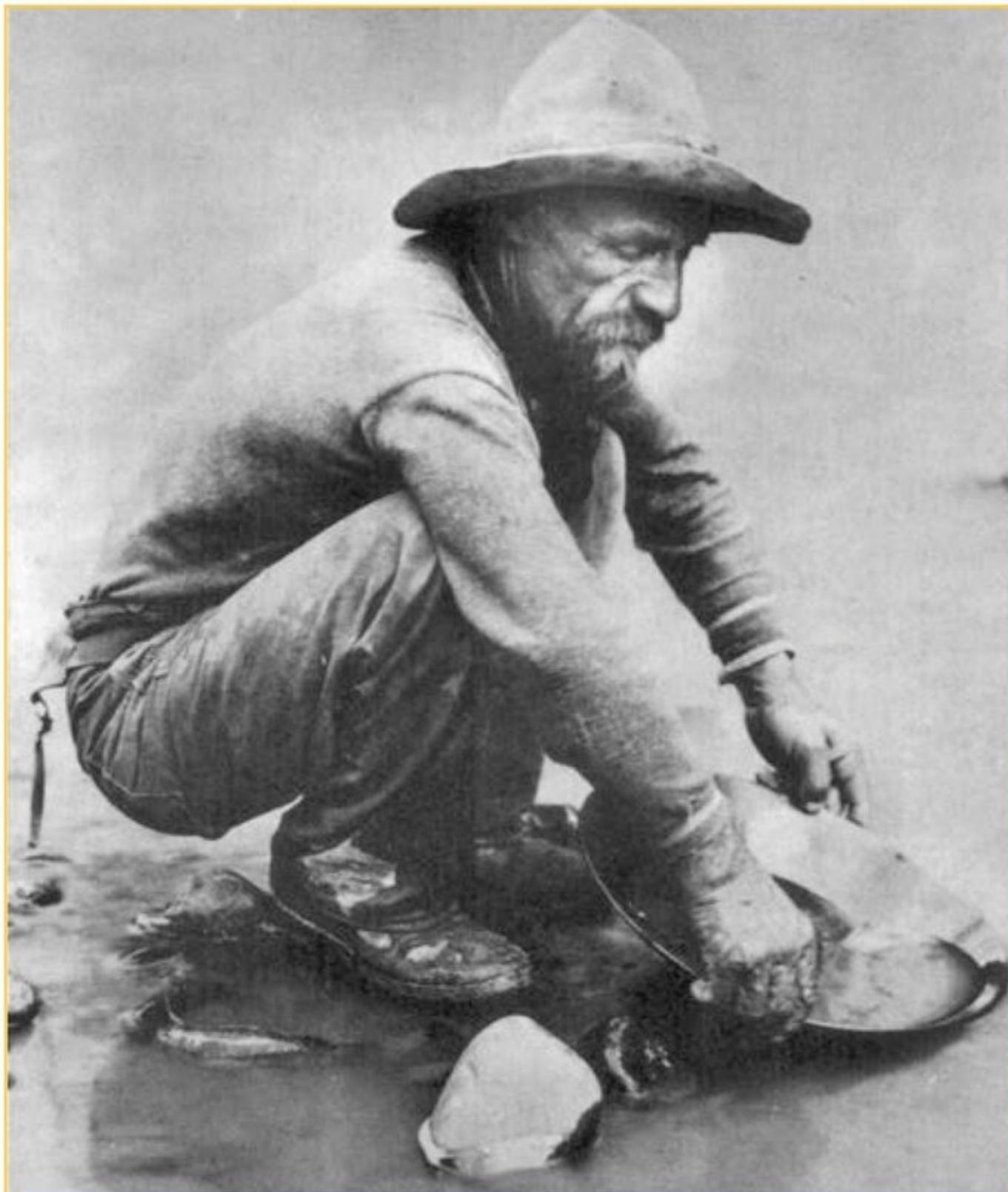


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Sutter's Mill, California



Gold!

On the morning of January 24, 1848, James Marshall went to inspect the new mill his crew was building. In the mill's water, he spotted something shiny.

He collected several pieces and showed his crew. They tested the pieces. It was gold! Four days later, Marshall went to show John Sutter, who owned the mill. Sutter had no wish to be **overrun** with gold hunters.

Everyone agreed to keep the secret: gold had been discovered in California.

Keeping a Secret

In 1848, the world was very different from today. There were no phones, TVs, or radios. There were no roads or railroads connecting California with the states in the East. It was harder to get a message from the East Coast to California than it is to get a message to Mars today. At the time of Marshall's discovery, California belonged to Mexico. Nine days later, Mexico signed a **treaty** that gave California to the United States. Neither side knew about the gold.

The secret got out when Sam Brannan found out. Brannan had a store at Sutter's Fort, where John Sutter lived. Brannan wanted to cash in when he heard the news, but he wasn't interested in mining. Instead, he bought all the shovels in San Francisco. Then he filled a bottle with gold dust and ran through the streets yelling about the great discovery. The city of 850 people almost emptied—after Brannan sold them each a very expensive shovel.



Sam Brannan

Panning

Unlike in most places, the gold in California was not locked deep under the ground.

Erosion had long ago washed the metal down the mountains into the rivers. All people needed for **placer mining** was a shovel and a shallow, flat pan.



placer mining

Placer mining works because gold is much heavier than gravel. The **prospectors** stood in the rivers and shoveled gravel into their pans. They removed large rocks, then carefully swirled the pan. The dirt and gravel spilled over the edges with the water. The shiny flakes of gold stayed at the bottom of the pan.



The term *prospector* comes from the gold rush. It means a person who moves to a spot with the prospect, or possibility, of finding gold and making a fortune.

People from California and Oregon soon showed up to work the rivers near Sutter's Mill. Some of them were European, and some were Native American. Others came from Mexico. Next came prospectors from South America and Asia. At that time, it was easier to get to California from China than from the East Coast.

Equal Opportunity?

As the hills filled with prospectors, white miners began to oppose other groups hunting for gold, especially the Chinese. California taxed foreign miners \$20 a month to prospect. White prospectors sometimes forced them from the mines.

For Native Americans, the gold rush was awful. It opened the gateways to the West, forcing huge numbers from their homes. In California, about 120,000 Native Americans died of illness, starvation, or murder during the gold rush.

Slaves were sometimes forced to work mining California gold, such as in this photo, taken in 1852.



The Forty-Niners

Back in the eastern states, gold fever didn't take hold until 1849. That year, ninety thousand people joined the **gold rush**. These were the forty-niners.

Many gold seekers were clerks, teachers, or lawyers. Nine out of ten were men. Many couldn't cook, wash a shirt, build a shelter, or harness oxen to pull a wagon. Many left behind families. They planned to quickly make a **fortune** and come home.

Around the Tip

About half of the forty-niners decided to go by ship. More than five hundred ships left eastern and Gulf ports in 1849 for California. Ships took from five to eight months to sail from the East Coast, around the tip of South America, and back up to California.



Gold fever was the greed and contagious excitement brought on by the discovery of gold.

The cheapest ticket was \$75—about \$2,300 in today's money. This price bought a tiny bunk in the dark, crowded bottom of the ship. Food was just as bad. The forty-niners suffered shipwrecks, seasickness, and disease. Yet many reported that the worst things were crowding and boredom.

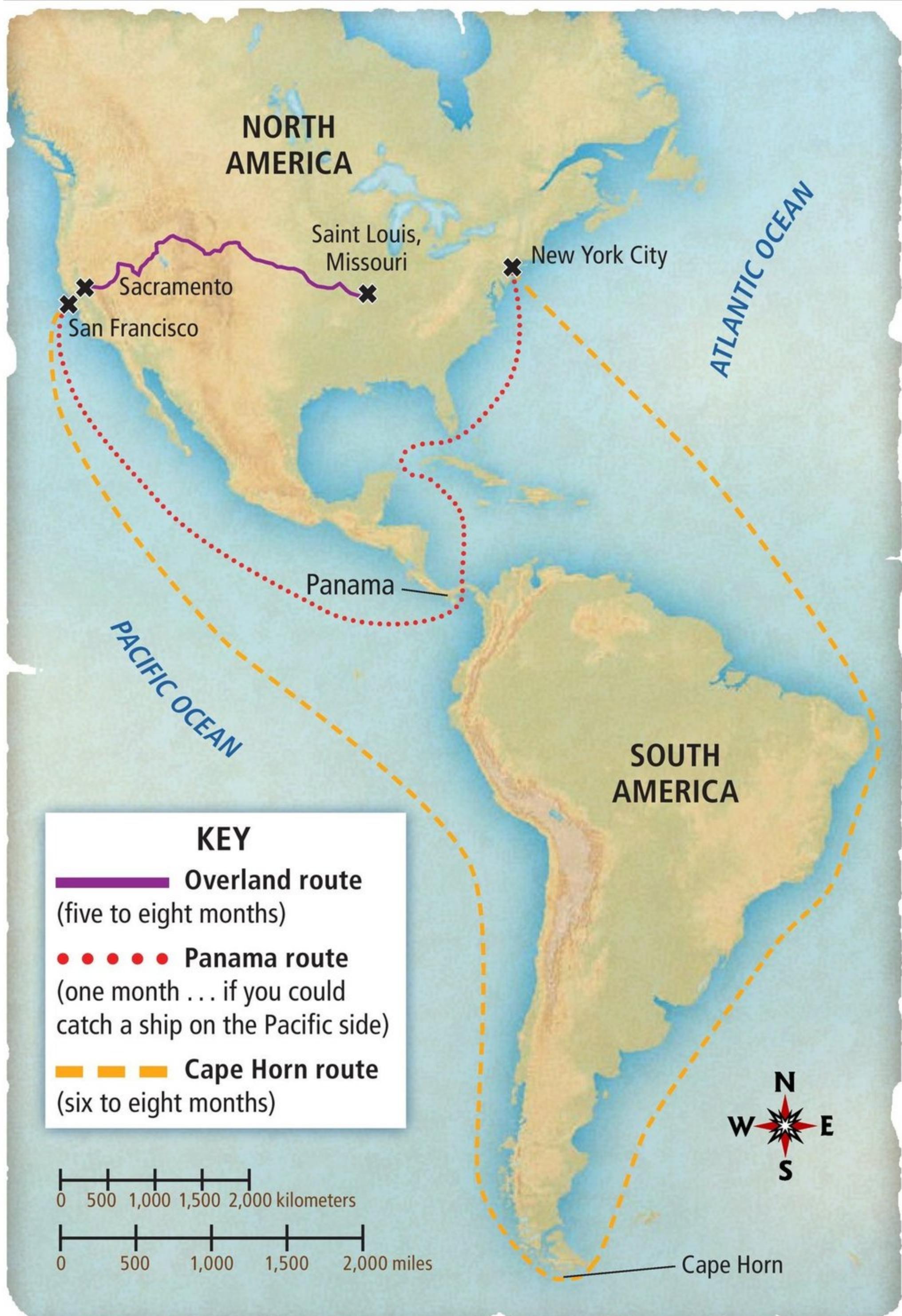
Some decided to save time by taking a shortcut through Panama. They could canoe and hike across 60 miles (97 km) of jungle, then catch another ship. These forty-niners faced deadly snakes and mobs of mosquitoes. Many fell ill. If they made it across, they might wait weeks or months to catch a ship on the other side.

Wagons Ho!

It took about the same amount of time to get to California by wagon. Many looked forward to the adventure almost as much as finding gold. The adventure, however, could prove deadly.



The Routes the Forty-Niners Took





An 1850 engraving depicts a wagon train moving toward California, probably by way of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Wagons followed the California Trail across the flat prairie. A wagon could go about 15 miles (24 km) a day—if it didn’t break down, if there wasn’t much rain, and if the oxen stayed healthy. Next, the forty-niners had to get the wagons up mountains, across rivers, and down steep cliffs. If they weren’t fast enough, they were slowed by blizzards in the high passes. They also crossed deserts with no water.

For many, their greatest fear was clashes with Native Americans, but death came from disease, starvation, and accidents. Often, the forty-niners carried disease with them as they drove their wagons the 2,100 miles (3,380 km) to California. Thousands died. By the fall of 1849, the trail was lined with dead oxen and graves.

The Losers, the Winners

For those who made it to California, life did not get easier. The prospectors lived in mining camps made of tents and rough shelters. They ate poorly. They worked twelve hours a day shoveling gravel or breaking rocks with picks. Many fell ill, but they kept working. The next pan of gravel might be worth a fortune!



Gold miners stand in their camp at El Dorado, California, around 1850. The original El Dorado in South America is a mythical place of great wealth.

Prices Gone Wild

Forty-niners could get what they wanted—for a steep price. Here's what some items cost in 1849 San Francisco and in 2016 dollars (adjusted for inflation):

	1849	=	2016
one can of peas	\$6	=	\$181
one egg	\$1	=	\$26
one breakfast	\$43	=	\$1,294
one pound (.45 kg) of coffee	\$3	=	\$103
one mule	\$360	=	\$10,835
one pair of boots	\$96	=	\$2,890

Source: *The Rush: America's Fevered Quest for Fortune, 1848–1853*, by Edward Dolnick

According to the *Sacramento Bee*, one in every five miners who came to California in 1849 was dead within six months. Even those who found gold often lost it to robbers, gambling, or paying high prices for everyday goods.

Good Prospects, Bad Endings

Several of the men involved in the original discovery of gold ended up with nothing to show for it. John Sutter lost his golden property when the United States would not recognize his land grant from Mexico. He died broke. So did James Marshall.

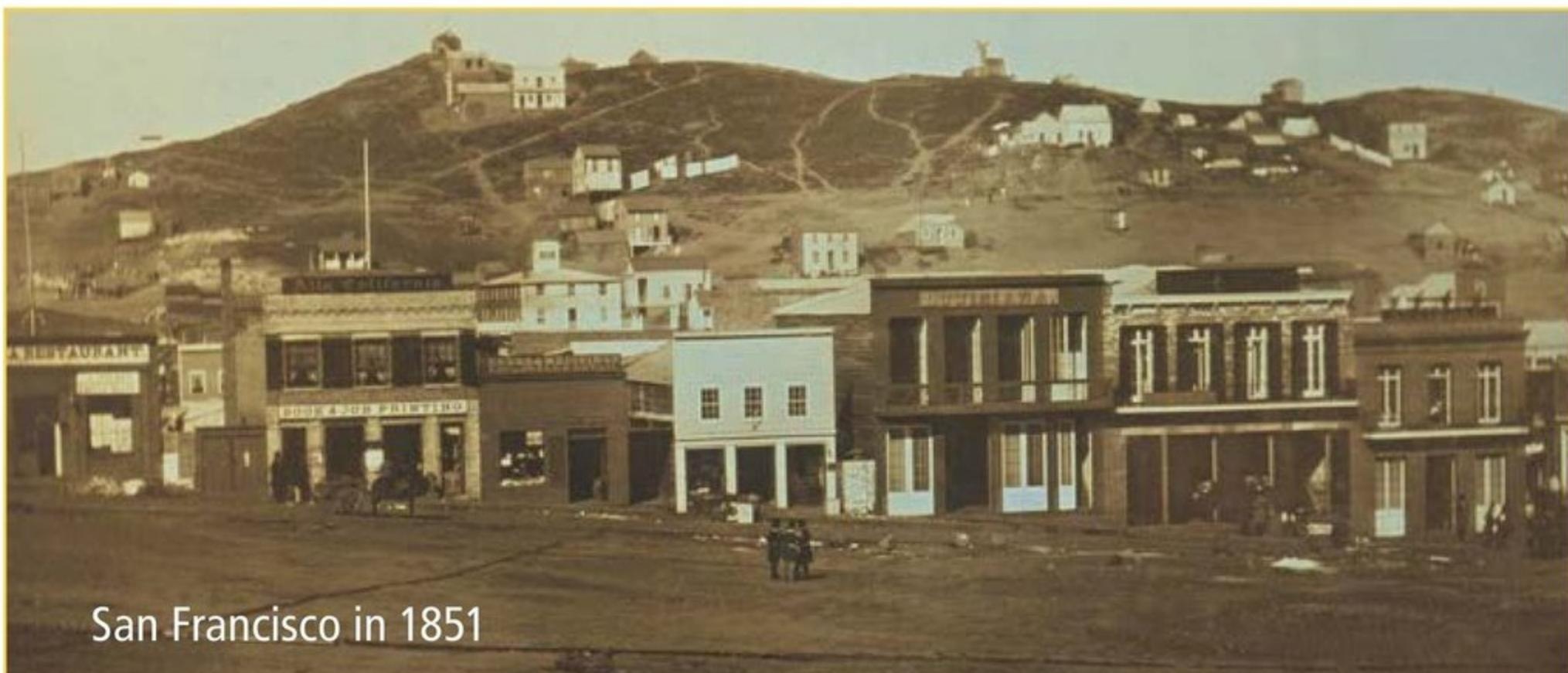
Sam Brannan made his fortune, then lost it all due in part to a bad temper. He died broke, too.

Some early prospectors were successful. Once the placer gold was gone, though, most of the riches from gold went to large companies. They were able to dig deep mines.

Entrepreneurs made a fortune by selling to the miners. Sam Brannan became one of the first millionaires in America. Levi Strauss made his fortune selling pants tough enough to handle the work—blue jeans. Women, especially, had many more opportunities in the West. They started businesses cooking, running boarding houses, and washing clothes for the prospectors.



Levi's jeans were popular by the 1880s. Here, two miners wear theirs outside an underground mine.



San Francisco in 1851



San Francisco today

The biggest winner was the United States. The gold rush brought about three hundred thousand people to California in a few years instead of a few decades. In 1850, California became a state. By 1863, the country began building the railway that would link East and West.

Today, California has more people than any of the other forty-nine states. It has a huge **economy**. And it still lives up to its nickname: the Golden State.

Glossary

economy (<i>n.</i>)	the circulation of money in industry, trade, and finance in a country or area (p. 15)
entrepreneurs (<i>n.</i>)	people who start and operate their own business (p. 14)
erosion (<i>n.</i>)	the natural removal of rock or soil by water, wind, or ice (p. 6)
fortune (<i>n.</i>)	a large amount of money or possessions (p. 8)
gold rush (<i>n.</i>)	the sudden movement of many people to an area where gold has been discovered (p. 8)
overrun (<i>v.</i>)	entered or taken over by large numbers of something (p. 4)
placer mining (<i>n.</i>)	the process of drawing minerals from gravel in streams (p. 6)
prospectors (<i>n.</i>)	people who search for minerals such as gold and silver (p. 6)
treaty (<i>n.</i>)	a formal agreement of peace or friendship between two nations or groups (p. 5)

1849: The California Gold Rush

A Reading A-Z Level R Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,025

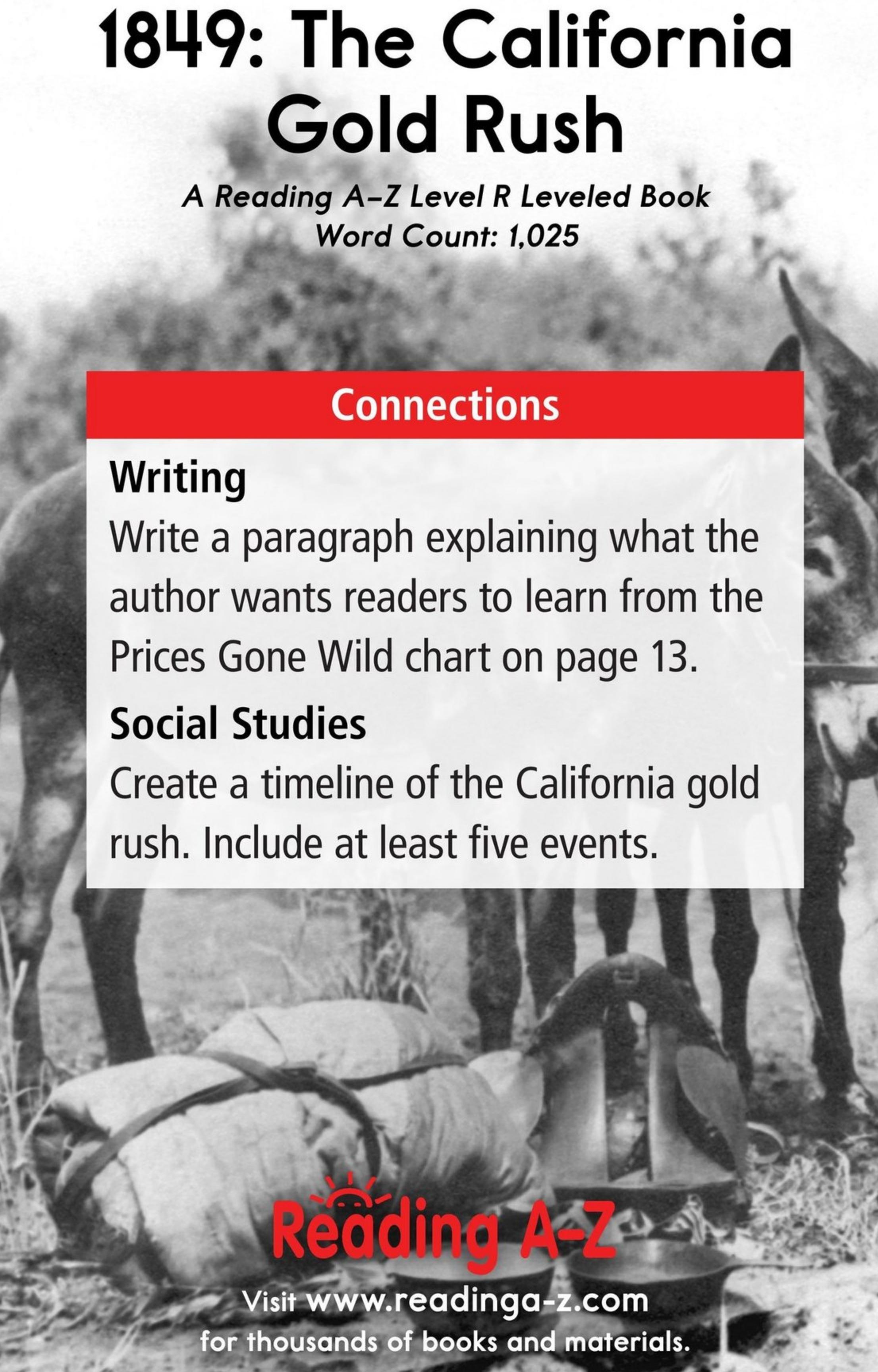
Connections

Writing

Write a paragraph explaining what the author wants readers to learn from the Prices Gone Wild chart on page 13.

Social Studies

Create a timeline of the California gold rush. Include at least five events.



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