

# California Trail

National Historic Trail / Missouri / Kansas / Nebraska /  
Wyoming / Utah / Idaho / Nevada / Oregon / California



## Official Map & Guide - Large Print

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National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

Bureau of Land Management  
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Forest Service  
Department of Agriculture

### Paradise

**"Ho for California!" Free land. Gold. Adventure. Between 1841 and 1869, more than a quarter million people answered this call and crossed the plains and mountains to the "El Dorado" of the West. By 1849 the lure of instant wealth and tales of gold beckoned at the end of the 2,000-mile California Trail. The story of the men, women, and children who traveled overland to the West Coast has become an American epic. Since the late 1700s, the West had held out the promise of boundless opportunity. After Lewis and Clark found a way**

**to the Pacific in 1805, fur traders followed Indian trails up western river valleys and across mountain passes, filling in the blank spaces on early maps that represented unknown country. By the late 1830s, mountain men had explored most of the routes that became overland trails. In 1837 an economic panic swept the United States and gave people already itching to move an additional reason to go west. Throughout the 1840s promoters and trail guides worked hard to create an idyllic picture of the prospects for greater**

fortune and better health open to Americans who made the journey to California. One young emigrant reported that a pamphlet describing a lush California with its

ideal climate and flowers that bloomed all winter “made me just crazy to move out there, for I thought such a country must be a paradise.”

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### Manifest Destiny [caption]

The concept of Manifest Destiny—that it was God’s will and the right of Americans to expand west—is symbolized in John Gast’s painting, *American Progress*, 1872.

Watching “one continual stream” of “honest looking open hearted people” going west in 1846, mountain man James Clyman asked why “so many of all kinds and classes of People should sell out comfortable homes in Missouri and Elsewhere pack up and start across such an immense Barren waste to settle in some new Place of which they have at most so uncertain information.” Clyman’s answer?—“this is the character of my countrymen.”

What was the character of Americans in the 1840s? Many embraced Manifest Destiny, a phrase penned by journalist John O’Sullivan in July 1845 to explain the U.S. government’s thirst for expansion. It was a new term but not a new idea. Since the beginning of the republic, leaders had aggressively claimed land for the United States. Manifest Destiny crystallized the idea that it was God’s will and the rightful destiny of Americans to take over the continent. It became a rallying cry for

### [photo caption]

African American trapper Jim Beckwourth guided wagon trains and blazed a trail across the Sierra Nevada in 1851. Colorado Historical Society

overlanders to head west. Personal motives of the emigrants varied. Some planned to build permanent homes or farms, but many hoped to make their fortunes and return east. One 1846 traveler noted that his companions all “agreed in the one general object, that of bettering their condition,” but individual hopes and dreams “were as various as can well be imagined.” Dreams spurred a diversity of emigrants too: Americans, African Americans, Indians, Canadians, Europeans—people of all ages and backgrounds crossed the plains.

### Why Go West? [caption]

Posters such as this captured El Dorado’s promise of instant wealth. The call of California was irresistible—health, cheap and fertile land, and a paradise without cyclones or blizzards. (Poster, *California Cornucopia of the World*, 1883 poster, advertises 43,795,000 Acres of Government Lands) Huntington Library

The Bidwell-Bartleson party, the first emigrants to go to California, left Missouri in May 1841 with 69 people. At Soda Springs, Idaho, some continued on to Oregon. The others, knowing only “that California lay to the west,” struggled across the north end of the Great Salt Lake Desert. They abandoned their wagons before reaching the Humboldt River, packed their livestock with necessities, and, in November, 39 travelers reached California. In 1844 the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party, traveling the Truckee route, reached the Sierra Nevada in November. Stalled by snow, they left some wagons at Donner Lake and packed onward. In the spring they retrieved their wagons, becoming the first emigrants to take wagons all the way to Sutter’s Fort, California. In 1845 John C. Fremont explored a new route across the

### **Beginnings [caption]**

John Bidwell was 21 when he caught California fever. His 1841 party of men, women, and children was the first of any size to travel overland to the far West. Library of Congress

### **[photo caption]**

Rescuers, intent on saving the children first, separated eight-year-old Patty Reed from her mother. (Patty is shown here as a teen.) California Dept. of Parks and Recreation

James W. Marshall discovered gold on January 24, 1848, at John Sutter’s sawmill on the South Fork of the American River, about 40 miles east of Sutter’s Fort. Fortune hunters from California, Oregon, and Sonora, Mexico, flooded the goldfields by June, but the news spread more slowly across the continent. In December 1848 President James Polk confirmed the discovery in a report to Congress, thus setting the stage for the largest voluntary migration in American history. By the spring of 1849 gold fever was an epidemic. Single men headed west to find wealth and

Great Basin. The next summer promoter Lansford W. Hastings convinced about 80 wagons of late-starting emigrants to try this new cutoff across the Great Salt Lake Desert. The last of them was the ill-fated Donner-Reed party. In 1846 a party from the Willamette Valley opened a southern route to Oregon, now known as the Applegate Trail. Peter Lassen branched south from this route in 1848 to reach his ranch in northern California. Not all early traffic on the California Trail headed west. After marching across the Southwest during the war with Mexico, Mormon Battalion veterans left Sutter’s Fort in 1848 for the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. They opened a wagon road over Carson Pass, south of Lake Tahoe, that became the preferred route for wagon travel during the gold rush.

### **[caption]**

“If we never see each other again, do the best you can, God will take care of us.” Patty Reed

### **[photo caption]**

Delayed by mishaps, the Donner-Reed party didn’t reach the Sierra Nevada until November. Trapped in deep snow, they stayed in makeshift shelters near Donner Lake (above). Nearly half the party died of cold and starvation.

adventure. Married men left families and jobs, hoping to return home in a year or so with enough money to last a lifetime. Thousands of travelers clogged the trail to California. The size of the rush created a host of problems. Almost every blade of grass vanished before the enormous trail herds. Overcrowded campsites and unsanitary conditions contributed to the spread of cholera. Desperation created tension as Indians saw the plants and animals they depended on for food disappear.

The gold rush added new trails to California. Mountain man Jim Beckwourth and surveyor William Nobles opened routes across the Sierra Nevada, while thousands traveled to the goldfields across Mexico

## Gold Rush [photo captions]

Pick axe and pan artifacts, Museum of the Rockies and Miners Creed, Bancroft Library

### [photo caption]

The gold nugget (above left) that James Marshall found at Sutter's Mill in 1848 is about the size of a dime and weighs just over a quarter of an ounce. Smithsonian/National Numismatic Collection

and the Southwest. Cherokee Indians from Arkansas and present-day Oklahoma opened a route through the Rockies, the first that did not use South Pass.

### [photo caption]

In 1852 miners at Spanish Flat, El Dorado County, (above) pose by their "long tom"—a device for separating gold from rock and gravel. California State Library

### [photo caption]

Miner panning for gold, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

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The California Trail eventually offered many ways to get to the West Coast. The network of cutoffs and variants became what is often described as a rope with frayed ends. Most emigrants set out from towns on the Missouri River and followed the Oregon Trail along the Platte and North Platte rivers. The trails became a single cord (more-or-less) between Fort Kearny and South Pass in present-day Wyoming. At Parting of the Ways the strands unwound again. The western end of the rope fanned out at the Humboldt Sink into routes leading to California and the goldfields.

South Pass marked the halfway point on the trail and the end of the long ascent up the Continental Divide. West of South Pass travelers could go several ways: to Idaho and

## Cutoffs and Variants

### [artwork caption]

In the summer of 1848 Mormons working in northern California left behind lush valleys such as the one above and headed east to the Valley of the Great Salt Lake. They opened a new route over the Sierra Nevada at Carson Pass. William Keith 1869. Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California

the Raft River area, where the main branch of the California Trail separated from the Oregon Trail; or to Utah and the settlements of the Latter-day Saints, Mormons, which were popular way stations. After visiting Salt Lake City, most emigrants followed the Salt Lake Cutoff back to the main trail at City of Rocks in present-day Idaho. For wagons the Humboldt River Valley provided the best practical wagon road through the basin-and-range country, but overlanders continually sought easier ways to cross the formidable Sierra Nevada.

By 1860 freight and mail companies, military expeditions, new settlements and trading stations, and thousands of travelers going in both directions transformed the California Trail into a road.

### [artwork caption]

"It was awful coming up those mountains. There were great rocks, waist high, that the wheels had to bump over, and it was all the poor oxen could do to drag the lightened loads." Frances Anne Cooper

Every great human migration seems to have its own catch-phrase, and the forty-niners were no exception. “Seeing the elephant” characterized emigrant encounters with vast plains and barren deserts and the difficulty of surviving the harrowing trek across the western landscape. The expression predated the gold rush and was based on the thrill of seeing these exotic beasts in circuses. For overlanders the elephant symbolized a challenging trip, the adventure of a lifetime. If you had “seen the elephant” you had seen about all there was to see! People had never encountered anything like these prairies, canyons, deserts, and rugged mountains. The deserts of the Great Basin and the barrier of the Sierra Nevada made the California Trail the most difficult of all overland trails. Almost every emigrant recalled seeing the elephant somewhere

along this arduous stretch. For many the encounter came on the Humboldt River—the Humbug, as some called it in disgust—a stream that got more sluggish and alkaline as it bent west and south until it finally disappeared into a shallow lake. Others met the beast on the Fortymile Desert east of today’s Reno, Nevada. The travelers lucky enough to escape the deserts of the Great Basin with animals and outfit intact were almost certain to see the elephant among the steep passes of the Sierra Nevada. Those who turned back often claimed to have seen the elephant’s tail. One emigrant, who turned back after only 700 miles said “he had seen the Elephant and eaten its ears.”

### [caption]

“I think that I may without vanity affirm that I have seen the elephant.” Louisa Clapp

Going west was an expensive proposition. Emigrants needed supplies (food, utensils, stoves, bedding, lanterns, and more), hardware (axes, wagon parts, shovels, rope, other tools), livestock, and money to last for many months. Most travelers used light farm wagons that came to be called prairie schooners because their canvas tops reminded emigrants of sails on a ship. Schooners could carry about a ton of food and supplies, and often travelers packed their belongings into every bit of space. Treasures such as china, heirlooms, and furniture were jettisoned when it became obvious that the load was too heavy.

Overlanders preferred oxen to pull their wagons. They were slower than horses but cheaper, more reliable and powerful, and

### Wagons and Waybills [caption]

J. Goldsborough Bruff quit his government drafting job to join the gold rush. His 1849 to 1851 sketches and diaries chronicled humorous and horrific life on the trail. Utah State Historical Society

harder to steal. Oxen also fared better on prairie grass than did horses and mules, an important consideration because emigrants’ lives could depend on the health of their livestock.

Getting started was one thing—getting safely to California was another. Guidebooks, or “waybills,” became available almost as soon as the trail opened. Most waybills offered practical advice about routes, landmarks, distances, and what equipment and supplies to take. Some, such as *The Emigrants’ Guide, to Oregon and California, 1845*, by promoter and guide Lansford W. Hastings, described California in almost heavenly terms and helped fuel what became “California fever.”

### [artwork caption]

Bruff’s 1849 sketch of dead teams and broken wagons in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert grimly recorded the hardships of overland travel. Huntington Library

## [artwork caption]

Wagons of the Washington City and California Gold Mining Association (led by Bruff) form a circle to corral livestock, near

the Sweetwater River. Bruff painted this image from the top of Independence Rock on July 26, 1849. Huntington Library

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**A**lthough single men made up the majority of early emigrants and forty-niners, women and families played an important role on the trail.

The first major wagon train, the Bidwell-Bartleson party, set out in 1841 with five women and about 10 children. At age 19 Nancy Kelsey (carrying her baby over the Sierra Nevada after the party abandoned its wagons) became the first covered-wagon woman to reach California. Iowans Catherine Haun and her husband caught gold fever in 1849. The Hauns, and about 25 of their neighbors in the wagon party, longed to go west, pick up gold off the ground, and return home to pay off their debts. Catherine wrote in her journal that women and children on the trail “exerted

## [photo caption]

“One day I read a pamphlet written by . . . [promoter] Hastings. . . . We kept talking about California until Father decided to put it to a family vote whether we should go or stay. Father went out with Fremont in 1845 to explore the Far Western country. . . . Father came home in time although we had decided to go anyway.” Frances Anne Cooper

a good influence, as the men did not take such risks, were more alert about the teams and seldom had accidents, [and] more attention was paid to cleanliness and sanitation.” Even “the meals were more regular and better cooked thus preventing much sickness.” Births on the trail were as common as deaths. As one girl recalled, “Three days after my little sister died . . . we stopped for a few hours, and my sister Olivia was born.”

By 1852 about a third of all those crossing the plains were women. Five years later, it was common to find wagon parties made up largely of women and children. These women, as did all emigrants, left familiar homes and endured hardships to find a better life.

## [photo caption]

Life on the California Trail was not all hardship and suffering. Travelers often recounted that they stayed an extra day to have a picnic or to simply “enjoy the grandeur which surrounds us.” National Archives

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**T**he quiet land along the California Trail may have seemed empty, but Indian nations had lived there for more than 10,000 years. Unlike Hollywood stereotypes, Indians were more of a help than a danger to emigrants. In the 1840s fatal confrontations were rare. Travelers entrusted their wagons and families to Indians who guided them across swift rivers and through unfamiliar country. In 1844 Paiute Chief Truckee guided emigrants along the route and the river that they named after him. Stories of Indian massacres far outnumbered actual hostile encounters. “We are continually hearing

of the depredations of the Indians,” wrote Caroline Richardson in 1852, “but we have not seen one yet.” Conflict increased in the 1850s and 1860s as thousands of emigrants and their livestock destroyed Indian food sources. Some Indians tried to collect payment for passage across tribal lands. A few emigrants paid, but most felt little sympathy for Indian claims to the land. Relations deteriorated: Indians killed travelers, and emigrants killed Indians. The violence attracted attention, but it was not the reason most emigrants perished. Thousands died from drownings, accidents, and disease, especially cholera. Many

incidents were the work of criminals called “white Indians,” who were notorious for their brutality. One 1850 traveler concluded that “the savage Indians” were “afraid to come near the road” and “near all the stealing and killing is done by the Whites following the Trains.”

## Indians and Emigrants

### [photo caption]

Paiute Sarah Winnemucca (left) recalled that they would have helped the Donner-Reed Party, “only my people were afraid of them.” Sarah Winnemucca, granddaughter of Chief Truckee, of the Paiute tribe in Northern Nevada, Nevada State Museum

### [artwork caption]

Emigrants saw the West as theirs for the taking. Indians saw the land as their home. For Indians, western settlement led to loss of homeland, broken treaties, and the destruction of their traditional ways of life. Library of Congress

### [photo caption]

In the 1850s Chief Washakie and his Shoshoni tribe guided thousands of emigrants safely through their homelands in present-day western Wyoming. Wyoming State Archives

**T**ravel to California in days, not months! In 1869 the Union Pacific from the east and the Central Pacific from the west connected their rail tracks at Utah’s Promontory Summit. A golden spike tapped symbolically to celebrate the union hailed a new, exciting way to travel the continent, and it signaled the demise of the wagon trails to the West.

Although dust from the wagons settled nearly 150 years ago, the California Trail’s heritage lives on—with the people who love its history and in the railroads, interstate highways, and powerlines that follow the routes of the old emigrant trails. Today, public lands preserve much of the original landscape. Surviving ruts offer silent testimony of the California Trail, but no one tells this epic better than the people who traveled it. Westward travelers shared similar experiences: the drudgery of

walking more than 2,000 miles, the struggle to cross forbidding landscapes, extremes of temperature and weather, shortages of food and water, fear of Indians, accidents, sickness, and death. These emigrants, who saw the elephant and more, remembered the trip west as their life’s greatest adventure. Their experiences—often recorded eloquently in journals, drawings, and letters—inspired American popular culture and influenced art, literature, and the movies. Their stories are part of the legacy of the American West.

## An Enduring Legacy

### [photo captions]

**A Piece of the old tent 1853**

The adventure of a lifetime! These emigrants celebrated their trip to a new homeland with this lasting souvenir. University of Oklahoma

Union Pacific Route Logo, © Union Pacific Railroad

### [caption]

The California National Historic Trail, authorized by Congress in 1992, is administered by the National Park Service and managed by the Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, other federal agencies, state and local governments, and private landowners.

### [photo captions]

California National Historic Trail logo

Chimney Rock, Nebraska © Jeff Gnass

# For More Information

## National Park Service

National Trails System Office  
324 South State St., Suite 200  
Salt Lake City, UT 84111  
[www.nps.gov/cali](http://www.nps.gov/cali)



## Bureau of Land Management

[www.wy.blm.gov/nhtic](http://www.wy.blm.gov/nhtic)  
[www.nv.blm.gov/elko/catrail](http://www.nv.blm.gov/elko/catrail)

## Forest Service

[www.fs.fed.us/r4](http://www.fs.fed.us/r4) [www.fs.fed.us/r5](http://www.fs.fed.us/r5)

## Oregon-California Trails Association

P.O. Box 1019 Independence,  
MO 64051-0519 [www.octa-trails.org](http://www.octa-trails.org)

## Internet Information

NPS Comprehensive Management and Use Plan: [www.nps.gov/cali/parkmgmt/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/cali/parkmgmt/index.htm)

Auto Tour Route Interpretive Guide  
[www.nps.gov/cali/planyourvisit/brochures.htm](http://www.nps.gov/cali/planyourvisit/brochures.htm)