

## Early California History

This page has more California history with an emphasis on transportation to support the Donner Pass Transportation and Communication History Page

Originally populated by a number of small Indian tribes, who originated from people who migrated from Asia across the land bridge which is now the Bering Strait from 10,000 to 20,000 years ago, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese navigator exploring for Spain in 1542, was the first European to see California. No European settlements were established until Captain Gaspar de Portola, the Spanish governor of Baja California, led an expedition north in 1769-70, establishing forts at San Diego and Monterey. A string of 21 missions were founded by the Franciscans during the next 54 years. The El Camino Real, the first major transportation route in California connected these Missions. It was established by Spanish explorers Father Junipero Serra and Governor Don Gaspar de Portola (Note: There was also an El Camino Real "Royal Road" in what is now Texas and New Mexico.)

The first travelers from the eastern United States were trappers and traders. The first recorded crossing of the Sierra Nevada was in 1828 when trapper Jedediah Smith returned from California crossing near the present Ebbetts Pass. Other mountain men such as Kit Carson and Joseph Walker soon followed finding new routes over the mountains. In 1829 the first wagon road to California was the old Spanish Trail connecting Santa Fe Trail to Los Angeles. It was traveled primarily by trading caravans operating from 1829 to 1848 and passed through what is now New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada and California. This 1,120-mile looping pack route was the first major thoroughfare across the Southwest.

White settlers started coming from the eastern United States in the 1840's. In 1839 John Sutter, a pioneer trader, arrived in Monterey via Oregon, Alaska and Hawaii. In 1841 he built a Fort at the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers, what is now Sacramento. John C. Fremont discovered Lake Tahoe from Red Lake Peak near Carson Pass while on a surveying assignment in 1844.

Wagon trains were organized during the great migration starting in 1843. The 2,000 mile journey from Missouri to California took 4-5 months. In 1846 about 1,500 people took the overland route to California. Many preferred the sea route either going around the horn (a 4 month trip) or crossing by land at Panama and taking another ship to San Francisco. The Oregon Trail to the north and Fremont Trail to southern California were originally more popular but the California Trail cutting through Donner Pass gained popularity as a more direct, although more difficult, route to the Gold Country and San Francisco. The ill fated Donner party became snowbound at Donner Lake in the winter of 1846-47 and almost half of the party died.

### Gold to Silver to Farms

The discovery of gold at John Sutter and James Marshall's sawmill on the South Fork of the American River, in Coloma in 1848 started the gold rush. Auburn, Foresthill, Downieville, Sierra City, Nevada City and Placerville were established and grew during this period as over 100,000 people migrated to California. Highway 49, which intersects I-80 at Auburn, cuts through the heart of the Gold Country.

In 1859 the Comstock Lode (silver) was discovered near Virginia City, NV. This set off a second wave of get rich fever. Most settlers did not get rich from gold prospecting. The Homestead Act, passed in 1862, promised free land (160 acres) to settlers who would establish farms and many of the new Californians turned to farming.

California's population had grown from 26,000 in 1848 to 380,000 in 1860. In 1963 California surpassed

New York as the most populous state.

## Railroad

In 1862 congress passed an act to build a transcontinental railroad and funded the project with appropriations for loans and land. The transcontinental railroad had been dreamed about since the 1840's, but controversy over the route, a northern route from St. Louis or a southern route from New Orleans to Southern Calif. The secession of the South from the Union opened the door for the northern route. The Central Pacific Railroad was started in Sacramento in 1863, managed by trustees Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, and Leland Stanford. It connected with the Union Pacific Railroad at Promontory Point Utah on May 10, 1869 to complete the first transcontinental railroad. Railroad towns like Norden, Cisco, Colfax, Dutch Flat, and Truckee. were populated during this period. 25-30,000 Chinese immigrants, called coolies from the Chinese words for rent and muscle, were hired to carve the route out of the granite mountains. They worked in deplorable conditions, for meager wages and had a high injury and death rate.

## Recreation and Vacation Spots

Traffic increased as Lake Tahoe turned into a vacation and recreation area starting in the early 1900's. The Tahoe Tavern Hotel just south of Tahoe City was completed by D.L. Bliss in 1902. This marked the beginning of a period when Tahoe became a posh summer watering hole for the West's wealthy. Primary access was via a rail link from Truckee to Tahoe City. The Tavern stood until 1968. Snow skiing grew in popularity starting in the 1940's. The Donner summit area (Soda Springs and Norden) was the center for skiing until the 60's when it shifted to the North Tahoe ski areas following the 1960 Olympics at Squaw Valley and the completion of I-80.

## TimeLine:

- 100 Million Yrs. - Sierra Nevada Mountains formed
- 20,000 Yrs. - First Native Americans migrated from Asia to N. America.
- 10,000 Yrs. - Lake Tahoe was molded into its present form at the end of the last ice age.
- 1542 - Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, a Portuguese navigator exploring for Spain, was the first European to see California.
- 1770-1824 - Franciscans establish 21 missions in western California.
- 1796 - The first sailing ship from the east reaches California via Cape Horn.
- 1769 - California's first road, El Camino Real was established.
- 1804-5 Lewis and Clark explored routes to the Oregon Territory
- 1812 - Russians establish Fort Ross on the northern coast.
- 1828 First recorded crossing of the Sierra Nevada by trapper Jedediah Smith.
- 1841 - John Sutter builds a Fort at what is now Sacramento.
- 1844 - John C. Fremont was the first white man to see Lake Tahoe, while on a surveying assignment near Carson Pass.
- 1844 - The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Party was the first wagon train over the summit.
- 1846 - First newspaper "The Californian" in Monterey
- 1846-48 Mexican American War results in the acquisition of California and the Southw
- 1846-7 The Donner Party became snowbound.
- 1848 - Gold was discovered near Coloma on Jan. 24, 1848.
- 1850 - California admitted to the Union as the 31st state.
- 1854 - The Flying Cloud sets a world record by sailing from New York to San Francisco in 88 days.
- 1859 - The Comstock Lode (silver) was discovered near Virginia City, NV.
- 1860 - Pony express delivers mail to Sacramento.
- 1861 - Telegraph reaches California.
- 1862 - The Homestead Act promised free land to settlers who would establish farms.

- 1863 - Construction of Central Pacific Railroad begins.
- 1864 - Dutch Flat & Donner Lake Wagon Road (DF&DLWR) completed to help in building the railroad.
- 1865 - Southern Pacific Railroad founded.
- 1869 - Central Pacific Railroad completed - First transcontinental railroad.
- 1873 - The California state legislature outlaws gambling a second time.
- 1896 - Lake Tahoe Wagon Road (Hwy 50 now) becomes the first state highway.
- 1902 - Tahoe Tavern near Tahoe City completed.
- 1909 - DF&DLWR replaced by Sate Highway.
- 1909 - First radio station, SJN in San Jose (Now KCBS)
- 1914 - Lincoln Highway - First transcontinental highway.
- 1914 - First transcontinental telephone line from New York to San Francisco
- 1920's - Transcontinental air mail
- 1926 - Antioch Bridge opens, located on Highway 160
- 1927 - US 40 completed over the same route.
- 1930's - Transcontinental air travel becomes popular
- 1936 - San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge opens.
- 1937 - Golden Gate Bridge opens.
- 1940 - California's first freeway, the 6-mile Arroyo Seco Parkway, now known as the Pasadena Freeway, opens to traffic.
- 1952 - Train becomes snowbound and hundreds are trapped for 6 days.
- 1960 - Winter Olympics held at Squaw Valley.
- 1963 - California passes New York as the most populated state
- 1964 - Last section of interstate 80 over the summit completed.

**Population**

- 1848 - 26,000
- 1860 - 380,000
- 1963 - California passes New York as the most populated state
- 1970 - 19,971,000
- 1980 - 23,668,000
- 1990 - 29,839,000

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See Also: [History of Transportation and Communications over the Sierra Nevada Mouna](#)  
[Gold Rush History at malakoff.com](#) and [Sierra Heritage Magazine](#).

[John Sutter Timeline](#)

[Caltrans History Page](#) and [100 Years of Caltrans Service](#).

[History of gold in Placer County](#).

[San Francisco Timeline](#)

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