

LESSON SIX
“An apron full of gold”
Effects of the California Gold Rush on Families

I. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To understand the impact of the Gold Rush on family relationships across the nation.
- ◆ To comprehend the hardships endured by argonauts and their families.
- ◆ To understand how women contributed to Gold-Rush era California.
- ◆ To understand the importance of private letters as a source of information about historical events such as the Gold Rush.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At first glance we think of the California Gold Rush as a regional event, and as an event predominantly involving men. However, the discovery of gold had a profound effect on the lives of men, women, and children throughout the nation and around the world. For those who journeyed to California, their decision to leave their families for prolonged periods of time raised fundamental questions about their marital and family obligations, and about how those relationships might be hurt by their absence. For those who remained behind to run farms, shops, and small factories, the impact of the Gold Rush was just as profound: how would they cope with fewer hands to help at home. In fact, the absence of thousands of men over long periods of time would create hardships similar to those endured historically when men went to war.

In making the decision to seek their fortune in California, men (and some women) weighed these inevitable hardships against the dream that they would strike it rich in a short period of time. During their absence they hoped to improve their family's social status once and for all, and to alter an often dreary existence characterized by repetitive toil and mounting debts. Perhaps new-found wealth, and the hope of beginning a new life, would compensate for the temporary hardships imposed on their families. Men who were earning \$1 per day as farm laborers and mechanics at home hoped to earn \$16 per day laboring in the gold fields, even if they didn't strike gold themselves. Women could earn even more providing services such as cooking, cleaning, baking pies, and running boarding houses.

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During the winter of 1848–1849, in thousands of homes all over the United States, these same pros and cons were weighed by all family members. More often than not anxious wives, siblings, parents and acquaintances tried to convince future prospectors to abandon their ambitions. Warnings about the dangers to life and limb as well as the temptations of wickedness that awaited the gold miners so far from home raged in their ears. Families debated who would care for aged or infirm mothers and fathers, who would take responsibility for the management of farms and small businesses left unattended, and how the costs of the journey would be defrayed. Before disagreements were resolved, angry words might be exchanged and tears shed. In the end, though, overcoming all obstacles and wearing down all resistance, they made the decision by the scores and the hundreds and the thousands to set off for the land of gold.

With these dilemmas resolved at last, the prospectors now turned their attention to preparing themselves for the journey. Before their departure, many of them also felt compelled to justify their choice yet again, whether to themselves or to others, in the diaries, journals and letters that chronicled their travels. Some chose to emphasize the adventure that lay before them. Some, while acknowledging the allure of fortune for others, professed the more modest goals of providing for their families and assuring their future.

Once they left, frequent letters filled with encouragement, consolation and admonition, sought to preserve the strongest possible links between separated family members. While struggling to attend to their affairs in California, many gold seekers also struggled to retain some part in the conduct of family affairs back home. As months and years slipped by, however, some grew concerned that they might have no place left for them.

Many women, such as Lucy Stoddard Wakefield and Mary Jane Megquier, joined the rush to El Dorado and became involved in the same struggle between success and failure as their male counterparts. While some braved it only vicariously, through the careers of their husbands, many of them were pulled into the fray directly. In Gold Rush-era California, with its emphasis upon manual labor in the gold fields and commerce in the cities and towns, respectable women were relegated to a few roles that mirrored their culturally prescribed responsibilities within the family as homemaker. However, economic opportunities abounded and many Gold Rush women enjoyed their new-found freedom, especially the opportunity to earn their own “aprons full of gold,” as Mary Jane Megquier wrote in her letters home. Women worked as cooks, teachers, laundresses, stage coach drivers, entertainers, merchants, and miners.

The unremitting toil and drudgery so many men and women found in El Dorado and wrote of so frequently in their diaries and journals, whether as prospector or miner, cook or charwoman, convinced some that California was nothing more than a snare and a delusion. Some wrote home complaining about such challenges and lack of success, but the majority put on the bravest front possible, writing home of their undiminished resolution to pursue their golden dreams, even as the months and years dragged on.

However, if white emigrants endured physical and emotional hardships such as broken families, unremitting toil, illness, and bankruptcy, Native Americans, who were residents of California before the whites arrived, suffered a much more brutal side of the Gold Rush. Genocide, disease, and, if they survived, forced labor destroyed their lives and their culture. The Indian population, already reduced from 300,000 to 150,000 by the Spanish intrusion of the past 100 years, dropped to 30,000 by 1870, as hundreds of thousands of emigrants appropriated their land and their labor, or worse, slaughtered them.

Adapted from Peter J. Blodgett, *Land of Golden Dreams: California in the Gold Rush Decade 1848–1858* (San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 1999).

III. MATERIALS

- ★ **Document 1**—Letter from John A. Sutter to San Francisco merchant William Leidesdorff, May 11, 1846
- ★ **Document 2**—“California!” California Emigration Society, Broadside, c. 1849
- ★ **Document 3**—Sarah A. Nichols to Samuel and George Nichols, Apr. 7, 1849
- ★ **Document 4**—Letter from Samuel Nichols to Sarah A. Nichols, Glasgow [Missouri] May 6, 1849
- ★ **Document 5**—Letter from Jonathan Heywood to Jane Heywood, March 8, 1951 (N.B. This document will not appear in the exhibition for the first six months.)
- ★ **Document 6A**—Letter from Lucy Stoddard Wakefield to “Lucius and Rebecca”: Sept. 18–25, 1851. (N.B. This document will only be on display for the first 6 months of the exhibition.)
- ★ **Document 6B**—Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to her daughter Angeleine (Megquier) Gilson, June 30, 1850. (N.B. This document will only be on display for part of the exhibition.)
- ★ **Document 7**—Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to “My dear children,” April 8, 1853. (N.B. Note how Mary Jane Megquier’s second letter contrasts starkly with Lucy Stoddard Wakefield’s letter, and her own earlier letter.)

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IV. LESSON ACTIVITIES

- A. Have students read the “Background Information” section. Hold a classroom discussion about the impact of the Gold Rush on family relationships, both in California and the rest of the country. Don’t forget to discuss the effects on the Indians and Californios, who were residents of California before gold was discovered.
- B. Hold a discussion about the various types of historical documents available to historians seeking information about the Gold Rush, especially information about the lives of anonymous people. Keep in mind that most people leave behind few records of their lives, even today. (The discussion should include: photographs, letters, journals, court records, obituaries, ship manifests, tickets, etc.)
- C. Ask students which social classes were likely to be educated and literate in mid-19th-century America. Who would be able to write letters and journals. Who would not? What kinds of historical records would pre-literate or illiterate people leave behind? (Material artifacts such as tools, clothing, dwellings, furniture, etc.) Pose the historiographical question of whose voices are recorded in written historical records. (Only those who can write.) How do we know about the lives of pre-literate people, such as the Indians? What written sources do we rely on? How authentic are those sources in representing the subject’s voice or point of view? How accurate are those sources in representing the subject’s control over his or her own life?
- D. **Jig-Saw Activity:** Divide students into groups of 5 or 6 and assign each student a different document. (8 documents are provided with the lesson). [NOTE: Due to conservation concerns, **Document 6A** will be removed from the exhibit after six months and replaced with **Document 6B**.]
- E. Ask each student to read his or her document and to fill out a “Document Analysis Worksheet.” (Provided in the front of this packet.)
- F. In their groups, ask each student to share with others the story their document tells, and how the story illuminates the impact of the Gold Rush on the families involved. (“Questions to Consider” are provided with each document.)
- G. Based on their documents, ask each student to write a feature story for a 19th-century newspaper describing the hardships or successes their characters endured while seeking gold.

VI. VOCABULARY

excursion
cholera
damask

let [as in “let the farm”]
tidings

V. EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

A. Comparison of Forty-Niners’ Experiences with Student’s Own Family’s Experiences Coming to California

Ask students to interview their parents or grandparents about reasons for leaving their country, what the journey was like, and the effects on family members who stayed behind. Ask students to create a Venn diagram of the reasons for coming to California in 1849 with their own family’s reasons for emigrating. Ask students to write an essay comparing hardships endured by families of Forty-Niners with hardships endured by their parents or grandparents. What have been the benefits and losses for their families?

B. Preservation of Family Documents

Ask students if their families preserve personal letters and photographs. Students should ask their parents where they keep them, and how they are handed down to the next generation. How can photos, videos, audio tapes, and computers serve to preserve family histories today? How do students preserve their own important documents?

C. Research How Family Documents End up in Museum Collections and Archives

Ask students to find out how their local museum collects and preserves family documents. How does the museum solicit materials from private individuals, and how do individuals seek the museum out for preservation of family documents? How does the museum or archive curator decide what to keep? How does the curator know when a document is particularly valuable? How do family documents become part of the public record?

One example of a successful grass roots effort to document the private lives of community members was an exhibition sponsored by the Photo Friends of the Los Angeles Public Library called “Shades of L.A.” The exhibition featured photographs from family albums that revealed otherwise unrecorded aspects of work, community, ritual, religion, and everyday family life. The 8,000 pictures in the collection document ethnic populations in L.A.

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history. A book, *Shades of L.A.: Pictures From Ethnic Family Albums*, edited by curators Carolyn Kozo and Kathy Kobayashi, was published to accompany the exhibition. To find out more about this project, and to look at some of the photos, consult the following Web site: [<http://www.gii.getty.edu/faces/facelapl.htm>].

**Letter from John A. Sutter to San Francisco
merchant William Leidesdorff
May 11, 1846**

W.A. Leidesdorff, Esq.

Dear Sir:

I received by the Launch yhour favour of the 1st inst with the Articles yhou was so good to send me. I found every thing conform with the bill except the writing paper large format was only 15 quires. Perhaps some body made a Mistake and took it for a whole ream. Please have the Goodness to send me 5 quires more to make the ream complet. I return you the piece of grass linnen which will not answer for this place, for which please give me Credit for the amount of \$25 for the same.

I am very sorry that it layed not in my power to send you the 10 Indians this time, as I had only a few new hands from the mountains here, only in harvest time You can select them, while they are all coming here to work; but by the next Voyage of the Launch I will send you 10 selected Indians or even 12 if you like, which will be of some service to you. I send 6 new hands for Vincente Peralta, and fine Saywers and Shingel makers to Denis Martin. I send two Indian Girls, of which you will take which you like the best, the other is for Mr. Ridley whom I promised one longer as two year's ago. As this shall never be considered as an article of trade I make you a present with this Girl.—I am very much obliged to you for the Copy of the Document of the Prefecto concerning all foreigners, it is thought not much about it here.—Mr. Gillespie has given me all the interesting news, [*letter continues with further details about Gillespie and Frémont's activities in California as well as trade in items such as salmon*].

Questions to consider

1. What were the legal and social relationships between American Indians and white entrepreneurs in the years preceding the Gold Rush?
2. How important was Indian labor to the California economy?
3. What effect would Sutter's proposed transaction have on Indian families?
4. What do you predict will happen to the Indians after the gold discovery in 1848?

“California!”
California Emigration Society, Broadside, c. 1849



**EMIGRATION TO
CALIFORNIA!**

Do you want to go to California? If so, go and join the Company who instead going out the middle of March, or let of April next, under the charge of the California Emigration Society, in a first-rate Clipper Ship. The Society agreeing to find places for all those who wish it upon their arrival in San Francisco. The voyage will probably be made in a few months.—Price of passage will be in the vicinity of

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS!
CHILDREN IN PROPORTION.

A number of families have already engaged passage. A suitable Female Nurse has been provided, who will take charge of Young Ladies and Children. Good Physicians, both male and female go in the Ship. It is hoped a large number of females will go, as Females are getting almost as good wages as males.

FEMALE NURSES get 25 dollars per week and board. SCHOOL TEACHERS 100 dollars per month. GARDENERS 60 dollars per month and board. LABORERS 4 to 5 dollars per day. BRICKLAYERS 6 dollars per day. HOUSEKEEPERS 40 dollars per month. FARMERS 5 dollars per day. SHOEMAKERS 4 dollars per day. Men and Women COOKS 40 to 60 dollars per month and board. MINERS are making from 3 to 12 dollars per day. FEMALE SERVANTS 30 to 50 dollars per month and board. Washing 3 dollars per dozen. MASONS 4 dollars per day. CARPENTERS 5 dollars per day. ENGINEERS 100 dollars per month, and as the quartz Crushing Mills are getting into operation all through the country, Engineers are very scarce. BLACKSMITHS 80 and 100 dollars per month and board.

The above prices are copied from late papers printed in San Francisco, which can be seen at my office. Having views of some 30 Cities throughout the State of California, I shall be happy to see all who will call at the office of the Society, 28 JOY'S BUILDING, WASHINGTON ST., BOSTON, and examine them. Parties residing out of the City, by enclosing a stamp and sending to the office, will receive a circular giving all the particulars of the voyage.

As Agents are wanted in every town and city of the New England States, Postmasters or Merchants acting as such will be allowed a certain commission on every person they get to join the Company. Good references required. For further particulars correspond or call at the

SOCIETY'S OFFICE,
28 Joy's Building, Washington St., Boston, Mass.

Proprietor: J. D. Don, 111 Washington Street, Boston.

Questions to consider

1. What opportunities were available for men and women emigrating to California in 1849?
2. Why were so many jobs available, and at such high pay, by mid-19th century standards?
3. Which gender was likely to earn more by selling its labor? Why?

Letter from Sarah A. Nichols to Samuel and George Nichols

In this extraordinary, moving letter Sarah A. Nichols pleads with her husband and son to return home before reaching California.

Buffalo April 7th 1849

My husband & Son—You know not my feelings I cannot live if you go any futher—Oh return home sell your things & return to me Save oh Save my life I cannot live if You go to California, there is war famine pestilence—murders—& evry evry evil there to await you have mercy on a poor mother oh come home I'm Sick & depres'd—I know not what to do, I think I shall give up the house—I'm not fit for any charge the boys are well—Mrs Clark thinks I will not live long unless you return home—come back Oh come, I fret & weep day & night, a cruel wife was I to let you leave me—remember If You will go on we never meet on earth again I've pray'd but get no relife If you do not return by May 1 I shall take my passage on a line of Steamers & start for san francisco my mind is decided If you will go to the grave, I'll go with you Earth has no charm for me—unless you both will return—I have made arrangements to leave for California soon as you answer this—unless you will return I come to you—I'm almost heartbroken why should we be separated—George my son beg for me oh plead with your father ere it is too late to save a fond wife & mother Mrs Tiffany is dead grief kill'd, I shall soon follow. Answer next mail

Sarah A. Nichols

Questions to consider

1. Why did Sarah Nichols plead with her husband and son to return home?
2. What dangers did prospectors encounter en route to California?

Letter from Samuel Nichols to Sarah A. Nichols

Samuel Nichols' reply to his wife's letter of April 7.

Glasgow [Missouri] May 6 1849

Dear & affectionate wife

After becomeing a littel composed I embrace the first opportunity to communicate to you this sad & afflicting intelligence Our Lovely George is no more but is numbered with the dead I have not Language to express my grief on this sollemn occasion. Oh how I have been smitten and god in his providence has visited us moste bitterly oh remorse remorse my Dear & beloved wife & you my Lovely boys it is for your feelings that I abandon my enterprise & journey & return with the remains of my Lovely Son whose soul is not in the mansions of peace the fortitude he showed to the Last moment was truly great yesterday at four oclock he informed me that he was uneasy in his bowels & had vomited some and he also had a stool & I gave him a part of a tumbler of blackberry syrrup wich you put in our medicine chest soon after I was advised by a gentelman from St. Louis to ive george thirty grains of calonell I did so and he then vomited a great portion of the medicine upp the gentelman form St. Louis had these medicins all prepared by there family physicians & they had every confidence in there collera medicins we then resorted to there medicins and he did not vomit any more but had three free discharges downwards he had very severe cramping through all parts of his body and particularly in arms hands fingers his Legs & feet and those St. Louis friends informed me that he was out of danger how happy I was about two oclock P.M. I remarked to george that I had full confidence that providence would be with us in this trying & critical period george remarked to me he had the same confidence

My Dear & affectionate wife & sons bear up under this sad affliction oh how heavy it will fall but bear it oh bear it Let not grief overwhelm you at this most trying time my Lover and prayers for you my dear wife and sons

Question to consider

1. What were the probabilities of ever reaching California, given the difficulties of the journey?

Letter from Jonathan Heywood to Jane Heywood

In a letter home, Jonathan Heywood acknowledges the physical and emotional hardships that his wife endures because of his absence.

Jackson Creek California
March 8th 1851

Dear Wife

Yours of Nov 21st was received today with the greatest pleasure. I am glad to hear of the enjoyment of your good health and good success in carrying on the farm. This is the third one I have Received from you Since I have been here. I have written three; I have not received anything from Mr. Gawrth as yet. I am sorry to hear that Daniel is sick and has been so unfortunate with his Labor. I hope the next will bring better tidings. If you have not let the farm to any one and if you think best you might buy a yoke of oxen, and furnish seed, providing Daniel should recover from his sickness, and let him work it this year if he wishes to. You must have had a hard task to manage the farm and take care of the children, and built so much as you have. I am almost afraid you are making more improvements and more money for the farm than I could if I were there. I don't expect to know the place when I return. If Zacharias is coming out to Ill or wishes to come I will do what I can to assist him when I return which I hope will not be very long. If he is willing to work on a farm I think there will be no doubt of my furnishing him a place.

Questions to consider

1. What does this letter suggest about the ability of women to manage their farms during the absence of their husbands? How would their traditional role change?
2. What condition does Jonathan Heywood predict the farm will be in when he returns?
3. What adjustments would both he and his wife have to make on his return?

**Letter from Lucy Stoddard Wakefield to “Lucius and Rebecca”
Sept. 18–25, 1851**

... We have few sick people among us. The atmosphere is perfectly healthy no miasmas and no epidemics and a universal free flow of animal spirits...I know of hundreds of people who came here with the intention of remaining for a year or two who have become so attached to the climate that they postpone their return indefinitely and probably will lay their heads upon their last clay pillow in this golden land. I love California and probably now shall make my home and final resting place here. I had never much to return for, I have less now. I have been toiling hard for the last two and a half years and am still doing an almost incredible amount of work averaging about 20 dozen pies weekly with my own hands without any one to fetch as much as a bucket of water. Do you wonder I am not a good correspondent. If Rebecca were to perform the same amount of work one week you would perhaps appreciate what I have to do, and say no more about etiquette in writing. People who have so little to do that they do not know how to dispose of themselves or their time may stand on etiquette, but let them toil till they cannot stand up another minute and till they are actually asleep at their work, and they cannot well appreciate the importance of etiquette. Yes I am always thankful whenever my friends will do me the favor to write me. You ask my advice (probably a joke) about Buella's coming to California. There is no way for a woman to make money except by hard work of some sort. If Buella were willing to put her hands to it I have no doubt that she might take home over and above her expenses coming, while here, and going home, \$3000 in the years but they would be three years of toil, hardship, and in some respects severe privation, though if she came over the plains she would be prepared to consider comforts. If it is a husband she would be after she could find them with any amount of fortune as thick as toads after a rain, pardon the vulgarity of my comparison. A gentleman friend (by the way, very good looking, pretty extensive mustaches, and a pretty good [illegible] of the "rhino" proposes himself for a pig in a poke.

Questions to consider

1. Why do you suppose Lucy Stoddard Wakefield wanted to remain in California permanently, in spite of the endless toil she faced?
2. How might Gold-Rush California provide more economic independence for a divorcée such as Stoddard Wakefield than she would find elsewhere in the country?

Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to Angeleine (Megquier) Gilson
June 30, 1850

While her husband pursued his medical practice, Mary Jane Megquier set up her boarding house only months after her June 1849 arrival in San Francisco. By the summer of 1850, with the boarding house running full tilt, she found herself swamped by the chores it demanded, as she described them to her daughter.

I should like to give you an account of my work if I could do it justice. We have a store the size of the one we had in Winthrop, in the morning the boy gets up and makes a fire by seven o'clock when I get up and make the coffee then I make the biscuit, then I fry the potatoes then broil three pounds of steak, and as much liver, while the woman is sweeping and setting the table, at eight the bell rings and they are eating until nine. I do not sit until they are nearly all done I try to keep the food warm and in shape as we put it on in small quantities after breakfast I bake six loaves of bread (not very big) then four pies, or a pudding then we have lamb, for which we have paid nine dollars a quarter, beef, and pork baked, turnips, and beets, potatoes, radishes, sallads, and that everlasting soup, every day dine at two, for tea we have has, cold meat bread and butter sauce and some kind of cake and I have cooked every mouthful that has been eaten excepting one day and a half that we were on a steamboat excursion I make six beds every day and do the washing and ironing you must think that I am very busy and when I dance all night I am obliged to trot all day and if I had not the constitution of six horses I should {have} been dead long ago but I am going to give up in the fall whether or no as I am sick and tired of work, The woman washes the dishes and carpets which have to be washed every day and then the house looks like a pig pen it is so dusty, Mr. Richmond received the picture of his lady love last steamer, give an abundance of love to all, and tell Mrs. True I shall answer her met mail if possible am under everlasting obligation. *Write, Write, Write.*

Question to consider

1. How did Mary Jane Megquier describe her life of endless toil?

**Letter from Mary Jane Megquier to “My dear children”
April 8, 1853**

Mary Jane Megquier emigrated with her husband from Maine, arriving in San Francisco in June 1849. She watched San Francisco explode into a cosmopolitan city where demand for goods was high and where luxury items such as ice cream and fancy silk dresses were commonplace.

... Here you can step out of your house and see the whole world spread out before you in every shape and form. Your ears are filled with the most delightful music your eyes are dazzled with everything that is beautiful the streets are crowded the whole city are in the street We have near us a splendid ice cream saloon which surpasses anything I have seen in the states, very large windows with magnificent buff silk damask curtains with lace like those that Newhall Sturtevant boasts so much of two large rooms are connected by an arch hung with the same material, marble tables, floors and counters and as light as day at all hours of the night, the homeliest man in the city treated me to an ice cream there a few nighs since at one dollar a glass.

... I was at Mrs Calkin to day, all well, she and Mrs Davis are making dresses all the while, I presume they have twenty five in a year a silk dress lasts but two months at the best. I know not why it is, but every thing goes to destruction in a very short time here, I wish you could be here a short time it is so pleasant to have a plenty of money we cannot seem to get a thousand together but if I want ten or twenty it is always ready that I want five dollars to go to P[ortland], it will be hard work to raise it. I have been making me a brown silk, and next week I am going to make me a black one, to day I have been making a pink thibet sack trimmed with velvet ribbon but I am sure I do not know when I will wear it. I shall send you some pieces of them by Mr. Adams who has promised to take a package for me, he goes in May I had a line from Artie one page just the same number of lines and sentences in every one, Give abundance of love to him and Charlie, Bettie, Johny and all the Aunts, cousins and the Turner folds,

Mother

Questions to consider

1. In the few short years between 1849, when San Francisco was a “tent city,” and 1853, when Mary Jane Megquier wrote this letter, how had San Francisco changed?
2. According to Mary Jane Megquier, how did the delights of San Francisco compare with those of Maine?
3. How do you imagine Mary Jane’s children felt about Mary’s life in California?