

DISCOVER AMERICA

Teacher Guide



Striking Gold: The Impact and Legacy of the American Gold Rush

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Key Themes

- Dreams of Prosperity
- Persistence and Perseverance
- The Journey West
- Economic Boom and Bust
- Global Impact

Core Values

- Community
- Life
- Liberty



Learning Objectives

Students will be able to

- Recognize gold and understand why it was so valuable to people during the Gold Rush.
- Identify who the "49ers" were and why they traveled so far to reach California.
- Explain what life was like for miners during the Gold Rush, including the tools they used and the challenges they faced.
- Identify how the Gold Rush changed California, such as the rapid growth of towns.

Key Terms

- 0 1 **49ers:** the nickname for those who flocked to northern California in 1849 hoping to take advantage of the Gold Rush.
- 0 2 **gold miner:** someone who digs or sifts through dirt to find gold, a shiny and valuable metal.
- 0 3 **Gold Rush:** a time period when many people moved to California between 1848 and 1855, seeking their fortunes by searching for gold.
- 0 4 **merchant:** someone who buys goods and sells them for a profit.
- 0 5 **sawmill:** a place where big logs are cut into boards and planks for building things.
- 0 6 **waterwheel:** a type of device that takes advantage of flowing or falling water to generate power by using a set of paddles mounted around a wheel.

Introduction

TELL Students

Today, we are going to go on an exciting journey. But guess what? We are not taking a car, a bus, or even an airplane. We are going to use our imaginations!

ASK Students

Are you ready?

TELL Students

A long time ago, people heard that there was something very special hiding in the rivers of California.

ASK Students

Do you know what it was?

TELL Students

That is right! It was gold! Gold is shiny and valuable, and people thought if they found it, they could buy a lot of nice things. So, they packed up their things and went on a long trip to California to try to find it. But finding gold was not easy. They had to dig, sift through sand, and sometimes even get a little bit dirty. Does that sound fun to you? Now, let's pretend we are gold miners! A **gold miner** is someone who digs or sifts through dirt to find gold, a shiny and valuable metal. **[Reference Gold Miner Image]** We are going to go on our own Gold Rush adventure right here in our classroom. But first, we need to get ready. First, we need to pack our bags. Everyone, pretend to put on your backpack.

ASK Students

What should we bring?

TELL Students

Maybe we should pack a shovel, a pan, and some food. Let's pretend to pack them all in our backpack! [Mimic packing and have the students do the same.] Now, let's pretend to walk to California. It is a long way! Let's march, march, march!

Introduction

TELL Students (continued)

[Lead the students in a short walk around the classroom.] We made it to California! Now it is time to find some gold. Let's pick up our pans and start looking in the river. Can you pretend to scoop up some sand and shake your pan? [Show students how to mimic panning for gold by scooping and shaking an imaginary pan.] Look! I see something shiny!

ASK Students

Did you find some gold?

TELL Students

Hold up your gold for everyone to see! [Encourage the students to pretend they found gold and show it to their classmates.] Wow! We found so much gold! But remember, even though finding gold was exciting, it was also a lot of hard work. People who joined the Gold Rush had to be very strong and brave, just like all of you today. The **Gold Rush** was a time period when many people moved to California between 1848 and 1855, seeking their fortunes by searching for gold. Now, let's sit in a circle and talk about what we found.

ASK Students

Was it fun to pretend to look for gold? What do you think people did with the gold they found? [Allow a brief discussion and encourage the students to share their thoughts.]

TELL Students

Great job, everyone! You are now an official gold miner like John Sutter! **[Reference John Sutter.]** In 1834, John Sutter left Switzerland and moved to the United States. He had big dreams! By 1839, he found his way to California and decided to become a Mexican citizen to get a large piece of land. He had a vision of turning this land into a new settlement he wanted to call Nueva Helvetia, which means "New Switzerland."

ASK Students

Why do you think John Sutter named his new settlement "Nueva Helvetia," which means "New Switzerland"? What does this tell us about how he felt about his new land and his homeland?

Introduction

TELL Students 📷 🔑

John Sutter named his new settlement "Nueva Helvetia," or "New Switzerland," because he wanted to bring a piece of his homeland, Switzerland, to his new life in California. **[Reference California Image]** It also suggests that he saw his new land as a place of opportunity, where he could start fresh and build a prosperous future. To help build his dream, Sutter hired a carpenter named James Marshall to construct a sawmill in Coloma, along the south fork of the American River. **[Reference James Marshall Image]** A **sawmill** is a place where big logs are cut into boards and planks for building things. They finished building the sawmill in January 1848, but they needed more water power to run it, so they started to deepen the stream.

ASK Students

Why do you think John Sutter and James Marshall needed to deepen the stream to run the sawmill, and what might have happened if they didn't make the stream deeper?

TELL Students 📷 🔑

John Sutter and James Marshall needed to deepen the stream to run the sawmill because a deeper stream could provide more water flow. This was necessary to have enough water power to operate the sawmill's machinery. Sawmills require a lot of power to cut through large logs, and in the 1840s, this power typically came from waterwheels. A waterwheel needs a strong, steady flow of water to turn efficiently and consistently. A **waterwheel** is a type of device that takes advantage of flowing or falling water to generate power by using a set of paddles mounted around a wheel.

[Reference Waterwheel Image] On January 24, while checking on things, Marshall saw something shiny in the river. It sparkled in the sunlight and caught his eye — little did he know, this discovery was about to start a huge event in history! Let's watch another episode of Star Spangled Adventures to learn more!

WATCH 📺

Star Spangled Adventures Cartoon Ep. 33: The Gold Rush



Lesson

TELL Students

One day, James Marshall found shiny gold while building a sawmill for John Sutter. They tried to keep this a secret because they knew it was a very big discovery that could make them a lot of money. But soon, people started talking about the gold, and the news spread!

ASK Students

Why do you think James Marshall and John Sutter initially wanted to keep the discovery of gold a secret?

TELL Students

James Marshall and John Sutter wanted to keep the discovery of gold a secret because they knew it was a very big find that could make them a lot of money. If the news about the gold spread, they feared that many people would rush to the area to look for gold. This could cause chaos, make it hard for them to control the land, and potentially prevent them from collecting as much gold for themselves. By keeping it a secret, they hoped to have more time to gather as much gold as possible before others came looking for it. The first people to hear about the gold were in San Francisco. At first, not many believed the news until a man named Sam Brannan showed everyone real gold from the mill. **[Reference Sam Brannan Image]** That summer, almost everyone in San Francisco, and soon after, a lot of people in California, left their homes and jobs to find gold. Even the local newspaper stopped printing because everyone went to look for gold!

ASK Students

What do you think would have happened if Sam Brannan had not shown the gold to the people in San Francisco? How might that have changed the way news of the gold spread?

TELL Students

If Sam Brannan had not shown the gold to the people in San Francisco, it is likely that many people would have continued to doubt the truth of the gold discovery. **[Reference Gold Discovery Image]** This would have given Marshall and Sutter more time to collect gold quietly, but eventually, the news would likely have spread, perhaps through other channels or after more people independently discovered gold.

Lesson

TELL Students (continued)

Back in those days, there weren't any phones or computers, so news traveled very slowly. People from nearby places like Oregon and Mexico, and even as far as China and Peru, heard about the gold and came to California to see if they could find some too.

ASK Students

Why do you think people from places like China and Peru came a long way to California to find gold?

TELL Students

People from places like China and Peru came all the way to California to find gold because they heard stories about how much gold was there and thought they could find some too. They wanted to get gold because it was very valuable and could help them buy things they needed or wanted.

[Reference Gold Image] Even though it was a long and hard journey, the chance to find gold and maybe become rich was a big reason for them to come. When they finally arrived in California, they tried their best to find gold, hoping it would change their lives for the better. Then, President James K. Polk talked about gold in a speech in December 1848. **[Reference James Polk Image]** He said that there was so much gold in California that it was hard to believe! He had seen reports from trusted people who saw the gold with their own eyes.

ASK Students

Why do you think people traveled to California to look for gold?

TELL Students

People traveled all the way to California because they heard exciting stories about a lot of gold being there. They thought that if they could find some gold, they could become rich and buy things they needed or wanted, like food, clothes, or even a new house. The journey was very long and hard, but the chance to find gold and improve their lives was worth it to them. They hoped that finding gold would help them and their families have a better future. In the spring of 1849, thousands of people, mostly men, traveled across mountains and oceans to California to try to get rich quickly. These gold seekers were called "49ers."

Lesson

TELL Students (continued)

They left everything behind and took big risks, hoping to find gold. The “**49ers**” is the nickname for those who flocked to northern California in 1849 hoping to take advantage of the Gold Rush.

ASK Students

Why did people want to find gold?

TELL Students

People wanted to find gold because they heard it could make them very rich. They imagined using the gold to buy things they needed or wanted, like food, clothes, or even houses. The stories of a lot of gold in California made them excited and hopeful, so they traveled long distances, even across mountains and oceans, to try and find this treasure. They were called “49ers” because so many of them came in the year 1849. **[Reference 49ers Image]** These adventurers were willing to take big risks and leave everything behind because they believed finding gold could give them a much better life.

ASK Students

Why did the “49ers” go to California to find gold?

TELL Students

The “49ers” went to California to find gold because they heard stories about how much gold was there and thought they could become very rich. They wanted to use the gold to buy things they needed, like food and clothes, or even to buy houses. They were excited and hopeful that finding gold would help them have a much better life. So, they traveled long distances, sometimes over mountains or across oceans, taking big risks and leaving their homes behind, all because they believed that finding gold would change their lives for the better. But, panning for gold often wasn’t the quick path to wealth many people hoped for. Success mostly depended on luck, despite the hard and exhausting work involved. Life in the mining camps was tough. Miners dealt with poor food, inadequate housing, and unsanitary conditions. **[Reference Mining Camp Image]**

Lesson

ASK Students

What challenges did the “49ers” face when they arrived in California to search for gold, and how did these challenges differ from their expectations?

TELL Students

These challenges were very different from what many of the “49ers” expected. They thought they would find plenty of gold and have a better life, but the reality was hard work with often little reward, tough living conditions, and a lot of risks. As more people arrived in California, mining towns sprang up. While a few men did strike it rich by finding gold, many others found their fortune by providing services to the miners. Samuel Brannan, a merchant and newspaper publisher, became California’s first millionaire not from mining gold, but from selling goods to miners. A **merchant** is someone who buys goods and sells them for a profit. Other successful entrepreneurs included Levi Strauss, who became famous for his durable blue jeans; Domingo Ghirardelli, who sold chocolate and coffee; and Leland Stanford, who made a fortune from his grocery business. **[Reference Brannan, Strauss, Ghirardelli, Stanford Images]** These businessmen made their wealth by “mining the miners” — profiting from the needs of those who came looking for gold.

ASK Students

How did Samuel Brannan become rich without finding gold?

TELL Students

Samuel Brannan became rich during the Gold Rush not by finding gold himself, but by selling goods to the miners who were looking for gold. He was a merchant, which means he sold things that people needed to buy. Brannan knew that all the miners coming to California would need tools, food, and other supplies, so he set up a store to sell these items. As more and more miners arrived hoping to find gold, they all needed supplies, and Brannan’s business thrived. He made a lot of money because he was selling what the miners needed to try their luck at finding gold. This smart approach to business made him California’s first millionaire.

Lesson

ASK Students

What did Samuel Brannan sell to the miners to become rich?

TELL Students 📷

Samuel Brannan became rich during the Gold Rush by selling necessary items like tools, food, and other supplies to the miners who came to California hoping to find gold. He set up a store where the miners could buy what they needed to mine for gold. As more miners arrived, they all needed these essential supplies, and Brannan's business flourished. **[Reference Merchants Image]** His smart business strategy allowed him to profit from the miners' needs. Thanks to the Gold Rush, California's population grew very quickly. Between 1849 and 1855, about 300,000 people from all around the world came to California. It was an exciting time, but it was also hard for many people. Let's watch two exciting Learn More with Liberty videos to learn more!

WATCH 🎬

Learn More With Liberty: The Science of Gold: What Makes Gold So Valuable?

Learn More With Liberty: Life of a 49er: A Day in the Life





Objective

To teach first graders about the economic aspects of the Gold Rush and the concept of trading goods in a mining town setting, enhancing their understanding of value, negotiation, and social interactions.

Materials Needed

- Play money or tokens
- Various "goods" such as small bags of beans (representing gold), small toys, pencils, erasers, stickers (representing supplies needed in a mining camp)
- Tables or areas designated as "stores" or "market stalls"
- Aprons or hats for storekeepers
- Shopping bags or baskets for the miners

Setup

- Set up a mini "Gold Rush Town Market" in the classroom with different stations. Each station represents a store where different items are sold, such as food, mining tools, and clothing.

Introduction

- Explain that during the Gold Rush, miners had to buy supplies with the gold they found. Discuss the types of goods miners might need and the concept of using gold to trade for these items.

Role Assignment

- Assign roles to the students, alternating between being a storekeeper and a miner. Storekeepers will sell the items, and miners will buy them with their gold (beans).

Market Activity

- Give miners a set amount of gold (beans) and a list of items they need to purchase from the market.
- Miners visit the different market stalls to purchase their supplies using their gold. They need to negotiate and decide what's most important to buy with the limited gold they have.
- Storekeepers manage their stalls, take gold in exchange for goods, and make change if necessary.



Role Swap

- Halfway through the activity, allow students to swap roles, giving everyone a chance to be both a miner and a storekeeper.

Discussion

- After the market closes, gather students and discuss what it was like to be a miner needing supplies and a storekeeper selling goods. Talk about the importance of making wise choices when spending their gold and how people might have felt during the Gold Rush with limited resources.

Reflection

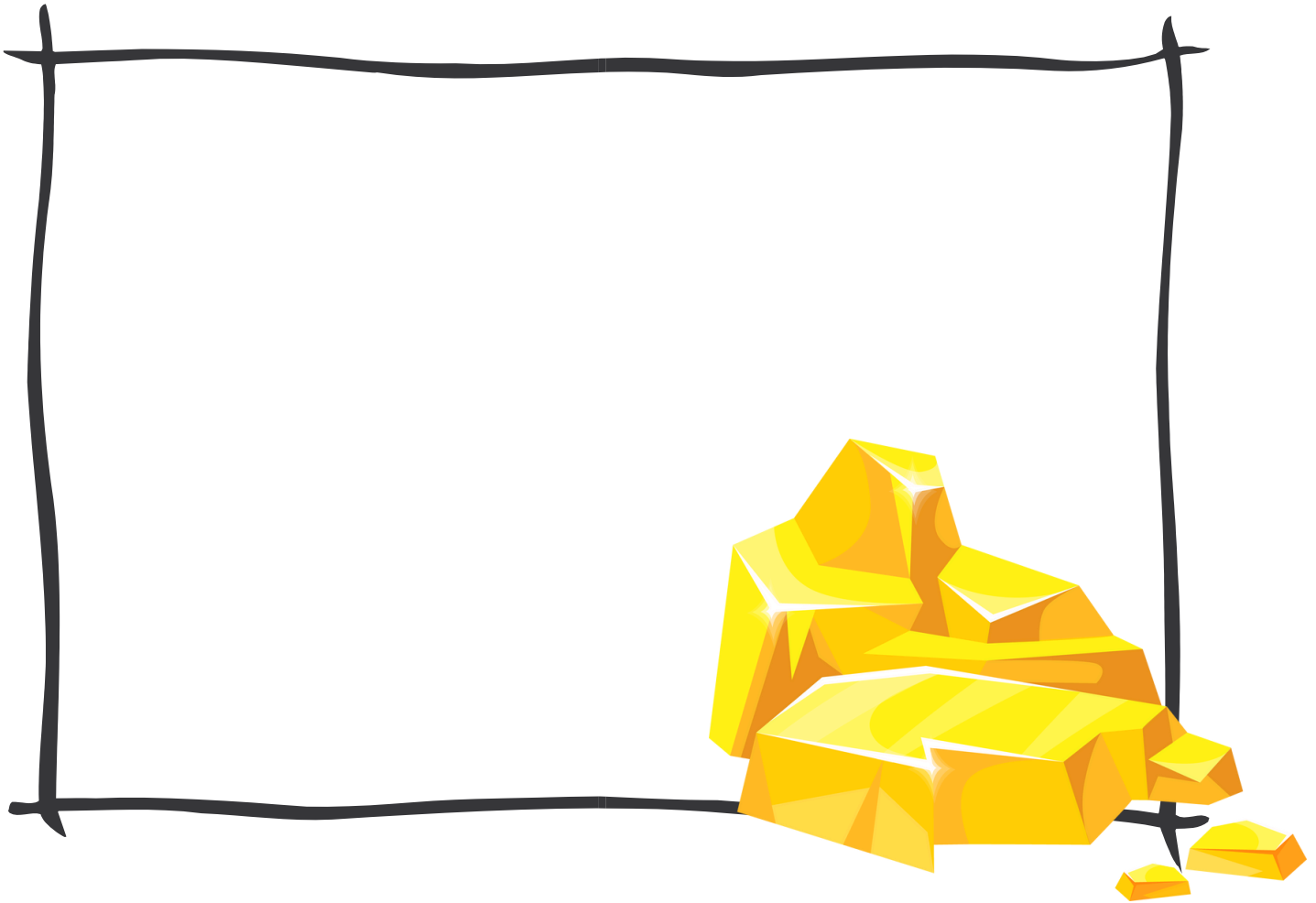
- Ask students to draw a picture or write a few sentences about their favorite part of the activity and what they learned about trading and using resources wisely.

This activity not only teaches first graders about the economic aspects of the Gold Rush but also engages them in a fun, hands-on way that involves critical thinking and interpersonal communication.

Gold Rush Adventure

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Instructions Draw your own picture of a Gold Rush scene and write a sentence about what is happening.



Resources

- <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>
- <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/discovery-of-gold/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1099
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/annual-message-to-congress-5/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
- <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/docs/CirGuides/Ridge-Crime-Gold-Rush.pdf>
- <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/california-gold-rush/sources/1912>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-gilded-age/american-west/a/the-gold-rush>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/gold-rush-of-1849>
- <https://www.library.ca.gov/california-history/gold-rush/legacy/>

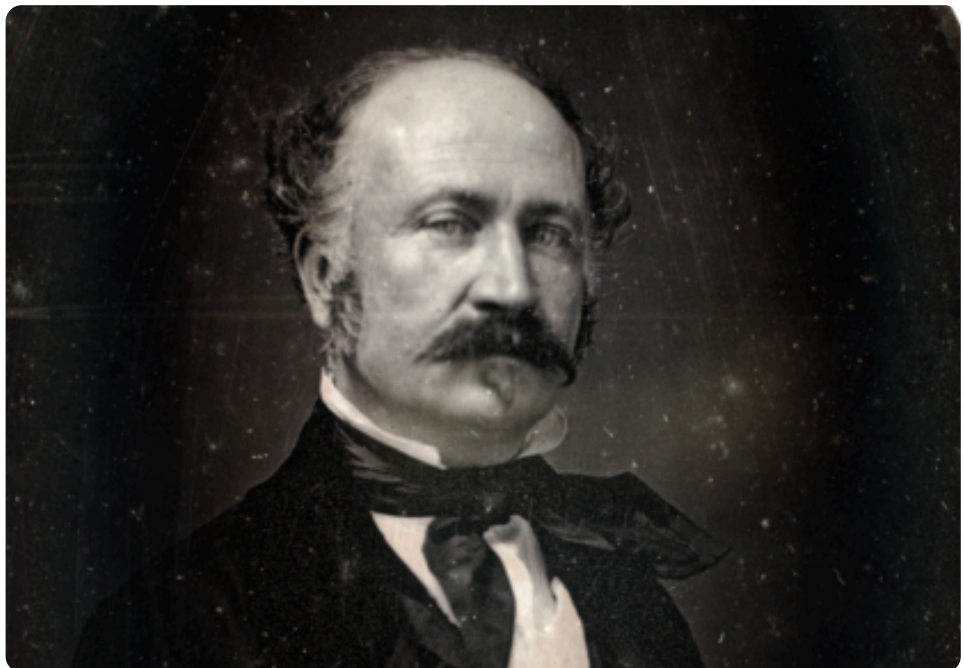
Images

Gold Miner



Credit: Canva Pro.

John Sutter



Credit: Wikipedia.

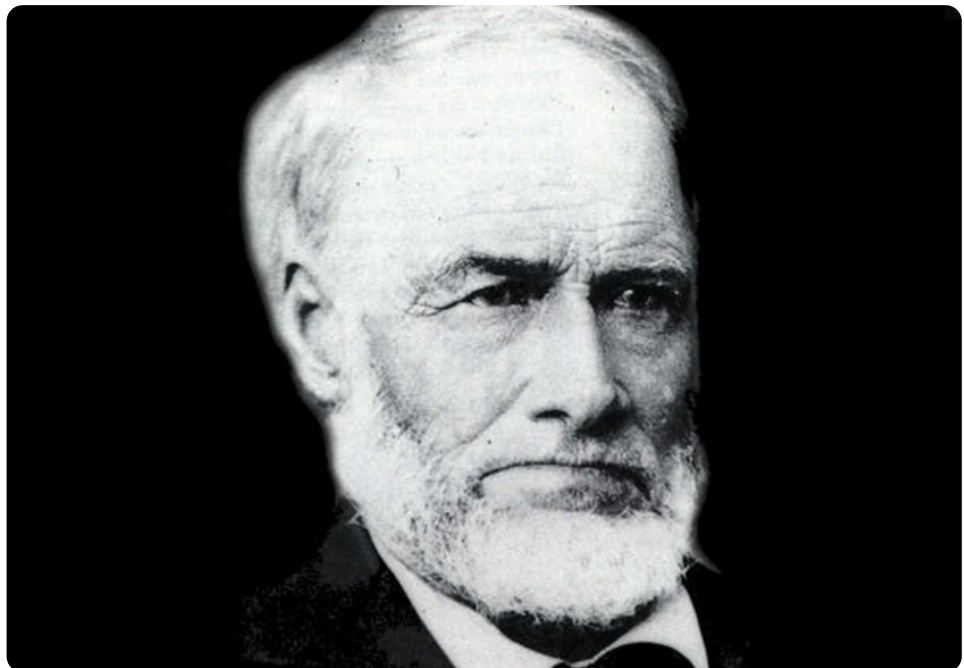
Images

California



Credit: Britannica.

James Marshall



Credit: Wikipedia.

Images

Waterwheel



Credit: Canva Pro.

Sam Brannan



Credit: Canva Pro.

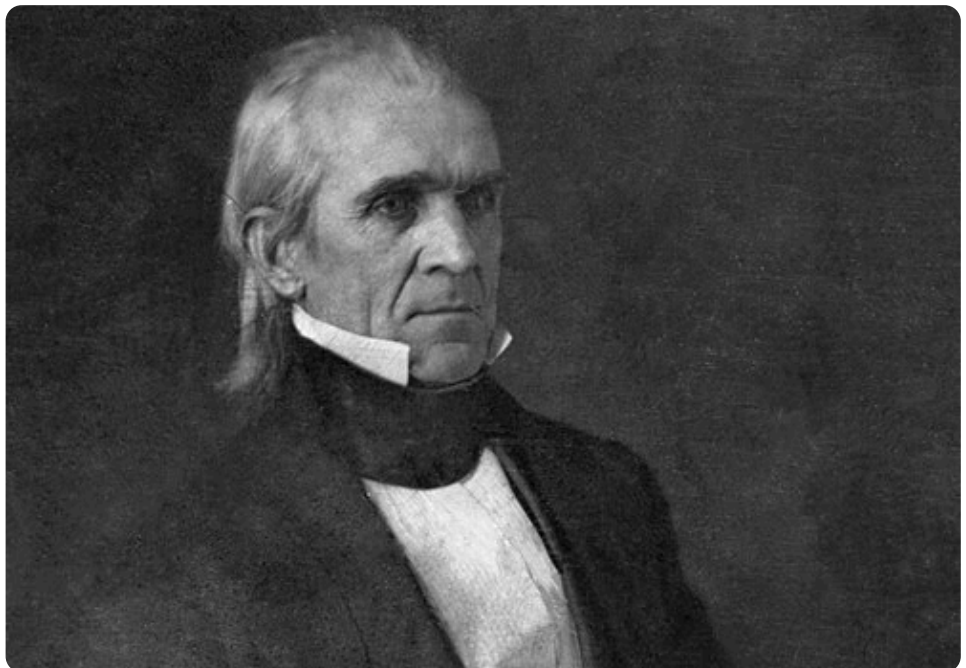
Images

Gold



Credit: Canva Pro

James Polk



Credit: Wikipedia

Images

49ers



Credit: Canva Pro.

Mining Camp



Credit: Canva Pro

Images

Levi Strauss



Credit: Levi Strauss & Co.

**Domingo
Ghirardelli**



Credit: National Portrait Gallery

Images

Leland Stanford



Credit: U.S. Senate Historical Office

Merchants



Credit: Canva Pro.

Notes

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