

PASSAGE I

This passage is adapted from an article on the California Gold Rush.

In 1848, gold was discovered in California, and newspapers quickly spread the word. President James K. Polk confirmed the discovery in his 1848 State of the Union message to Congress. The president's words and the knowledge that taking the precious metal was completely unregulated in California were enough to trigger the greatest national mass migration in US history and a global gold fever now called the California Gold Rush.

5 People used their life savings, mortgaged their homes, and sold everything they had to travel to California in hopes of becoming wealthy. At the time gold was discovered, there were approximately 11,000 non-Native Americans living in California. Between the discovery and 1852, some 300,000 people, mostly young and male, traveled to California from all quarters.

Regardless of where the hopeful travelers originated, the months-long trip was perilous. A journey across the continent meant rough conditions and possibly skirmishes with Native Americans and attacks by other travelers, both of which could result in injury and even death. Those coming by sea from Europe and the eastern United States had to travel around stormy Cape Horn. The sea journey could be shortened by going overland through the jungles of the Isthmus of Panama, but it was a region rife with cholera and other diseases. From San Francisco, getting to the mining areas was difficult. There was little housing, disease was rampant, and food prices were astronomically high.

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There were tales of people finding thousands of dollars of gold in only a few weeks, but most miners just encountered hard times. To survive, some left mining or worked for wages in other men's operations. The problem for many was that they couldn't afford to return home, and any news of other people striking it rich would renew hope. Many people lost, but a few lucky ones won. By 1860, approximately \$600 million in gold had been mined—more than \$10 billion today.

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