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THE IMPACT OF THE GOLD RUSH ON  
NATIVE AMERICANS OF CALIFORNIA  
A SOURCE INVESTIGATION

# CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH (1848–1860)

- What do you notice about this map of the location of gold mines in California?
- Each gold dot represents a different gold mine.

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Possible student answers:

- Gold was located throughout California.
- California had more gold mines than students previously thought.
- Most gold mines are in Central and Northern California.

## CALIFORNIA NATIVE LAND

- What do you notice about this map of pre-European-contact languages in California?
- Does anything surprise you?



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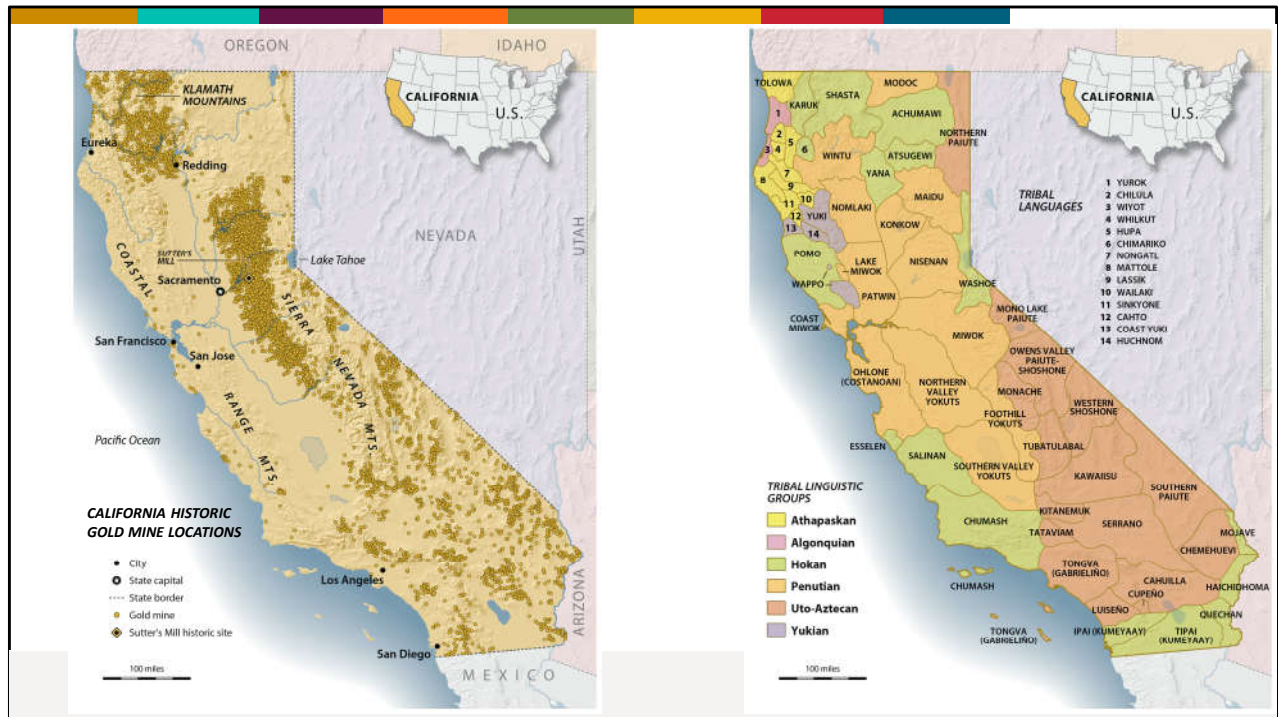
Teacher Notes: This map shows pre-European-contact language groups, not tribal groups. There were many autonomous, sovereign tribes within these different language groups.

Possible student answers:

- California has more Native Americans than students previously thought.
- California was full of Native peoples.
- There are more different Native American tribes than students previously thought.



WHAT QUESTIONS ARISE AS YOU SEE THESE  
TWO MAPS SIDE BY SIDE?



Teacher Notes: We hope that students will notice that all gold mines were on land already home to Native Americans. Encourage students to think about the impact of mining and mass immigration on California Native Americans. It is important to note that sustained violence occurred not just around the gold mines but in agricultural areas as well. California Native Americans living away from the gold mines were not spared.

Possible student answers:

- How did the gold rush impact Native Americans of California?
- What happened to Native American homelands when immigrants to California started mining?
- Did Native Americans find gold first or have mines of their own?
- Did Native Americans mine for gold?
- Did white settlers have a good relationship with California Native Americans?

## PRE-EUROPEAN CONTACT

- Scholars estimate that before the arrival of European colonists, present-day California was home to between 300,000 and 400,000 diverse Native people.
  - Over 100 different languages spoken
  - As many as 500 individual, self-governing societies<sup>1</sup>



*Vue du Presidio de San Francisco*, ca. 1815. Engraving by Louis Choris.

1. Benjamin Madley, *American Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

Teacher Notes: The next few slides provide historical background on European colonization of California before the gold rush.

## SPANISH COLONIZATION

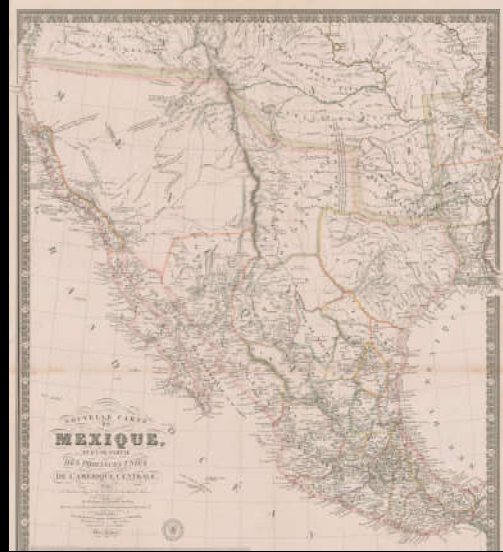
- 1769: Spain sent soldiers and priests to present-day California to build missions, colonize the area, and convert Native peoples to Christianity.
- Disease, starvation, and abuse in the missions caused substantial Native American population decline.



*Danse des Californiens*, ca. 1815. Watercolor drawing by Louis Choris depicting California Native Americans at the San Francisco Mission.

## MEXICAN COLONIZATION

- 1821: Mexico gained independence from Spain and claimed all California territory.
- The Mexican government gave Native Americans Mexican citizenship; yet, under Mexican rule, California's Native population declined further due to disease, harsh forced labor practices, and violence.



*Nouvelle Carte du Mexique...* (Map of Mexico), 1834.



## DISCOVERY OF GOLD

Present-day California came under U.S. control in 1848 (and became a state in 1850).

James Marshall and a group of Nisenan Native Americans discovered gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848. Thousands of people from all over the world headed for California with dreams of striking it rich.

- Non-Native California population in 1848: 15,000
- Non-Native California population in 1850: 165,000<sup>2</sup>



Nisenan man with arrows, ca. 1850. Daguerreotype, photographer unknown.

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Teacher Notes: Many American immigrants to California saw Native Americans as an impediment to progress, a group of people who were in the way. They thought of Native Americans, who had called California home for centuries, as an obstacle to gold, land, and agricultural development. White Americans brought hostile, racist attitudes towards Native Californians with them as they arrived in California. These attitudes quickly turned violent as white Americans clamored for Native land and set about to establish a legal system and culture “organized around the dispossession and murder of California Indians.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 128.

3. *Ibid.*, 2.

## NATIVE POPULATION

Between 1846 and 1870, California's Native American population declined from 150,000 to 30,000.<sup>4</sup>

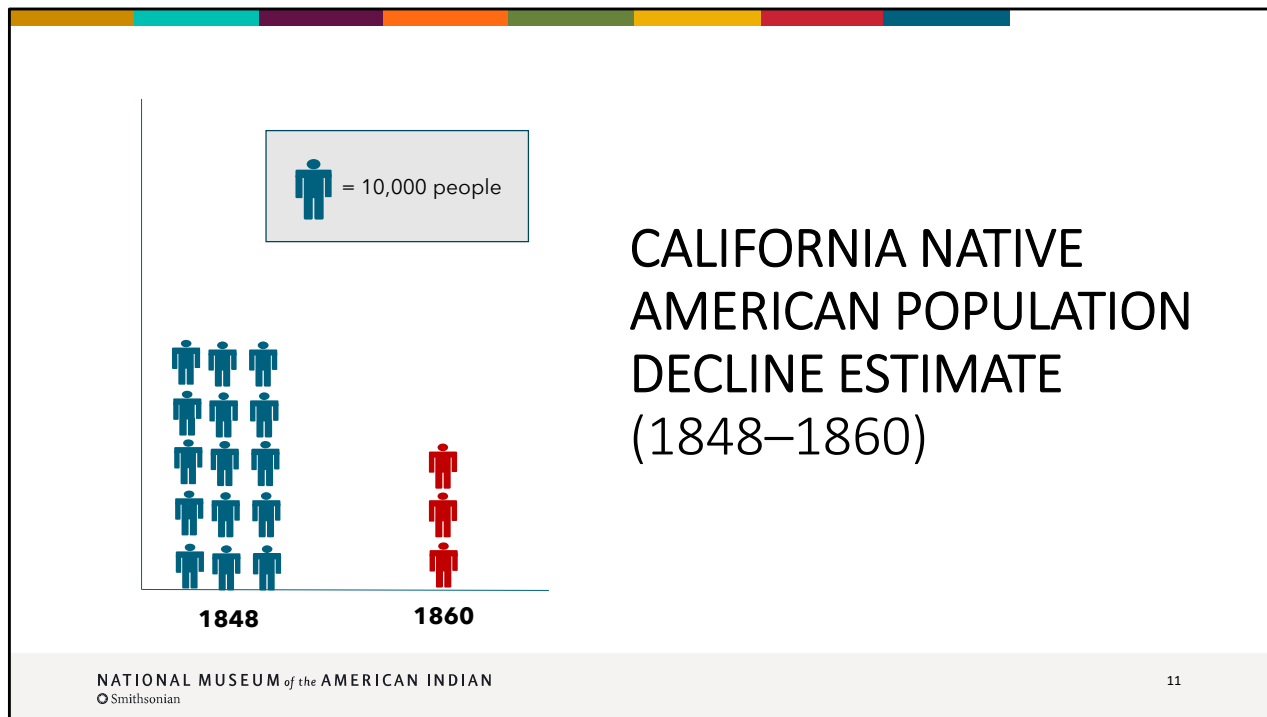
What do you think caused this massive decline?



Portraits of Nisenan brother and sister, 1874. Photographs by Alexander Chase.

#### 4. Madley, *American Genocide*, 347.

Teacher Note: Students often have a difficult time comprehending the scale of large population numbers. To help students visualize the implication of these numbers, please use the graphic on the next slide.



Teacher Notes: This graphic provides a visual representation of the drastic decline of the Native American population of California during the gold rush.

Ask students: After seeing the massive loss of Native American life during the gold rush, what questions do you have? What first comes to mind when you see these quickly declining population numbers? Write responses on the board.

## CENTRAL QUESTION OF TODAY'S LESSON:

### **WAS THIS GENOCIDE?**

*Do American actions against California Native Americans during the gold rush meet the United Nations definition of genocide?*

Teacher Notes: Introduce the central question for the lesson. Teachers could do this by saying, "Given the massive loss of life over a short period of time, as historians we need to ask ourselves: Was this genocide? Today, we will use the United Nations (UN) definition of genocide as well as primary and secondary sources to investigate the following question: *Do American actions against California Native Americans during the Gold Rush meet the UN definition of genocide?*"

To activate prior knowledge, ask students what they think about when they hear the word "genocide." Other options include, "Where have you heard the word genocide before?" or "What do you think genocide means?"

## DEFINITION OF GENOCIDE

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS  
CONVENTION ON THE  
PREVENTION AND  
PUNISHMENT OF THE CRIME  
OF GENOCIDE

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with **intent to destroy**, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

- **Killing** members of the group;
- Causing **serious bodily or mental harm** to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group **conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction** in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to **prevent births** within the group;
- Forcibly **transferring children** of the group to another group.

Teacher Notes: Introduce the UN definition of genocide. Explain to students that using a graphic organizer and the UN definition, they will analyze primary and secondary sources to see if there is evidence of genocide in California during the gold rush.

Important Note: To meet the UN definition of genocide, atrocities do not need to meet all of the criteria. It is important to note that the definition says, “genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy.” It does not say *all* of the following acts. For example, killing members of a group with the intent to destroy a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group would constitute genocide. The other acts do not need to be present as well.

Background on genocide from the UN website: “The word ‘genocide’ was first coined by Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin in 1944 in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. It consists of the Greek prefix *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin suffix *cide*, meaning killing. Lemkin developed the term partly in response to the Nazi policies of systematic murder of Jewish people during the Holocaust, but also in response to previous instances in history of targeted actions aimed at the destruction of particular groups of people. Later on, Raphaël Lemkin led the campaign to have genocide

recognized and codified as an international crime. Genocide was first recognized as a crime under international law in 1946 by the United Nations General Assembly.”  
<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>

## THE UNITED NATIONS DEFINITION OF GENOCIDE HAS TWO PARTS:

- A ***mental element***: the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such
- A ***physical element***, which includes any of the following five acts:
  - Killing members of the group
  - Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
  - Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
  - Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
  - Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

Teacher Notes: Review the elements of genocide, then pass out the graphic organizer.

Please note that the definition of genocide has two parts: a mental element, which focuses on the intent (objective or goal) of the perpetrators; and a physical element, which focuses on the actual destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group and how it is achieved. Both pieces need to be present to meet the UN definition of genocide.

Next, introduce the sources (printed copies or online).

Teacher Tip: Analyze the first source together as a class and fill in the graphic organizer. Then, have students work alone or in pairs to analyze the remaining sources and complete the graphic organizer.

Keep this slide projected as students work.

## IMAGE CREDITS



Slides 2–5: Doug Stevens/Flyboy Graphics

- California Historic Gold Mine Locations: Created using information provided by California Geological Survey
- Tribal Languages: Based on Survey of California and Other Indian Languages Map by Victor Golla (2011)



Slide 6: *Vue du Presidio de San Francisco* [ca. 1815], f G420.K84C6 1822x - Part 3, Plate II, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley



Slide 7: Dance of native Californians at San Francisco de Assis Mission, California, Robert B. Honeyman, Jr. Collection of Early Californian and Western American Pictorial Material, BANC PIC 1963.002.1312-FR, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley



Slide 8: Courtesy, Warren Heckrotte Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries



## IMAGE CREDITS



Slide 9: Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum, Los Angeles; 1346.G.1



Slide 10:

- *Portrait of Captain Tom's Daughter in Partial Native Dress*: Photo courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, NAA 01527700
- *Portrait of Captain Tom's Son in Partial Native Dress*: Photo courtesy of National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, NAA 01527800