CHAPTER

07

Expansion of the Western U.S.

1836 – 1853

A re-rendering of the famous 'Oregon Trail' game.[1]

Stories from Class

[1] Not the actual game because that could be copyright infringement.

Remember the ... Alamo!

— Class callout

Later in this chapter you will find two versions of the story of the Texas Revolution. I broke my students into four groups — two groups read one version, two groups read the other. Then I had them answer questions and debate until a student said, "Hey! We have different texts!" Two of the best and most well-behaved students I ever taught argued about the Texas Revolution even after knowing they had different texts.[2]

[2] "The best students give you Olam Hazeh (This World), the average students give you a paycheck, and the weakest students give you Olam Haba (The World to Come)." — The Ponevezher Rav

By 1848, Americans had convinced themselves that Providence had meant for them to own the continent. From the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to the **Mexican Cession** in 1848 — the vast territory Mexico gave up after losing a war — the United States had doubled, then tripled in size. The chapter you just read — Chapter 6 — covered the eastern half of that story: the Mississippi River, the Erie Canal, Texas, and Florida. This chapter covers the western half: the **annexation** of Texas (formally absorbing an independent territory into the country), the war with Mexico, and the gold rush that transformed California from a sleepy ranching frontier into one of the largest **migrations** in human history — a migration being a large-scale movement of people from one place to another. As always, Jews were there — rarely the ones in the river panning for gold, usually the ones selling the pans.

The Frisco Kid (1979)

Cowboy: You're from California, huh?

Rabbi: California is that way?

Cowboy: Lost, ain't you? Got any money?

Rabbi: No.

Cowboy: Got any food?

Rabbi: No.

Cowboy: Sure talk funny. Where you born at?

Rabbi: Poland.

Cowboy: Oh. That near Pittsburgh?

Rabbi: No, that's near Czechoslovakia.

Cowboy: Oh, yeah, yeah. And you're going to California?

Rabbi: Yes.

Cowboy: You ain't going to make it.

The Frisco Kid (1979)[3] *— a comedy about a Polish rabbi crossing the American West to reach San Francisco to be the first Rabbi of the gold rush Jewish community.*

[3] My favorite line from the movie: "Out of 88 students graduating from this yeshiva, you came in a close 87."

Quote & Music for this Chapter

QUOTE *"Go West, young man, and grow up with the country."*
Horace Greeley, New-York Tribune, 1865

Greeley's advice was not original — he was quoting an Indiana journalist named John Soule — but he repeated it so often it became his. In any case, tens of thousands of Americans took it to heart, and the West grew up fast.

SONG *"Oh! Susanna"* — Stephen Foster (1848)
Oh! Susanna was the unofficial anthem of the California Gold Rush. Written in 1848, the song was being played at every mining camp by 1849. The chorus — "Oh! Susanna, oh don't you cry for me / For I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee" — is still recognized by virtually every American child.

Timeline: Western Expansion, 1836–1853

The western expansion of the United States took place in rapid, overlapping steps — each event triggering the next.

AMERICAN HISTORY		JEWISH AMERICAN HISTORY
Texas declares independence from Mexico. The Battle of the Alamo is fought; Santa Anna wins the battle, Houston wins the war.	1836	
Texas is annexed by the United States, becoming the 28th state. At the same time, Florida enters as the 27th state — to preserve the balance between slave and free states.	1845	

1846

The United States and Mexico go to war over the Texas border. Oregon Territory is formally agreed upon with Britain.

1848

The Mexican-American War ends. Mexico cedes California, Nevada, Utah, and five other future states. Gold is discovered at Sutter's Mill, California — nine days before the peace treaty is signed.

Jewish merchants Jesse and Leopold Seligman arrive in California. Levi Strauss is still in New York.

1849

The '49ers arrive. The largest land migration in American history: over 80,000 people reach California in a single year.

Hundreds of Jewish merchants follow the miners. The first Jewish congregation in California is founded in San Francisco.

1850

California becomes the 31st state, skipping territorial status entirely. It enters as a free state.

Jewish community life is established in San Francisco. Adolph Sutro arrives in California from Belgium.

1853

The Gadsden Purchase adds a strip of land from Mexico for a southern railroad route — present-day southern Arizona and New Mexico. The continental United States now has its modern borders.

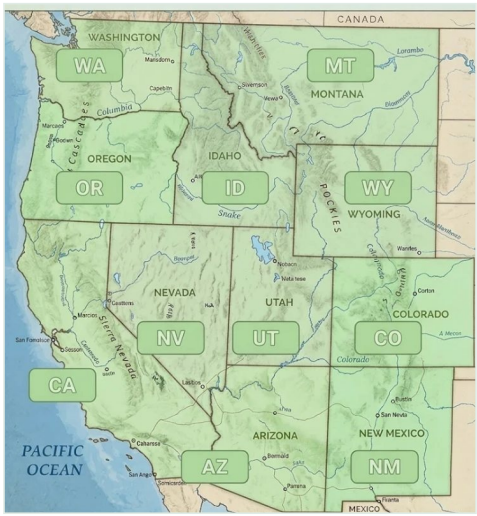
The Map of Western Expansion

The map below shows how the United States acquired the western half of the continent. Almost every piece of land shown was either purchased, won in war, or negotiated in a treaty — often all three at once. **Geography** — the study of Earth's physical features and their relationship to human events — explains why trails, rivers, and railroads all followed the same narrow passes through the mountains.

The territorial growth of the United States. Oregon Territory (1846), the Mexican Cession (1848), Texas Annexation (1845), and the Gadsden Purchase (1853) are all shown. The original 1783 United States is shown on the right. Note how the western state borders are mostly straight lines — they were drawn by mapmakers, not formed by rivers or mountains.

Interesting State Facts

These are the key states that appear in this chapter.



California
CA *Gold Rush 1848; largest migration in U.S. history; became a state in 1850*

Oregon
OR *End of the Oregon Trail; border with Britain agreed at 49th parallel, 1846*

Washington
WA *Cut from Oregon Territory; borders Canada*

New Mexico
NM *End of the Santa Fe Trail; from the Mexican Cession 1848*

Arizona
AZ *From Mexican Cession 1848 and Gadsden Purchase 1853*

Colorado
CO *From the Mexican Cession 1848*

Idaho
ID *From the Oregon Territory; mountainous interior*

Nevada
NV *Great Basin; admitted as a state in 1864 during the Civil War*

Utah
UT *Settled by Mormon pioneers; from the Mexican Cession 1848*

Wyoming
WY *Exact rectangle; first U.S. territory to grant women the vote, 1869*

Montana
MT *From the Oregon and Louisiana territories; statehood 1889*

After the Louisiana Purchase, the single largest acquisition of land was the **Mexican Cession of 1848** — the territory Mexico surrendered after losing the Mexican-American War. It added what is now California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming: about 525,000 square miles in a single transfer.

A glance at any map reveals a clear pattern: eastern state borders are irregular and jagged, while western borders are mostly straight lines. Eastern borders follow rivers, mountain ranges, and colonial land grants — all irregular in shape. Western states were drawn by government surveyors using a grid of latitude and longitude lines. The land was new enough that no Americans had established competing claims, so mapmakers simply drew straight lines and called it done.

Oregon Territory was acquired peacefully through diplomacy; the Southwest was taken by war. The difference comes down to the opponent. Britain was a powerful military and trade partner the United States had already fought twice — negotiation was far safer than conflict. Mexico, after years of internal instability, was considerably weaker. The United States also had a stronger argument for the Oregon border (the 49th parallel was already accepted informally) than for the Texas border, which both sides genuinely disputed.

The **Gadsden Purchase** of 1853 added only a small strip of southern Arizona and New Mexico — but geography made it essential. The mountains north of that strip made a transcontinental railroad impractical. That flat southern corridor provided the only level route connecting the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Coast. Geography, not politics, drove the purchase.

Mountains, rivers, and valleys determine where people and vehicles can travel. The trails that carried settlers west followed river valleys and mountain passes because those were the only practical routes — wagons could not cross steep terrain. Railroads followed the same paths because the engineering requirements are even stricter: a locomotive needs a nearly flat grade to function. Geography chose the route; humans had little real choice.

Some of the territory the United States acquired came through purchase: the **Louisiana Purchase** from France (1803), **Florida** from Spain (1819), the **Gadsden Purchase** from Mexico (1853), and **Alaska** from Russia (1867). Other territory was taken primarily by force: the **Mexican Cession** — California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming — was won in the Mexican-American War of 1846–48. Texas be-

gan as Mexican land settled by Americans who declared independence and then requested annexation. In both cases, military force was followed by a cash payment.

Texas War for Independence — 1836

There are two versions of the story of the Texas Revolution. One is based on a typical U.S. history textbook for grade school. The other is based on a book titled *Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth*.[4] Read both and decide for yourself which version is 'true.' Notice that both can be accurate in what they say while still being misleading — that is a **lie by omission**, a form of deception that leaves out important facts without stating anything false.

[4] Burrough, Bryan, Chris Tomlinson, and Jason Stanford. *Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth*. Penguin Press, 2021.

Version 1: Based on a typical U.S. history textbook

United States History: Beginnings to 1877. HMH Social Studies, 2018.

In 1821 Stephen Austin started a Texas colony in what was then part of Mexico. These Americans, mostly Protestant, became increasingly resentful of Mexican authority. In October 1835 the Mexican army tried to remove a cannon from the town of Gonzales, Texas. Rebels stood next to the cannon with a flag that said "Come and Take It." This first battle resulted in a clear Texas victory.

The Texans' actions angered Santa Anna. He began assembling a force of thousands to stop the rebellion. With hastily gathered volunteers, Colonel William Travis and the defenders of the Alamo knew they were outnumbered but had to hold out as long as possible.

The Mexican army attacked. Despite heavy losses the army overcame the Texans. All the defenders of the Alamo were killed.

In the Battle of San Jacinto, Santa Anna was confident of victory but careless in choosing the site for his camp. While the Mexicans were resting during their siesta, the Texas forces attacked.

Version 2: Based on Forget the Alamo (Burrough, Tomlinson & Stanford, 2021)

Anglo settlers began arriving in Texas (then Mexico) from the United States in the 1820s. The government wanted settlers who would farm the land and defend it from raids, so they offered land grants — on three conditions: become Mexican citizens, convert to Catholicism, and do not bring enslaved people.

Mexico had abolished slavery, stating that "all men are created equal." The Americans brought their enslaved people anyway.

Mexicans felt that Americans were invited guests and were appalled when the Americans not only brought more and more enslaved people, but also demanded political power. Americans discriminated against Mexicans and looked down on Mexican culture and religion.

In 1832, Austin demanded that Mexico give up Texas entirely and found himself in jail for treason. Mexico clamped down further on slave-holding American settlers.

The fighting ended swiftly. In fewer than 20 minutes, Santa Anna's army was all but destroyed. The Texans captured Santa Anna and he signed a peace treaty.

Santa Anna became very upset at the uncompromising Texans when a volunteer army led by Colonel Jim Bowie (a slave trader from Tennessee) and Travis attacked the Mexican army and the Alamo was used as a base.

Texans screamed, "Remember the Alamo!" and raised a larger army to fight at San Jacinto. Sam Houston found Santa Anna relaxing and captured him.

Lies by Omission — What Did Each Version Leave Out?

- **Version 1 omits:** that many American settlers came specifically to preserve slavery (which Mexico had abolished); that Austin was imprisoned for demanding Mexico cede Texas outright; that Jim Bowie was a slave trader; and that the "Come and Take It" confrontation was started by American settlers resisting Mexican law.
- **Version 2 omits:** that Mexico's government was weak and unstable; that many American settlers genuinely felt they were being misgoverned from a distant capital; that the Alamo defenders were vastly outnumbered and fought with considerable bravery; and that not all American settlers were motivated by slavery.
- **The lesson:** Both versions are largely accurate in what they say. Each is misleading in what it leaves out. A lie of omission does not require a single false word.

Dan L'chaf Tzchus — Judging Favorably

- The Torah principle of *dan l'chaf tzchus* — giving someone the benefit of the doubt — asks us to assume good intentions when a person's actions are ambiguous. How might a person knowing only Version 1 or Version 2 think he knows that the Mexicans or Americans were the 'bad' people?

After reading one version of the story, you might come away thinking you understand the Texas War for Independence. After reading both versions, you will probably feel like you know less than you thought — though you actually know more! This is called the **Dunning-Kruger effect**: beginners often feel confident because they do not know what they do not know, while people who study a subject deeply realize how complicated it really is.[5]

Now here's a more balanced version of the story — which we hope is more accurate, though we rely on what those before us left for us to read.

Mexico had a problem. The northern part of its territory — what is now Texas — was almost impossible to govern. Native American raids made the roads dangerous. Few Mexican families wanted to move there. The land was nearly empty and the government in Mexico City was too weak and too distant to do much about it.

The solution Mexico tried was to offer **land grants**: free land to anyone willing to settle in Texas, as long as they agreed to three conditions. First, they had to become Mexican citizens. Second, they had to convert to Catholicism. Third, they had to follow Mexican law — which meant they could not own enslaved people, because Mexico had abolished slavery.

Americans took the land. They largely ignored the conditions. By the early 1830s, there were roughly 30,000 Americans in Texas — and fewer than 8,000 Mexicans. The settlers spoke English, practiced Protestantism, and many owned enslaved people. When Mexico tried to enforce its laws, the Americans pushed back.

[5] Named after a 1999 study by psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger. Most '49ers had no mining experience and wildly overestimated their chances of striking it rich.

In 1835, a man named **Stephen F. Austin** — the son of the man who first organized the American settlement of Texas (the city of Austin, Texas, is named after his family) — traveled to Mexico City to negotiate. He was arrested and imprisoned for a year. When he returned to Texas in 1835, he declared that war was inevitable.

The Republic of Texas and the United States, 1836. Texas was an independent nation for nine years before it joined the United States.

In 1836, Texas declared independence from Mexico. The Mexican president, **General Antonio López de Santa Anna**, marched north with an army to retake it. He reached a fortified mission in San Antonio called **The Alamo**, defended by 189 men including Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett. Santa Anna's force of roughly 1,800 besieged it for thirteen days. On March 6, 1836, the Mexican army stormed the walls. All 189 defenders were killed.

"Remember the Alamo!" became the battle cry of the Texas independence army, commanded by **Sam Houston**. Six weeks later, at the Battle of San Jacinto, Houston's force surprised Santa Anna's army during their afternoon nap and routed them in eighteen minutes. Santa Anna was captured in disguise. He signed a treaty recognizing Texas independence in exchange for his life.

Six Flags Over Texas

- Texas is the only U.S. state that has been governed by six different flags[6] (which is why there is a theme park chain named after it):
- **1. Spain** (1519–1685 and 1690–1821) — Spain colonized the region.
- **2. France** (1685–1690) — Robert de La Salle briefly claimed it.
- **3. Mexico** (1821–1836) — after Mexico gained independence from Spain.
- **4. Republic of Texas** (1836–1845) — an independent country for nine years.
- **5. United States** (1845–1861 and 1870–present) — after annexation.
- **6. Confederate States of America** (1861–1865) — during the Civil War.

Spain
1519–1821

France
1685–1690

Mexico
1821–1836

Republic of Texas
1836–1845

United States
1845–pres.

Confederacy
1861–1865

Mexico's land-grant system created the conditions for its own undoing. American settlers were offered free land on three conditions: become Mexican citizens, convert to Catholicism, and follow Mexican law — which banned slavery. They accepted the land and largely ignored the conditions. Mexico's failure was not enforcing those terms before Americans became the majority; the settlers' failure was making a promise they never intended to keep. Both sides contributed to the breakdown, though the settlers are the ones who broke a specific oath.

"Remember the Alamo!" became one of the most powerful rallying cries in American history — despite being a defeat. The 189 defenders chose to stand and fight rather than retreat, knowing they were vastly outnumbered. That sacrifice gave the phrase its emotional power far more than any victory could have. Military history is full of such examples: "Remember the Maine," "Remember Pearl Harbor" — defeats inspire more reliably than victories because a noble sacrifice is a more compelling story than a straightforward win.

The timing of Texas statehood was not accidental. In 1845, every new state shifted the balance of power in the Senate between slave states and free states. Texas was a slave state, and Florida joined at the same time — also a slave state. Adding two slave states at

[6] This is where the amusement park gets its name.

once was politically manageable in 1845. The question of California, five years later, would be far more explosive — because California was too large and too populated to be balanced by any single counterpart.

Mexico's three requirements for American settlers were straightforward: become a Mexican citizen, convert to Roman Catholicism, and follow Mexican law — which included a ban on owning enslaved people. The Americans who arrived differed from their Mexican neighbors in almost every way: language (English rather than Spanish), religion (Protestant rather than Catholic), and attitudes toward slavery. Many had no intention of following Mexican law and regarded themselves as Americans living temporarily under foreign jurisdiction.

The **Alamo** was a fortified Spanish mission repurposed as a military outpost. The Texas independence army used it as a defensive position. Its significance lies not in any victory — all 189 defenders were killed — but in the decision those men made to hold the position rather than retreat. Their stand bought Sam Houston time to organize a larger force, and their deaths became a symbol impossible to ignore.

Whether the United States was right to take Texas is a question without a clean answer. The settlers broke the conditions of their land grants; Mexico was unable to govern the territory; the majority of the local population was already American. On the other side: the settlers made and broke a promise, Mexico had legal sovereignty, and the annexation set a precedent for using military force to acquire disputed land. That the Texas question remains contested in popular history says something about how unresolved it is.

The US-Mexican War — 1845–48

Nine years after Texas declared independence, it joined the United States. Mexico had never fully accepted the Texas peace treaty it signed under duress. The border was also disputed: the United States claimed the Rio Grande as the boundary; Mexico claimed a river further north, the Nueces River. Polk sent troops to the disputed zone and Mexico did the same.

In April 1846, Mexican cavalry crossed the Rio Grande and attacked a U.S. Army patrol, killing eleven soldiers. President **James K. Polk** went to Congress: "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon American soil." Congress declared war. A large faction in Congress believed Polk had deliberately provoked the conflict — a first-term congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln gave a speech demanding Polk prove the "spot" where American blood was shed, earning him the nickname "Spot Lincoln."

The U.S.–Mexican War, 1846–48. U.S. forces pushed into Mexico from three directions simultaneously. The blue territory became the Mexican Cession.

The war was swift. General **Winfield Scott** landed at Veracruz and marched inland to capture Mexico City itself — the first time an American army captured a foreign capital. General **Zachary Taylor** won battles in northern Mexico. The war lasted less than two years and cost Mexico enormously.

The peace treaty, signed on February 2, 1848, was the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**. Mexico ceded to the United States all of present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming — about 525,000 square miles — in exchange for $18.25 million and the cancellation of Mexican debts. The United States had just acquired more than half of Mexico's entire territory.

The war was controversial then and remains so. Henry David Thoreau went to prison rather than pay taxes that funded it and wrote *Civil Disobedience* in response. Ulysses S. Grant, who fought in the Mexican-American war as a young officer, later called it "one of the most unjust wars ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation."

The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill happened on **January 24, 1848** — nine days before the peace treaty was signed. Mexico ceded California without knowing of the gold to be found.

President Polk told Congress that Mexico had "shed American blood upon American soil" — and that framing was everything. If the attack occurred on Mexican soil, the United States was the aggressor; if on American soil, Mexico had started the war. The problem was that the location was genuinely disputed: the United States claimed the Rio Grande as the border, Mexico claimed the Nueces River to the north. Abraham

Lincoln's demand that Polk identify the exact "spot" where American blood was shed was not a technicality — it was a challenge to the war's entire legal and moral basis.

The United States paid Mexico $18.25 million for roughly half of Mexico's territory — a payment made while American troops occupied Mexico City. Whether money paid under military occupation constitutes a genuine purchase is a question worth sitting with. The Mexican and Native American residents of those territories were not consulted. The payment, real as it was, did not change the fact that the terms were set at gunpoint.

Ulysses Grant fought in the Mexican-American War as a young officer and later called it "one of the most unjust wars ever waged by a stronger nation against a weaker nation." His view matters because soldiers carry out orders, not policy. A soldier can fight honorably in an unjust war without believing the war was right. Grant's criticism was of the government's decision — not of the men who fought it. That distinction between individual conduct and institutional policy is one of the harder ideas in military ethics.

By the way, General Robert E. Lee also served in the Mexican-American War and would later be on the opposite side from Grant in the Civil War. About Texas, Lee wrote of its heat: "My rattlesnake, my only pet, is dead. He grew sick and would not eat his frogs and died."

California Gold Rush — 1848

On January 24, 1848, a carpenter named James Marshall was inspecting a lumber mill on the American River in northern California when he spotted something yellow in the water. He picked it up and tested it: soft, heavy, did not tarnish. Gold.

The mill was owned by John Sutter, a Swiss immigrant who had been given a 50,000-acre land grant by the Mexican government. Sutter had no interest in a gold rush — it would destroy his ranch and his workforce. He tried to keep the discovery secret. He failed.

News first reached San Francisco in May 1848 when a **merchant** (someone who buys and sells goods for profit) named **Sam Brannan** ran through the streets waving a bottle of gold dust, shouting, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!"[7] Brannan had quietly bought up every shovel, pickaxe, and mining pan in the region first.[8]

[7] The early strikes were almost unbelievable. Two miners on Weber Creek pulled $17,000 worth of gold out of the ground in seven days. A party of six miners working with about fifty hired Native Americans took out 273 pounds of gold. And Sam Brannan's store near the mines did $36,000 in business in May, June, and early July of 1848 alone.

[8] Brannan made roughly $150,000 in a single month selling mining supplies. His investment in supplies before the announcement was, depending on your view, shrewd entrepreneurship or shameless manipulation. He would go on to become the first millionaire in California.

Sam Brannan, who raced through San Francisco shouting "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" — after first quietly buying up every shovel, pickaxe, and mining pan in the region.

Before the Gold Rush

When the Mexican-American War began in 1846, California belonged to Mexico. Its population was about 6,500 Mexicans, 700 Americans, and roughly 150,000 Native Americans who had been living there for thousands of years. San Francisco was a small trading port. Sacramento was a ranch. Los Angeles barely existed.

On February 2, 1848 — nine days after Marshall found the gold — California passed to the United States. Nobody in Washington knew about the gold yet. The treaty negotiators had no idea they were handing over one of the richest deposits of surface gold in history.

The News Spreads

News of the discovery traveled *outward* from California before it traveled *eastward*. Sailors carried it to Hawaii, Chile, Peru, Mexico, and China months before it reached New York. The reason: overland mail took weeks; ships could travel the Pacific faster than a rider could cross the Rockies.

In December 1848, President Polk confirmed the discovery in his annual message to Congress: *"The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service."*

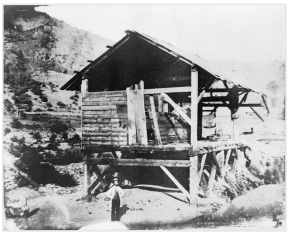
> *"The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large and that gold is found at various places in an extensive district of country."*
>
> **President James K. Polk, Annual Message to Congress, December 1848**

The president had just told every American: there is an enormous amount of gold in California. What followed was the largest voluntary migration in American history — that's why there's a sports team called the ~~'48ers~~ '49ers.[9]

[9] The gold was discovered in January 1848, but most people only heard about it in 1849. Interesting fact: Chinese and other people from across the Pacific Ocean often heard about the gold before those in the eastern United States, because travel by water was so much faster than travel by land.

The '49ers

In 1849, more than 80,000 people came to California. They were called the **'49ers** — which is why San Francisco's NFL team is named that. Most were men. Most left behind families, debts, and jobs. Many borrowed money, mortgaged their homes, or spent their life savings on a chance at striking it rich — not so different from the people who poured their savings into Bitcoin a hundred and seventy years later. Some won big. Most did not. They came by ship (sailing around Cape Horn at the tip of South America — a six-month journey) or overland on the California Trail, a branch of the Oregon Trail.[10]



Sutter's Mill, Coloma, California, in an early photograph — where James Marshall found the first gold flakes on January 24, 1848. The site is now a state historic park.

Mining was brutal work. It involved standing in freezing rivers, moving hundreds of pounds of rock and sediment, and getting almost nothing for days at a time. Men hurt their backs, froze their feet, and caught cholera. The lucky ones found enough gold to pay back what they had borrowed. The unlucky ones went home broke. A few became wealthy. Almost all the *very* wealthy ones were not miners at all.

Sam Brannan's behavior before announcing the gold discovery is a useful test case in business ethics. He took a real financial risk — buying all the mining supplies before anyone knew whether a rush would materialize. He also had information the public did not: he knew about the gold before his announcement. Whether that makes him a shrewd entrepreneur or a manipulator depends on how you weigh risk-taking against information advantage. Both sides are defensible, and most large American fortunes involve some version of this question.

The broader lesson of the Gold Rush is that the people who got rich were usually not the ones panning in the rivers. Consistent, reliable demand — miners always needing boots, flour, pickaxes, and durable pants — proved more valuable than the lottery of striking it rich. This pattern repeats throughout economic history: the people who sup-

[10] Some travelers took the Panama shortcut: sail to Panama, cross the Isthmus on mule-back, then sail up the Pacific Coast to San Francisco. Faster than Cape Horn — roughly six weeks — but more expensive and dangerous due to tropical disease.

ply a gold rush tend to do better than the people who join it.

Levi Strauss's approach was to find a specific, concrete problem — pants wearing out too fast in the mines — and build a business around solving it. The same logic appears in nearly every durable company: FedEx solved overnight delivery, Netflix solved video rental late fees, Amazon solved buying books without driving to a store. Identifying what people actually need, rather than what they think they want, is a template that works across centuries.

The founding of **Congregation Sherith Israel** in San Francisco in 1851 — just three years after the Gold Rush began — follows a pattern consistent across all of American Jewish history. Wherever Jews arrived in significant numbers, community structure followed quickly: a synagogue, a charitable organization, a burial society. These institutions were not luxuries; they were the first things built because they provided protection, continuity, and identity in an unfamiliar place. The same pattern appeared in New Amsterdam (1654), Newport (1658), and New Orleans (1828).

The Numbers of the Gold Rush

- **Before the rush:** California had approximately 700 Americans, 6,500 Mexicans, and 150,000 Native Americans.
- **1849:** 80,000 people arrive. By the end of the year, 100,000 total non-indigenous residents.
- **1855:** 300,000 non-indigenous residents. California became a state in 1850, skipping the territorial phase entirely.
- **Gold extracted:** $10 million in 1849; $41 million in 1850; over $80 million in 1852 (equivalent to over $2 billion in today's money).
- **Winners and losers:** The majority of miners made little or nothing. The biggest fortunes were made by merchants, suppliers, and lawyers — people who sold to the miners rather than mining themselves.

Jewish Merchants: Jesse and Leopold Seligman

As a general rule, Jews rarely dug for gold. Let's be honest: we tend to be better at business than at standing in a freezing river poking at rocks. This was not laziness — it was the instinct of the **entrepreneur** (someone who starts a business and accepts financial risk in hopes of earning a profit). The men standing in the rivers were competing with tens of thousands of others for a limited supply of gold. The men selling them shovels, flour, boots, and whiskey had a captive market with no competition.

Jesse and Leopold Seligman were brothers who had immigrated from Bavaria to the United States in the 1830s. Their family ran a dry-goods business in Pennsylvania. When news of gold reached the East Coast, they did not head west to dig. They loaded ships with merchandise and sent it around Cape Horn to San Francisco.

View of San Francisco, 1849 — ships packed the harbor as gold seekers arrived from around the Pacific. Many ships were abandoned by crews who joined the rush.

The logic was simple. A tin cup that cost pennies to manufacture in New York sold for five to ten dollars at a California mining camp. Wine and whiskey sold for twenty to thirty dollars per bottle. Prices were not set by fairness; they were set by the laws of supply and demand in a place where everything had to be shipped 15,000 miles.[11]

The Seligmans made a fortune. They used it to found **J. & W. Seligman & Company**, which became one of the most important investment banks in 19th-century America — financing railroads, governments, and the construction of the Panama Canal. The company existed until 1939.

[11] The Seligmans had a reputation for honesty that paid off. When a great fire swept San Francisco, their store was one of the few built of brick and survived while competitors burned to the ground — and even with every rival wiped out, they refused to raise their prices.

Jewish Merchant: Levi Strauss

Levi Strauss was born in Bavaria in 1829. He moved to New York in 1847 and worked in his brothers' dry-goods business. In 1853, at age 24, he sailed to San Francisco to open a branch of the family store. He brought bolts of fabric and sewing supplies.

Miners needed durable pants. The thin cotton trousers of the era wore out in weeks under the demands of crawling through rock and mud. A Reno tailor named Jacob Davis had figured out a solution: reinforcing the stress points of trousers with copper rivets. He needed a business partner to patent and manufacture the design. In 1873, Strauss and Davis received U.S. Patent No. 139,121 for "improvement in fastening pocket-openings." The result was the first blue jeans.

Levi's is still in business, still based in San Francisco, and still making the same basic design. Levi Strauss did not go west to find gold; he went west to sell pants to the people who did. He made more money than most of them.

The Jewish Mayor of San Francisco: Adolph Sutro

Adolph Heinrich Joseph Sutro was born in Aachen, Belgium in 1830 to a Jewish family. He immigrated to California in 1850 and worked as a merchant before identifying a different problem: the Comstock Lode silver mines in Nevada were filling up with underground water and toxic gases, making mining increasingly dangerous and expensive.

Sutro designed a massive drainage and ventilation tunnel — four miles long, running straight through the mountain to drain the mines. He spent nearly twenty years raising money, fighting opposition from the mine owners, and supervising construction. The **Sutro Tunnel** was completed in 1879. He sold his interest in it in 1880 for a fortune.

He moved back to San Francisco, bought enormous amounts of land (at one point owning one-twelfth of all real estate in the city), built a public bathhouse called Sutro

Baths on the Pacific coast, created a free public library, and planted thousands of trees on the city's barren western hills. In 1894, he was elected **Mayor of San Francisco** on the Populist Party ticket.

Three Ways Jews Made Money in the Gold Rush

- **Merchants (the Seligmans):** shipped manufactured goods from the East. Sold at enormous markup to miners who had no alternatives.
- **Clothing manufacturers (Levi Strauss):** identified a specific, urgent need (durable work clothes) and built a company around it that still exists.
- **Engineers and investors (Adolph Sutro):** identified an infrastructure problem in the mining industry and provided a solution for a fee. Then reinvested profits in real estate and public works.

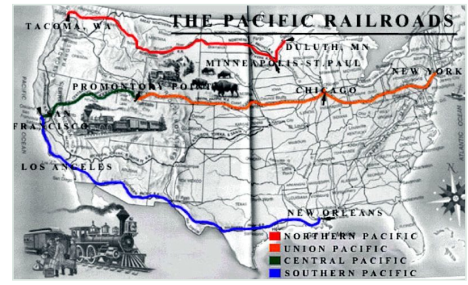
However, not all was well for Jewish Californians. As the Gold Rush population swelled, discrimination increased. Jews were barred from testifying in some courts. Anti-Semitic violence occurred in mining camps. The pattern was familiar from European history: Jews were tolerated, even welcomed, when there was money to be made together — and targeted when competition grew fierce. The first Jewish congregation in California, **Congregation Sherith Israel**, was founded in San Francisco in 1851 in part to provide community and mutual protection.

End of the Gold Rush

The easy surface gold was exhausted by the mid-1850s. What followed was industrial-scale mining: hydraulic cannons that blasted entire hillsides with water, washing gold-bearing soil into sluices below. This worked — but it also destroyed mountains, silted rivers, and buried farms downstream under tons of debris.

In 1884, a federal court issued the landmark *Sawyer Decision*, which banned hydraulic mining in California. It was one of the first environmental court rulings in American history. The Gold Rush was over.

California remained. By 1850, it was already the 31st state. By 1860, San Francisco was the largest city on the Pacific Coast of North America. The gold had drawn the people; the people had built the institutions. The Jewish community, the railroads, the banks, and the city streets that Sam Brannan had run through shouting — all of it remained long after the rivers ran clear again.



. . . will discuss trains when we get to Chapter 9, "Science and Technology."

Review

Sam Brannan's decision to announce the gold discovery — after buying all the available supplies — was shrewd, legal, and at least somewhat manipulative. He created a news event that generated demand for his own inventory. Whether spreading true information for personal gain counts as exploitation depends on what you think people owe each other in a free market. His longer-term effect was to start the migration that made California a state. Without his announcement, the rush might have taken years longer to develop.

The president most directly responsible for both the Mexican-American War and the California Gold Rush was **James K. Polk** (1845–1849). He provoked the war by sending troops to the disputed border zone and claiming American soil was attacked. He announced the gold discovery to Congress in December 1848, triggering the mass migration. He campaigned on continental expansion and delivered it — at enormous human cost — then did not seek re-election and died three months after leaving office.

Before the Gold Rush, California held roughly 150,000 Native Americans, 6,500 Mexicans, and 700 Americans. By 1855, it had 300,000 non-indigenous residents from across the world — Americans from the East, Chinese immigrants, Mexicans, Chileans, Peruvians, Australians, and Europeans including thousands of Jews. The Native American population, which had survived Spanish colonization, collapsed catastrophically in the decade that followed: from roughly 150,000 in 1848 to under 30,000 by 1870, due to

disease, displacement, and organized violence.

The Seligman brothers — **Jesse and Leopold** — represent the Jewish approach to the Gold Rush in concentrated form. Rather than joining the crowd of miners, they identified what the crowd needed: manufactured goods. They shipped merchandise from New York around Cape Horn to San Francisco, sold it at enormous markup, and used the profits to build **J. & W. Seligman & Company**, one of the most important investment banks of the 19th century. Levi Strauss and Adolph Sutro followed the same logic: find what the miners need, supply it reliably, and invest the proceeds in something lasting.