

RESEARCH GUIDE

CALIFORNIA

by NANCY HENDRICKSON



FROM THE MOMENT IN 1542 WHEN JUAN RODRÍGUEZ Cabrillo dropped anchor in San Diego Bay until Mexican independence in 1821, the present state of California was a Spanish possession. Once part of New Spain, California has a Spanish heritage that survives today in many of its place names, and it's among the earliest examples of cultures converging in what would become the west coast of the United States. Read on for the history of the Golden State—and how you can research your ancestors who lived there.

A COLLISION OF CULTURES

For more than two centuries after first being explored by the Spanish, “Alta” California remained unsettled by Europeans. That changed in 1769, when Fr. Junípero Serra (a Franciscan friar) established the first of 21 missions. The pueblos that sprang up around them, over time, became the cities of Los Angeles, Monterey and San Francisco.

Spain's hold on California began to erode in the 1800s. By 1812, Russia had moved eastward across the Pacific into Alaska, then pushed as far south as California's Bodega Bay. Then, after decades of altercations, Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, taking control of Spain's holdings throughout the Southwest. But, after the Mexican-American War that ended in 1848, California (as well as other Mexican territories) became part of the United States.

CALIFORNIA, HERE I COME

In the same year California became a US territory, gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill. Tens of thousands of gold-seekers poured into Northern California. The area that had once been home to dozens of peaceful Native

American tribes and Spanish rancheros was now filled with immigrants from around the world, all coming to seek their fortunes.

The population explosion must have been mind-boggling to anyone living in California before the Gold Rush. In 1848, the state's white population was only a few thousand individuals. But with “49ers” streaming in, the population soared to 92,000 in 1850, the same year California gained statehood. By 1860, the population was 380,000, with newcomers arriving from countries around the world (Switzerland, Ireland, France, Germany, Scotland, China, Italy, Indonesia, the Philippines and Greece, to name a few)—not to mention the thousands who arrived from other US states. By 1890, more than 1 million people called California home. The cultural diversity that was the foundation California continues today.

The best place to begin your immigration search is at either FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> or Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, as they both have bordercrossing lists from Mexico dating 1903 to 1957. Other notable collections at FamilySearch include California naturalizations, immigration registers, lists of Chinese laborers, and passenger lists.

While the main ports of entry were San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego, your Chinese immigrant ancestors may have gone through inspection or even detention at the Angel Island Immigration station <www.aiisf.org>, which operated from 1910 to 1940.

The Chinese Arrival Case File Index can be found at Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61228>, spanning 1884 to 1940. The cards can contain name, age,

FAST FACTS

ADDED AS US TERRITORY:
1850

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1850

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1800s (counties); 1905 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1800s (counties); 1905 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
California Dept. of
Public Health

gender, birth date and place, arrival date, ship name, and case number. The original records are held at the National Archives' San Francisco branch.

CALIFORNIA GIRLS (AND BOYS)

Given California's Spanish and Mexican heritage, early vital records were kept by Catholic parishes. While some counties have vital records going back to 1824, statewide registration of births, marriages and deaths, didn't begin until 1905.

This doesn't mean you can't obtain earlier California records, however. FamilySearch and Ancestry.com both have a wide variety of vital records. Ancestry.com has a "Pioneer and Immigrant File" <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2161>, with 10,000 records of pioneers who arrived in California prior to 1860. And at FamilySearch, you can search California deaths and burials from as early as 1776 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3518938>.

In addition, the Huntington Library's Early California Population Project maintains a collection of baptism, marriage and burial records from the California missions <www.huntington.org/ecpp>.

You can find post-1905 vital record indexes at Archives.com <www.archives.com> and VitalSearch.com <vitalsearch.ca.com>. In addition, the Western States Marriage Index <abish.byui.edu/specialcollections/westernstates/search.cfm> is a good jumping-off place for finding early marriages, with dates ranging by county (the earliest being 1821).

If you want to obtain informational copies of births, deaths or marriages, you can apply online or by mail at the California Department of Public Health <www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/chsi/pages/vital-records.aspx>. Counties can sometimes provide records faster than the state; you can find list of county registrars and recorders at <www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/chsi/pages/county-registrars-and-recorders.aspx>.

If you still can't find an ancestor's records, keep two things in mind: An earthquake in 1906 destroyed nearly all of San Francisco's civil records, and it wasn't uncommon for couples to go to Mexico or Nevada for quickie marriages (or divorces).

KEEPING COUNT

The whole state of California was first enumerated in the 1850 federal US census, the same year as its statehood. However, before statehood, the Spanish took censuses (called *padrones*) that counted Californians in several places, including Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo. You can obtain an online transcript of the 1790 census at <www.sfgenealogy.com/spanish/cen1790.htm> and an index to Spanish mission censuses of 1796 to 1989 at Ancestry.com ("California Spanish Mission Censuses, 1796-1798") <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1097>.

You can find federal census records from each decade (except 1890) at FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> and Findmypast <www.findmypast.com>. In addition to population schedules, you may also find the census mortality schedules to be useful, available from 1850 to 1885 at Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8756>. Search the Northern California counties in 1850 to get a sense of where gold miners originated, as well as their cause of death. Diphtheria, delirium tremens, fever, pneumonia, and gunshot or knife wounds were common.

Because some of its records are missing from the 1850 federal census, California took its own *state* census in 1852. You can find it at the California State Library (CSL) <www.library.ca.gov> as well as at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.

One of the most valuable of California record sets is the Great Register, which contains county-level voter registration lists dating back to 1866. The Register is a useful substitute for the missing 1890 federal census, as well as for records lost in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

The Great Register lists were compiled every two years and include name, age, place of birth, address, occupation, and sometimes a physical description. (Note: Only men are listed until 1911, when women obtained the right to vote.) The California State Library has registers from 1866 to 1944, but they are easier to access at Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, Findmypast or MyHeritage (1866-1910).

TIMELINE

1542

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo explores San Diego Bay, the first European to do so

1769

Spanish priests found the first mission in Alta California

1821

Mexico (then including modern California) gains independence from Spain

1846

Revolutionaries declare an independent "Bear Flag Republic" in Sonoma

1848

The United States takes control of California; James Wilson Marshall finds gold at Sutter's Mill, sparking the Gold Rush



**Golden Gate Bridge,
San Francisco**

1850

California is admitted to the Union as a free state

1869

The transcontinental railroad connects Sacramento, Calif., with the American East

1906

An earthquake and fire destroy most of San Francisco

1907

Imperial County is created, making it the newest (and last) county to be formed in California

1910

Angel Island opens; over the next 30 years, more than 1 million immigrants are processed here

TOOLKIT

Websites

California Genealogy <www.californiagenealogy.org>

California GenWeb Project <www.cagenweb.org>

Calisphere <www.calisphere.org>

Cyndi's List: California <www.cyndislist.com/us/ca>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: California <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/California,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: California <www.linkpendium.com/ca-genealogy>

Online Archive of California <www.oac.cdlib.org>

San Francisco Genealogy <www.sfgenealogy.org/sf/sfdata.htm>

Publications

California Colony: Genealogy, Landgrants, and Notes of Spanish Colonial California by Doris Shaw Castro (Author House)

California Place Names, 40th Anniversary Edition: The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names by Erwin G. Gudde and William Bright (University of California Press)

California Wagon Train Lists, Volume I by Louis J. Rasmussen (Janaway Publishing)

Spanish Mexican Families of Early California by Marie E. Northrop (Southern California Genealogical Society)

Archives & Organizations

California Genealogical Society <www.californiaancestors.org>

California Historical Society <www.californiahistoricalsociety.org>

California State Archives <www.sos.ca.gov/archives/collections/family-history-resources>

California State Library <www.library.ca.gov/collections/genealogy/toolkit>

National Archives at Riverside <www.archives.gov/riverside>

National Archives at San Francisco <www.archives.gov/san-francisco>

LA LA LAND

Up until 1820, Spain issued land grants, which were then taken over by Mexico. Land grant records reside at University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library <lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/bancroft-library> and the California State Archives <www.sos.ca.gov/archives/collections/ussg>. The United States agreed to honor the land grants after the Mexican-American War of 1848, but (of the 813 grants claimed) the land commission approved only 553.

Land not included in the grants was considered to be in the public domain and was sold through federal land offices. Records for public land sales can be found at the Bureau of Land Management website <gloreCORDS.blm.gov>. There, you'll find a treasure trove of land patents and can even request land entry case files from the National Archives. These records show the original transfer of land from the government to an individual; they do not include subsequent land transfers.

GOLDEN RESOURCES

Several other resources can help you fill in the blank spots in your California research. Among them is the California Genealogical Society (CGS) <www.californiaancestors.org>. CGS has many San Francisco records, including voter registrations and church, cemetery, and vital records. Some holdings are searchable for free, while others require a membership in the society.

Likewise, the Southern California Genealogical Society (SCGS) <www.scsgsgenealogy.com> has a number of freely searchable collections, including of obituaries, cemetery records and a list of 19th-century Los Angeles High School graduates. Society members can access several additional collections from their home computers.

City-level societies and libraries hold information for each of their respective regions. The San Diego Genealogical Society <www.casdgs.org>, for example, offers members access to the quarterly journal *Leaves and Saplings*, which has a full-surname index of each volume. And the Los Angeles Public Library <www.lapl.org/collections-resources/research-guides/genealogy> has an index to its holdings, as well as digitized Los Angeles directories.

If finding historical images (rather than records) is your goal, click over to the University of Southern California's "California Historical Society Collection, 1860–1990" <digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15799coll65>. You'll find more than 25,000 downloadable images in this collection, including 19th-century drawings of some of California's 21 missions.

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