



How can visuals and manuscripts help us understand the obstacles and hardships early Americans may have endured on the journey to California?

The Three Main Routes to California During the Gold Rush

Background Information

The Gold Rush began in 1848 when James Marshall discovered gold in the American River at John Sutter's Fort. The discovery was made official by President James K. Polk in December, 1848. This spurred the migration of many gold seekers, or prospectors, to the west. Prospectors and immigrants took one of the three main routes to California during this time.

The sea voyage around Cape Horn took five to eight months. Voyagers did not enjoy the ship's tiny rooms, monstrous waves, gusts of wind, and frigid temperatures. The most dangerous part was going through the Strait of Magellan because of its narrowness and unpredictable currents. The journey was also expensive.

The overland trek when travelling by covered wagon or stagecoach took equally as long as the Cape Horn voyage. Two popular trails were the California Trail and Santa Fe Trail, which began in Independence and St. Joseph, Missouri, respectively. Travelers could bring their families but often faced difficulties with rivers, food shortages, and attacks by Natives.

The route through the Isthmus of Panama took less time, only two to three months, but involved multiple stages. Travelers would take a steam ship to Chagres, travel up the Chagres River by canoe, then down to the Pacific Ocean by mule or foot. This route involved high risk of accidents, fever, snakebites, alligator attacks, drowning, robbery, and murder.

For those that could afford it, the Vanderbilt Line and Pacific Mail Steamship provided relatively safe passage from New York to Chagres, and from Panama City on the Pacific Coast to San Francisco. A railroad was completed in 1855 across the isthmus, which made California even more accessible. In 1869 the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroad companies completed the first railroad to connect the East Coast with the West Coast. After the completion, it took less than a week's journey from the East Coast to California.

Lesson Description

In this lesson, students will examine primary source documents relating to the three main routes to California. Students will then write a journal entry from the perspective of a prospector or prospector's family member traveling to California during the Gold Rush era.

Grade Range: 4

Time to complete lesson: 1.5—2 hours

Resources needed:

- Huntington primary source images and documents
- Library of Congress primary source images and documents
- Chart paper or whiteboard
- Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool

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By the end of this lesson, students will **know:**

- The three main routes to California and the difficulties and obstacles travelers may have faced on their journeys.

By the end of this lesson, students will **be able to:**

- Analyze various primary source images or written documents using an inquiry framework
- Work in teams to analyze and discuss a variety of images depicting the three main routes to California and discuss hardships and obstacles the travelers may have endured.
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a traveler making his or her way to California via one of the three routes.

Supported Standards

History-Social Science Content Standards 4.3.2: Compare how and why people traveled to California and the routes they traveled.





Lesson

Introduction (5-10 minutes):

1. *What is a primary source?* Have students discuss with partners. Teach students the “definition” of a primary source, or review if previously taught.
2. Tell students they will be looking at primary source images and documents which were made during the time of the California Gold Rush. Questions for students: *When did the Gold Rush begin? (1848). How might have these prospectors, or gold seekers, traveled to California to look for gold?*
3. Share the three main routes with students: 1) Overland Route 2) By sea- across the Isthmus of Panama 3) By sea- around Cape Horn in South America. Write these routes on the board for reference. Using a map, briefly show and discuss each of these routes.

Activity #1: Guided Practice Analyzing a Primary Source Image of the Overland Route, “Ferriage of the Platte, above the mouth at Deer Ck” (15-20 minutes)

1. Share Ferriage of the Platte, above the mouth at Deer Ck (Material #1) with students
2. Set up chart paper with three columns drawn out and the headings: Observe- *What are you noticing?* Reflect- *What are you thinking?* Question- *What are you wondering?*
3. Students look silently at the image for 1-3 minutes.
4. Students discuss with a partner the question: *What are you noticing?* Invite students to share. Record in the Observe column.
5. Students discuss with a partner the question: *What are you thinking? What hardships or obstacles might these travelers be facing?* Invite students to share. Record in the Reflect column.
6. Students discuss with a partner the question: *What are you wondering?* Invite students to share. Record in the Question column.
7. Provide students the following prompt: “Suppose you were to write a journal entry from the perspective of one of these men on the ferry, attempting to cross the river with their



covered wagon and animals. What might you include in that journal entry?"

8. Have students discuss with their partners then share with the class.
9. Back at their tables, students will be given a piece of paper that looks just like the Observe/Reflect/Question chart. They will also have several primary source images or written documents in a folder at their tables. Their first job is to look at or read the primary sources with their table groups.

Activity #2: Analyze Primary Source Documents in Groups Depicting Routes to California (25-35 minutes):

1. Split students into groups of three to four and provide each student (or each group) with one of the three Primary Source Packets (Materials #3-5) and a Primary Source Analysis Tool (Material #2)
2. Students will look at the images or read the documents.
3. Have each group member share with their group what they are observing or noticing in the documents.
4. Once each student has shared, have students record their thoughts (or their group's thoughts) in the first column of the Primary Source Analysis Tool under "Observe."
5. Prompt students to figure out what route their primary sources portray and think about what kind of hardships or obstacles these travelers may have been facing.
6. Have each group member share their thoughts on what they see in the primary sources and their thought process behind that with their group.
7. Once each student has shared, have students record their thoughts (or their group's thoughts) in the second column of the Primary Source Analysis Tool under "Reflect."
8. Have each group member share questions they still have.
9. Once each student has shared, have students record their questions (or their group's questions) in the second column of the Primary Source Analysis Tool under "Question."
10. Have students write at the top of your paper what route they think their documents are



portraying.

Activity #3: Whole Class Discussion of Primary Source Documents and Routes to California (15-20 minutes):

1. Invite groups that think they had the overland route to share their primary sources with the class.
2. Have students share why they think these images portray an overland route and what hardships the travelers may have endured. Invite students to share any questions they may have.
3. Reveal the correct route to California that the documents portray and the year it was created if the information is not on the document itself. Talk about some of the hardships groups of travelers may have faced on this route to California.
4. Repeat steps 1-3 for groups that think they had the Panama route.
5. Repeat steps 1-3 for groups that think they had the Cape Horn route.

Alternative Execution: The class can view and interpret each set of images and documents all together, as separate lessons. For example, display or give each group the same images for one of the routes to California. Analyze the documents as a class and complete individual or one class Primary Source Analysis worksheet. In the next lesson, repeat the process for a different route to California. Repeat the same process again for the third route.

Activity #4 (Extension): Write a Journal Entry (20+ minutes):

1. Have students imagine they are one of these travelers making your way to California to find gold and strike it rich. Ask students: *What might you include in your travel journal?*
2. Invite students to share some ideas to include in a journal entry.
3. Have students journal from the perspective of a gold rush traveler.
4. Have students share their writing with a partner.
5. Invite any students to share an excerpt of their journal entry aloud.



6. Optional: Continue with this writing assignment by providing time for peer editing and revising or teacher editing. Have students write a final draft. Display students' journal entries in the classroom with the primary source images.

Differentiation: List some ideas, necessary components, sentence frames, or question starters on the board.

Conclusion:

1. Have students discuss the following question with a partner: *What did you learn by looking at primary source documents and images?*



Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Meaning</u>	<u>Variations to Use (and Encourage Students to Use)</u>	<u>Notes</u>
primary source	Something created during the time we are studying	First-hand information	
analyze	Examine or study something in detail	Look closely, study	
prospectors	A person who searches for gold	Gold-seeker Argonauts	
isthmus	A narrow strip of land with sea on either side, forming a link between two larger areas of land		
overland route	A transportation route on land	California Trail, Santa Fe Trail	
Cape Horn	The southernmost tip of South America located in Chile's Tierra del Fuego archipelago		The waters around Cape Horn are hazardous owing to strong winds, large waves, strong currents, and icebergs. Many sailors have died attempting to



Materials

Material #1: Ferriage of the Platte, above the mouth at Deer Ck. (Bruff, 1849) <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5010/rec/166>

Material #2: Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool (PDF):

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Primary_Source_Analysis_Tool.pdf

Material #3: Overland Route Primary Sources *(Make enough copies for 1/3 of your class and put in folders)*

- a. Map of the United States, the British Provinces, Mexico &c showing the routes of the U.S. Mail steam packets to California, and a plan of the gold region.

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/4036/rec/23>

- b. Rock Avenue near head of Red Spring Creek (Bruff)

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5012/rec/8>

- c. Scene on the Emigrant Trail near Settlements

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5087/rec/51>

- d. Bruff's Camp

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5148/rec/84>

- e. Straggling Emigrants Fall of 1849

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/4958/rec/143>

- f. Tremendous Hailstorm on a mountain after leaving the Platte River

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/4969/rec/151>

- g. Difficult and dangerous passage of salt creek bridge

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/4973/rec/251>

Material #4: Around Cape Horn Primary Sources_ *(Make enough copies for 1/3 of your class and put in folders)*

- a. Map of the United States, the British Provinces, Mexico &c showing the routes of the U.S. Mail steam packets to California, and a plan of the gold region.

<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/4036/rec/23>



- b. Map of the Gold Regions of California: showing the routes via Chagres and Panama, Cape Horn
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/3734/rec/32>
- c. Excerpts from Pages 11-25 of “Life by land and sea” by Prentice Mulford <http://cdn.loc.gov//service/gdc/calbk/o50.pdf>
- d. A squall off Cape Horn <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3b51173/>
- e. “Rounding Cape Horn” chapter from “Rounding Cape Horn, and other sea stories” images 265- 278 <https://www.loc.gov/resource/dcmsiabooks.roundingcapehornoomcro/?sp=265&r=-0.691,0.176,2.383,1.574,0>
- f. Among the Icebergs <https://www.loc.gov/resource/dcmsiabooks.roundingcapehornoomcro/?sp=285&r=-0.167,-0.249,1.249,1.889,270>
- g. New York clipper ship “Challenge” <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3b50756/>
- h. A Clipper ship in a hurricane <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3b51109/>
- i. Clipper ship Tornado struck by a whirlwind <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a00994/>

Material #5: Isthmus of Panama Route Primary Sources *(Make enough copies for 1/3 of your class and put in folders)*

- a. Map of the Gold Regions of California: showing the routes via Chagres and Panama, Cape Horn
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/3734/rec/32>
- b. Crossing the Isthmus of Panama (Bruff)
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5215/rec/3>
- c. Letters of Hiram D. Pierce (traveled to CA via steamship and Isthmus of Panama to mine for gold in Gold Rush)
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p16003coll15/id/380/rec/16>
- d. Chagres, from the Anchorage (Bruff)
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/5217/rec/138>
- e. Steam ship Golden Gate: U.S Mail Carrier <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p9539coll1/id/11309/rec/4>
- f. Three years in California Chapter 1 excerpts <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p9539coll1/id/11309/rec/4>