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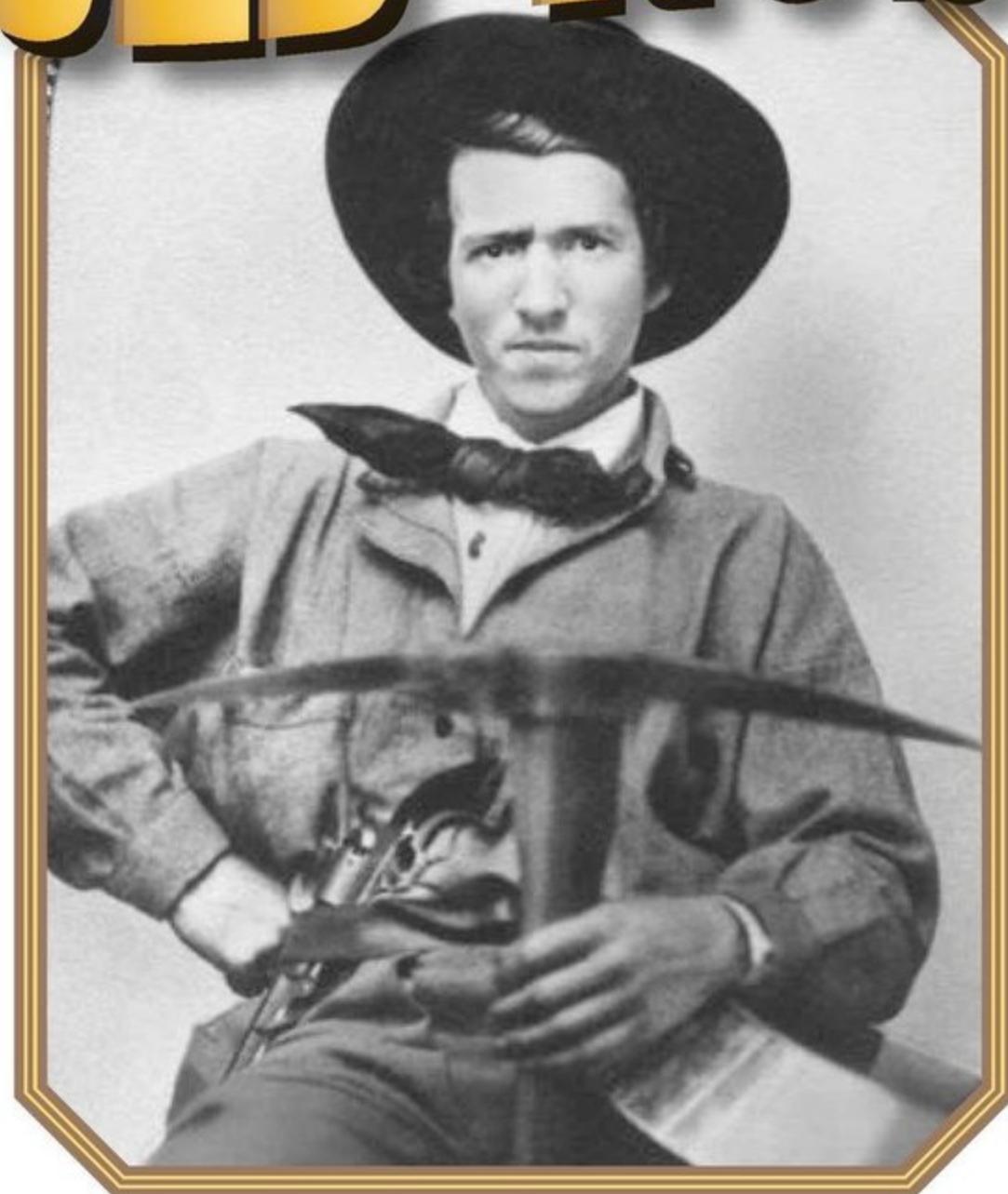
# 1849: The California Gold Rush

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Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

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## Focus Question

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

## Words to Know

economy  
erosion  
fortune

gold rush  
mining  
prospectors

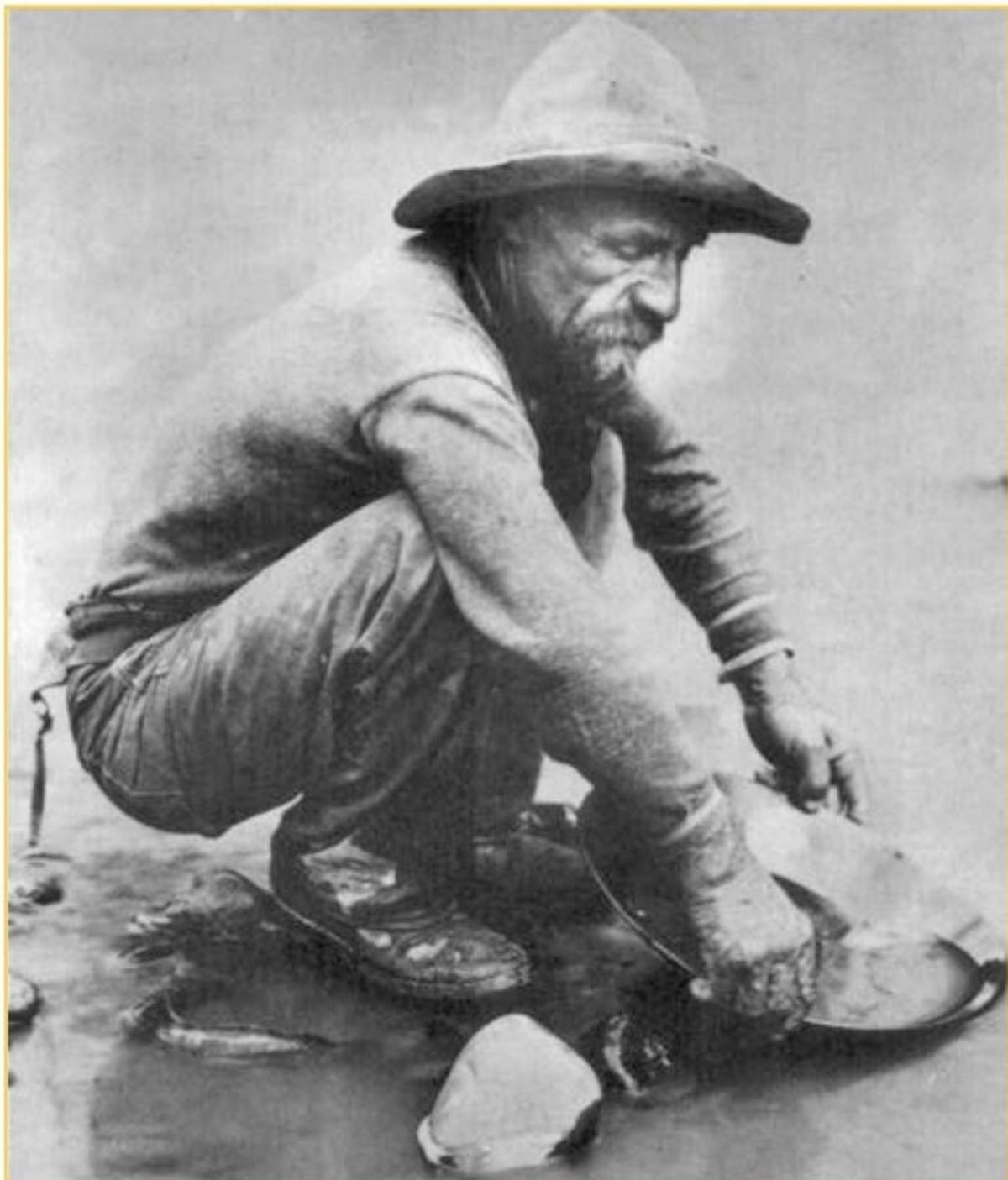
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### Correlation

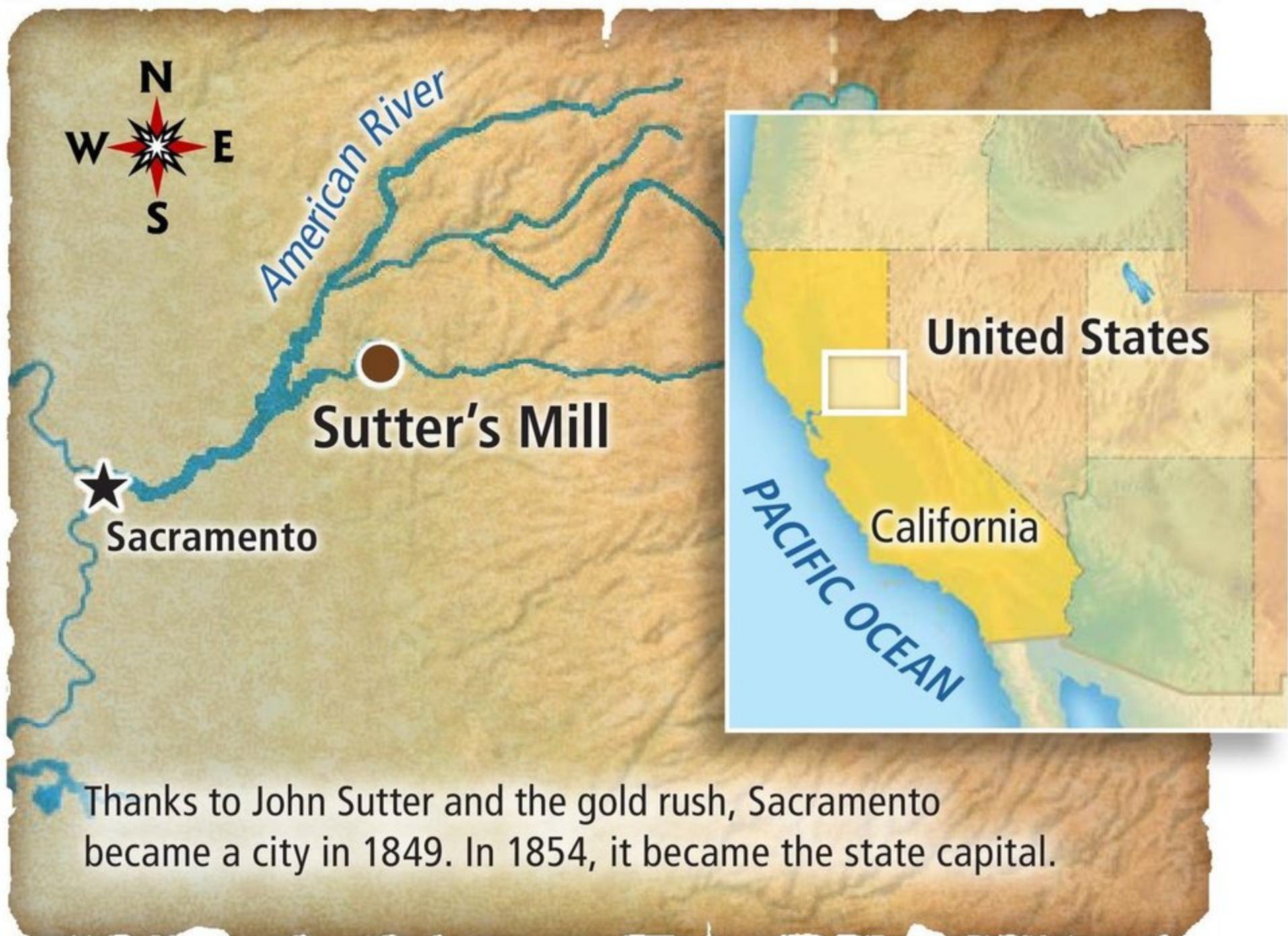
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## Sutter's Mill, California



### Gold!

It is January 1848. A man looks over the new mill his crew is building. In the mill's water, he spots something shiny.

He collects several pieces and shows his crew. They test the pieces. It's gold!

The man shows John Sutter, who owns the mill. Sutter doesn't want anyone else to know. They agree to keep the secret: gold has 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 back east. It took months to get a message from one coast to the other.

Still, the secret got out when a man named Sam Brannan heard the news. He wasn't interested in **mining**. Instead, he bought all the shovels in San Francisco. He filled a bottle with gold dust. He ran through the streets, yelling about the great discovery. Then he sold his shovels for a lot of money!



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 to mine it was a shovel and a flat pan.



placer mining

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



A *prospector* is someone who moves to a spot with the prospect, or possibility, of finding gold.

People from along the West Coast soon showed up to work the rivers near Sutter's Mill. 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 miners from other countries \$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 1852 photo.



## The Forty-Niners

It took longer for people in the eastern states to hear about the gold. They didn't start coming west until 1849. That year, ninety thousand people joined the **gold rush**. These were the forty-niners.



portrait of a forty-niner

Nine out of ten of them were men. Many couldn't cook, wash a shirt, or build a shelter. Many left behind families. They planned to quickly make a **fortune** and come home.

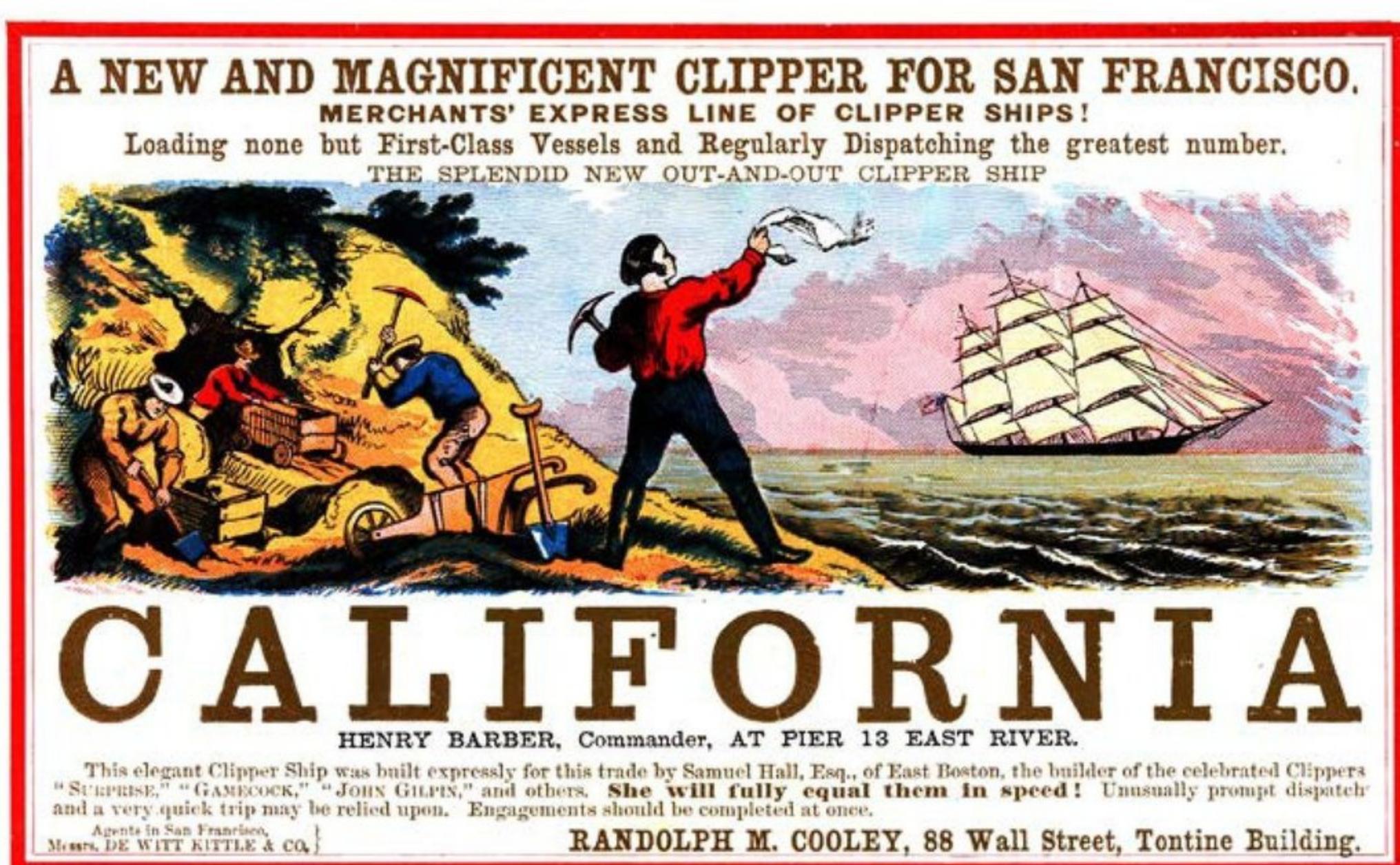
### *Around the Tip*

About half of the forty-niners went by ship. The tickets were expensive. The ships were crowded, the trip was boring, and many got sick. Ships took from five to eight months to make the journey.

Some decided to save time by cutting through the Panama jungle. These forty-niners faced deadly snakes and bugs. Many fell ill. If they made it across, they might wait weeks or months to catch a ship on the other side.

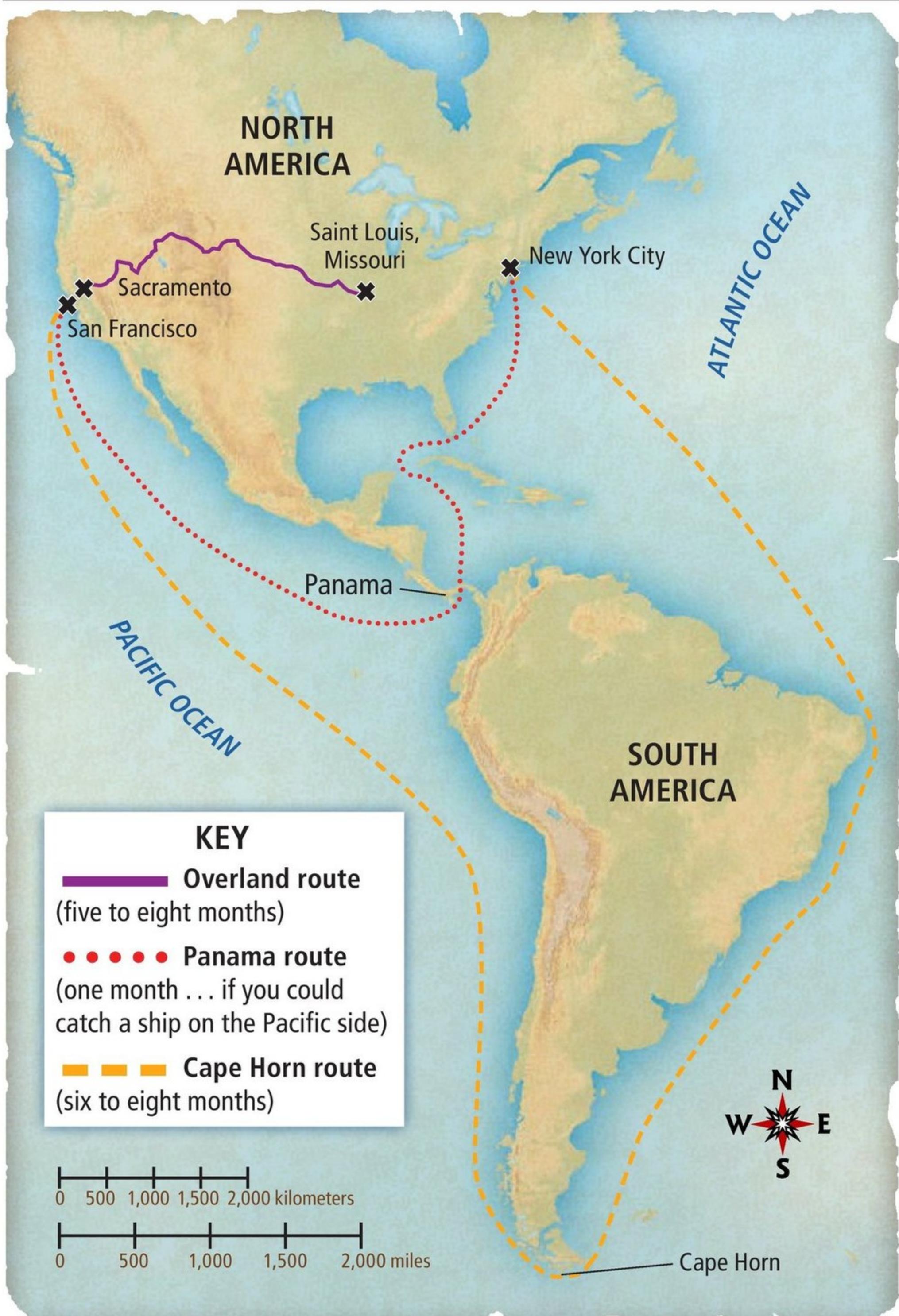
### *Wagons Ho!*

It took about the same amount of time to get to California by wagon. Across the flat prairie, a wagon could go about 15 miles (24 km) on a good day.



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

## The Routes the Forty-Niners Took





Artwork from 1850 shows a wagon train moving toward California by way of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Once they reached the mountains, the forty-niners had to get the wagons up them, across rivers, and down steep cliffs. They crossed deserts. Some also faced blizzards.

For many, their greatest fear was fights with Native Americans, but death came from sickness, starvation, and accidents. As they drove their wagons the 2,100 miles (3,380 km) to California, thousands of forty-niners 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 digging gravel or breaking rocks with picks. Many fell ill, but they kept working. By one report, one in every five miners who came to California in 1849 was dead within six months.



Gold miners stand in their camp at El Dorado, California, around 1850.

## Prices Gone Wild

Forty-niners could get what they wanted . . . if they could pay for it. Here's what some items sold for in 1849 San Francisco. The last column shows what those prices would look like in 2016.

	1849	2016
one can of peas	\$6	= \$181
one plate of biscuits	\$10	= \$301
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

Some early prospectors were successful. However, more people made their 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. Many women started businesses that served 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 just a few years. In 1850, California became a state. By 1863, the country began building the railroad 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

<b>economy</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the movement of money in business, trade, and finance in a country or area (p. 15)
<b>erosion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the natural removal of rock or soil by water, wind, or ice (p. 6)
<b>fortune</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a large amount of money or possessions (p. 8)
<b>gold rush</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the sudden movement of many people to an area where gold has been discovered (p. 8)
<b>mining</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the act of taking minerals from the ground by digging or blasting (p. 5)
<b>prospectors</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who search for minerals such as gold and silver (p. 6)

# 1849: The California Gold Rush

A Reading A-Z Level O Leveled Book

Word Count: 727

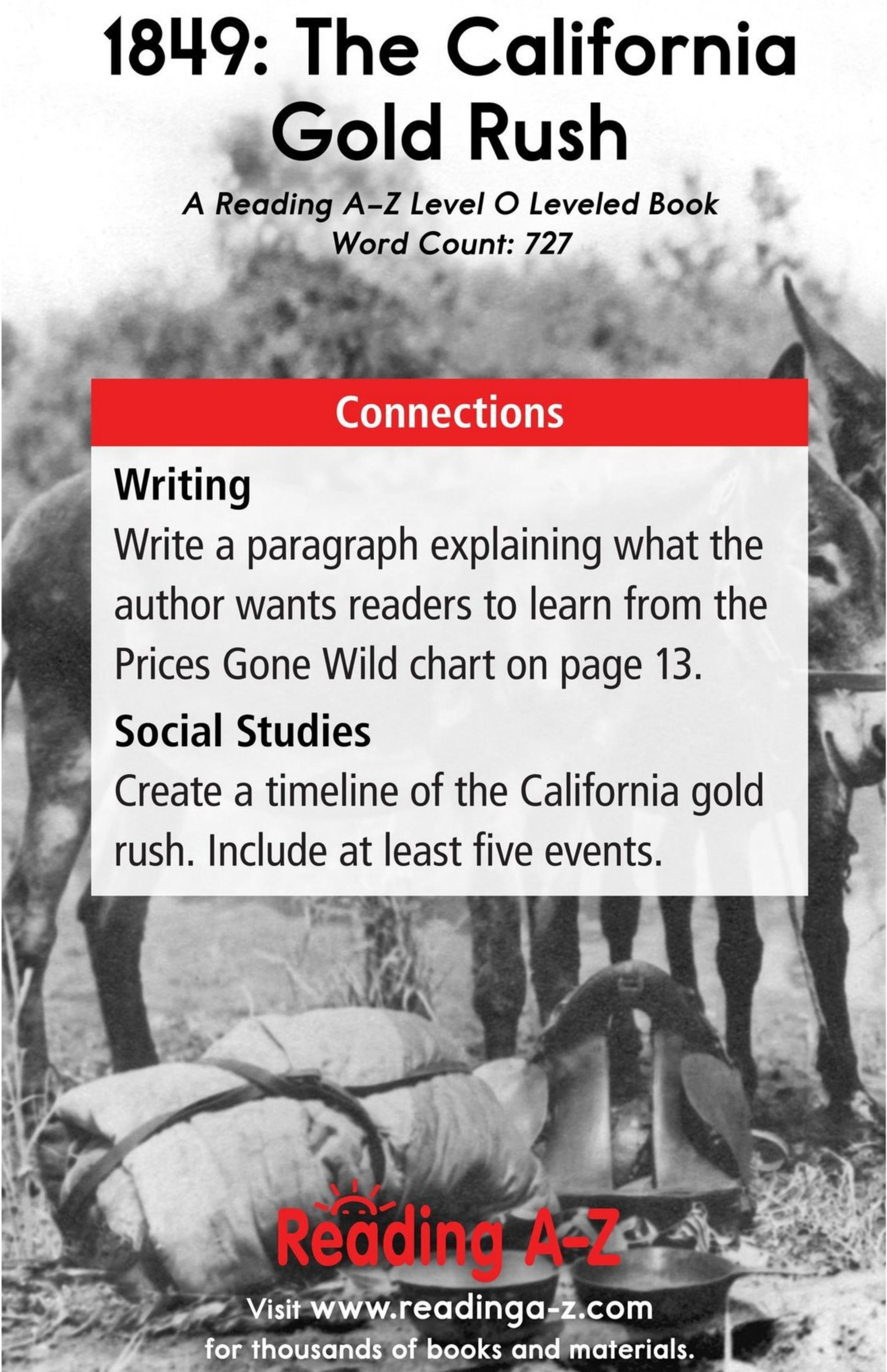
## Connections

### 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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