WESTWARD EXPANSION
11.3 – The Gold Rush

MAIN IDEA
The discovery of gold in California brought many settlers, having a lasting impact on California’s economy and population. The gold rush changed the future of the West.

Nelson History Curriculum
U.S. History through Reconstruction
**Learning Target:** *I can explain how the gold rush impacted California’s population and economy.*

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**Flashback**

**Directions:** *Answer the questions below in your social studies notebook.*

1. *Describe* the causes of the Mexican-American War.
2. *Describe* the effects of the Mexican-American War on the United States.

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**Preview**

1. You have a steady job but you hear gold has been discovered 2,000 miles away. You can’t hesitate to go, or you will miss out. However, supplies are very expensive, it’s a very long and risky trip, and you aren’t guaranteed to find gold. Would you take the risk and go in search of gold?

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**Vocabulary**

*Donner Party* – a group of western travelers who went to California but were stranded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during winter.

*Forty-Niners* – gold-seeking migrants who went to California in 1849.

*Prospect* – to search for gold.

*Placer miners* – used pans or other devices to wash gold nuggets out of loose rock and gravel.
Westward Expansion: The Gold Rush

Directions: Re-create the graphic organizer below in your social studies notebook to take notes as you read.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Information</th>
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Summary of Section:

Gold is Discovered

During the 1830s and 1840s, American settlers who wanted to go to California would use the Oregon Trail. At the Snake River in present-day Idaho, the trail split and people bound for California took the southern route. This became known as the California Trail. The trail traveled through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Settlers needed to cross this mountain range before winter snows.

Many Americans traveled along the California Trail, but few settlers actually settled in California. American merchants were normally more interested in trading goods made in factories than in establishing settlements. They traded for gold and silver coins, hides and tallow (animal fat used to make soap and candles) from Mexico.

Before the Mexican-American War, California’s population was mostly Mexican and Native American. When Mexico controlled California, Mexican officials did not want many Americans to settle there. However, Swiss immigrant John Sutter was given permission to begin a colony. Sutter’s Fort was located near the Sacramento River and became a popular rest stop for many American travelers.

The Donner Party was a group of western travelers who went to California but were stranded in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during winter. The party started its trip in the spring of 1846 and a portion of the group went in search of a short cut and got lost. The group became trapped by heavy snows and had very little food.

A rescue party found the starving group in February of 1847. The group began with 87 travelers but 42 died.

Gold in California

Sutter sent a carpenter named James Marshall to build a saw mill beside a river in 1848. While working, Marshall glanced at the ground and discovered gold. Sutter and Marshall agreed to keep the discovery a
secret, but when they examined the site the next day, a Spanish-speaking Native American worker had also discovered a gold nugget.

Stories of the discovery quickly spread across the country. In 1849, about 80,000 gold seekers came to California, hoping to become rich. These gold-seeking migrants to California were called forty-niners. Nearly 80 percent of forty-niners were Americans, while others came from all over the world.

It was a long and dangerous journey to California. Many arrived by sea while others traveled West in wagon trains. The first stop for most travelers was San Francisco. The port town became a convenient trade center and stopping point. As a result, its population increased from about 800 in 1848 to more than 25,000 by 1850.

Formative Assessment:

Infer how the United States was lucky in the timing of the California gold rush.

The Mining Camps

Very few miners had previous gold-mining experience. The work was very difficult and time-consuming. They would prospect, or search for gold, along the banks of streams or in shallow surface mines.

The first person to arrive at a site would “stake a claim” to a piece of land. Some miners banded together to prospect for gold and agreed that each would keep a share of whatever gold was discovered. At the start of the gold rush, before courts were established, conflict arose from disputes over claims, at times resulting in violence.

Mining methods varied according to the location. The most popular method was placer mining, done along rivers and streams. Placer miners used pans or other devices to wash gold nuggets out of loose rock and gravel. To reach gold deposits buried in the hills, miners had to dig shafts and tunnels. This type of mining was normally done by mining companies.

California’s gold production peaked at $60 million in 1853. Success stories inspired many miners. Some lucky miners quickly found gold and struck it rich, however, most miners did not become rich. Many who did become wealthy off the gold rush were merchants selling goods and supplies to miners at inflated prices.

Life in the Camps

Wherever people went to mine for gold, mining camps sprung up. The miners living in these camps came from many different cultures and backgrounds. Most were young, unmarried men in search of adventure. Only about five percent of gold-rush immigrants were women or children. Women of the gold rush normally made their money cooking meals, washing clothes, and operating boarding houses.

Others made money practicing law, supplying settlers with food, clothing, equipment, and other services. Miners had to pay high prices for basic necessities because the large amounts of gold in
The circulation caused inflation in California. A loaf of bread, for example, might cost 5 cents in the East, but would cost 75 cents in San Francisco.

Settlers were more than willing to take advantage of the conditions. For example, Biddy Mason and her family arrived from Georgia as slaves, but discovered most California miners opposed slavery. They were able to gain their freedom and moved to Los Angeles. Mason saved her money until she could purchase some land. Over time, Mason’s property increased in value, from $250 to $200,000, helping her become one of the wealthiest landowners in California.

**Immigrants rush to California**

The temptation of gold attracted miners from all over the world. For example, famine and economic hardship in southeastern China caused many Chinese men to leave China for America. Most were hoping to find great wealth and then return to China. Between 1849 and 1853, about 24,000 Chinese migrated to California.

Many Americans did not welcome the Chinese. In 1852, California placed a high tax on all foreign miners. Chinese miners had no choice but to pay this tax if they wanted to prospect for gold. Many of these Chinese workers were targets for violent attacks. In addition, the legal system was biased toward Americans over immigrants.

Despite the poor treatment, Chinese immigrants still worked in gold mines, while others took other jobs or opened small businesses.

In 1849 alone, about 20,000 immigrants from China, Europe, Mexico, and South America arrived in California. Although most intended to return home, most ended up staying. For example, Levi Strauss, a German immigrant, made his fortune making denim pants for miners.

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**Formative Assessment:**

*Summarize* the types of people who came to California during the gold rush and the way in which they hoped to benefit.

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**The Impact**

When Spain and Mexico controlled California, the population grew slowly. However, once miners arrived, the population began to grow more rapidly. California’s population boom made it eligible for statehood only two years after being acquired by the United States. In 1850, California became the 31st state.

A fast-growing population had negative consequences for Californios and California Native Americans. The new American settlers discriminated against these groups and immigrants.
In addition to rapid population growth, new businesses and industries transformed California’s economy. Gold mining remained an important part of the early economy, but Californians soon discovered other ways to make a living. Farming and ranching, for example, became industries for those willing to do the necessary hard labor.

However, one obstacle to growth was the fact that California was isolated from the rest of the country. It was difficult to bring in goods or ship them out, but the answer to the problem was the railroad. Californians would have to wait almost 20 years for the railroad to cross the country and connect California to the rest of the United States. The transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, helping grow a stronger economy.

Formative Assessment:

*Analyze* the impact of the gold rush on California’s population and economy.

**Directions:** *Answer the questions below in your social studies notebook.*

1. **Identify** why Sutter’s Mill was important.
2. **Summarize** the types of people who took part on the California gold rush and how they participated.
3. **Describe** the problems that arose by so many people coming to California.
4. **Describe** how people wanted to solve the problem of California’s isolation from the rest of the country.
5. **Identify** ways in which setters made money, other than mining.
6. **Analyze** the effect of the gold rush on California’s economy and population.
7. **Analyze** the impact of the California gold rush on the Native Americans and Californios who were already living in California? What impact do you think mining had on the environment?
Children’s Book

**Directions:** You will write and illustrate a children’s storybook about the California Gold Rush. Your book will feature a fictional character migrating to California and include his or her experiences. Be sure to write in such a way that a small child can understand the story.

Your book will meet the following criteria:

- Book will have a cover.
- Each page of the story has an illustration and at least two sentences telling the story.
- Each page is in full color
- Pages will be bound together
- Your book will feature four pages of story, plus the cover.
- The story must address the following questions:
  - Why is your character traveling to California?
  - What does your character do to earn money once they arrive?
    - For example, are they Miners? Are they merchants selling mining supplies? Are they women offering services to Miners?
  - What is life like for your character once they arrive?
  - How does your character view other immigrants?
  - What does your character notice about the impact of the Gold Rush on California?
Analyzing Primary Sources

Directions: Use the primary source below to answer the following questions.

1. What type of goods does the advertisement above promote?

2. Who do you think is the intended audience for this advertisement?

3. What specifically does the advertisement say that makes you believe its intended for who you answered in question No. 2?
Section 11.3: Assessment

1. Sutter’s Mill was important because,
   a. It was near the site where gold was discovered, starting the gold rush.
   b. It produced important goods for the minors of the gold rush.
   c. It was housing for minors of the gold rush.
   d. It the site where settlers declared California’s independence.

2. Women participated in the gold rush by,
   a. Mining for gold and other minerals.
   b. Working in factories that processed the gold mined.
   c. Providing goods and services, such as boarding houses.
   d. None of the Above

3. How did some want to solve the problem of California’s isolation?
   a. By adding bordering states.
   b. By building a railroad connecting California with the rest of the U.S.
   c. By building a canal in Panama, cutting the distance ships had to travel to California.
   d. None of the Above

4. **Summarize** the Gold Rush’s impact on California’s economy and economy.

5. **Explain** the Gold Rush’s impact on immigrants and California’s native population.