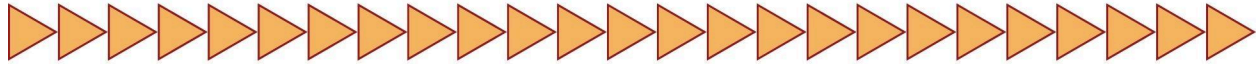


Reading Activity



California Indian Genocide

1846 - 1873

Basic Facts

Victims and Survivors:

- Indigenous peoples of what is now California

Perpetrators:

- United States Government & Military
- California State Militias
- Vigilante groups
- Colonizing settlers

Impacts:

- Millions of dollars spent on expeditions against Indians
- Hundreds of massacres, killings, murders, and executions, killing thousands of California Natives
- Many rapes and beatings
- Burning down of villages and destruction of food stores
- Survivors driven into inhospitable desert and mountain regions
- Malnutrition and physical exposure lowered fertility and increased miscarriages and stillbirths
- Thousands of children forcibly removed from families
- Enslavement of sovereign peoples
- Cultures driven underground, damaged, or lost
- Environmental destruction

Key Regions



Introduction

1. Pre-colonization, California Native peoples lived in balance and harmony for thousands of years. California was once the most diverse and populated region in North America. There were more than 100 languages spoken here with over 300 different dialects!
2. Settlers first arrived in California in the mid-1500s. Since then, Native peoples have experienced violent colonization by several settler groups. Spain, Russia, Mexico, and the United States each colonized parts of California at various times. Before the Spanish Mission era, Native populations were estimated to number between 310,000 to 1 million people. Within seven decades, when the US took control, that number declined to about 150,000. Following the Gold Rush, only about 20,500 California Natives survived. The Gold Rush marks an era of death and destruction for California Natives.

Early Colonization

Why did European immigrants come to California in the first place, and why did they stay?

The Spanish Mission Era

3. Under the *Doctrine of Discovery*, Spain expanded its empire by colonizing Indigenous lands. Between 1769 and 1823, Franciscan “padres,” or priests, spread Christianity along the coast of California. In all, they established 21 missions, from Mission San Diego de Alcalá in the south to Mission San Francisco Solano in the north. Their soldiers captured thousands of Natives and forced them to build their missions.
4. During settlement, the Spaniards introduced domestic livestock such as cows and pigs. These animals grazed on native plants. This threatened the well-being of Native peoples who relied on traditional foods. On top of that, foreign diseases such as smallpox, measles, and syphilis, wiped out entire Native villages. The Spanish had often developed immunity to these diseases. Out of fear for their children’s lives, some Natives sought treatment from the Mission padres. Due to life-threatening diseases and fear of starvation, many Native people ended up in the missions. In some cases, Spanish soldiers would intimidate or bribe Native people to go to the missions. Once there, they were forbidden to leave. The life expectancy of “Mission Indians” drastically

declined over the course of enslavement. During this short period of California history, at least 140,000 Native people died.

5. Understandably, resistance to the missions was common among California Indian Tribes. For example, in 1775, a group of Natives set fire to Mission San Diego de Alcalá. In addition, a group of Chumash Indians overthrew Mission leadership in Santa Barbara, Santa Ynez, and La Purisima in 1824. In spite of colonization, Native people successfully protected their cultures, languages and families through education and physical resistance.

Russian Colonization

6. Starting around 1810, Russians had a big presence in a small part of the northern coast of California. The Russian-American Company established Fort Ross on *Kashia Pomo* homelands in 1812. They hoped to bring food and trading goods, like otter pelts, back to their people in Russia. Some accounts say that Russian settlers treated Natives with a little more respect than the Spanish. They valued Native labor and their deep knowledge of the land. Still, they too exploited the land and its resources. They were also known to use violence against the Kashia people to get what they wanted.

The Mexican Rancho Era

7. In 1821, Mexico gained its independence from Spain following the 11-year Mexican War of Independence. As a result, Spain's "Alta California" territory became Mexican territory in 1822. This marked the beginning of the Mexican Rancho era. During this era, California Native people gained Mexican citizenship. Large tracts of land held by the Spanish were granted to Mexican citizens in good standing.



During this era, California Native people gained Mexican citizenship. Large tracts of land held by the Spanish were granted to Mexican citizens in good standing. If a Tribal village happened to be within the bounds of a rancho, the land and people of that village became property of that rancho. Thus,

many California Natives became *indentured servants* on the Mexican ranchos. Additionally, rancho cattle continued to destroy native food sources. This caused Natives to depend on Mexican rancheros for food. Natives also continued to suffer from disease epidemics. By 1846, it's estimated that these colonial forces had decimated more than half of the California Native population.

The US Era



An 1849 handbill from the California Gold Rush.

8. During the Mexican Rancho era, more and more US settlers migrated West. They had their hearts set on California's many natural resources: land, timber, minerals, and more. California's abundant resources presented a valuable economic opportunity. In 1846, American explorers attempted to "liberate" California from Mexico. Seeing an opportunity, the US Army took control of California and made it a US territory.

9. Many US settlers brought strong anti-Indian prejudices with them to California. US media used symbolic images, such as Natives killing helpless settlers, to depict Indians as violent and untamed.

Sovereign California Natives were generally a strong but peaceful people. Still, racial biases fueled fear and hatred in the new settlers. This, combined with greed and power, led to extreme violence against California Natives by settlers.

Violence During the Gold Rush

10. In 1848, gold was discovered in California. Tens of thousands of settlers came to California to strike it rich. Gold miners were often violent, especially towards Natives. They aimed to completely remove them from their lands near the gold mines.

11. Enslavement and forced labor of California Natives spread throughout the state. Large slave markets rose up in major cities like San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Here, merchants sold Native women and children to wealthy white settlers. Slave markets decimated the Native populations of *Kumeyaay*, *Tongva*, and *Ohlone* peoples. These horrific sales were eventually legalized by the state.

12. Many Native laborers, who worked under slave-like conditions, were desperate for food. Sometimes they had to steal horses or oxen so that they wouldn't starve to death. Most US settlers had no sympathy for the traumatized Natives. Working for these colonizers meant being completely dehumanized. John Sutter, for example, had 800 Natives working on his fort. He fed his laborers from troughs as though they were pigs. The conditions often resulted in fatalities; some Native peoples escaped or rebelled.



13. It was very dangerous to be a Native person in the mid-19th century. California Natives could not easily protect themselves from unfair treatment. The California Constitution denied Native Americans citizenship and the right to vote. This made them vulnerable in a hostile environment. They could not testify against Whites in court, and could not serve as jurors or witnesses. Natives had to carry special paperwork stating their identity. If caught without identification, white settlers could force Natives to work for them. In the 1850s, the United States illegally seized all sovereign Native lands in California. They ignored and kept secret treaty negotiations with Tribes. Taking control of Native lands was the ultimate goal. This land seizure left California's Native populations homeless and landless.
14. In 1850, California's first US governor, Peter Burnett, supported an important piece of anti-Indian legislation: *The Act for the Government and Protection of Indians*. It was meant to protect white settlers from the "savage" Natives. Among other things, the act legalized corporal punishment of California Natives. If caught stealing, Natives would

be subject to torture. The law also made it possible to remove Native children from their families.

15. At the State of the State address, Governor Burnett declared his intentions:



That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert.

16. From this point on, the State of California supported attempts to exterminate all California Indians. The US federal government sent money for California's killing campaigns against California Indians. It is estimated that the federal government spent \$1.7 million on the California Indian Genocide. Again, the primary motivation was the seizure of valuable Native land.

Physical Violence and Murder

17. Small and large massacres by US military personnel, vigilantes, and gold miners became common. In the spring of 1846, Captain John C. Fremont led a murderous rampage against California Natives. In the Sacramento Valley, Fremont and his men slaughtered 1,000 *Wintu* men, women and children. This was one of the first of many massacres to follow. Dozens of similar attempts took place. Settlers worked hard to wipe out Native populations from the state.

18. Two of Fremont's well-vetted Indian killers, Charles Stone and Andrew Kelsey, were among the first US colonists to settle in the Clear Lake region. These two ranchers had acquired land use rights from Mexican landholder Salvador Vallejo. There, they took possession of the *Eastern Pomo* and *Clear Lake Wappo* people who had been living on Vallejo's ranch. They represented the worst example of inhumane colonizers. They were very cruel to those they enslaved. Their Native slaves worked every day in terror and suffering on Big Valley Ranch. They were starved, beaten, and killed for the smallest of crimes. They assaulted the Native women. They forced 100 Native men to work in the gold mines without providing them with food or water; very few survived the return home. They used violent methods to suppress and weaken the political systems of the Tribes. Stone and Kelsey's actions forced this group of local Indians to make a choice. They had to choose to continue to endure this treatment, or to end it by taking the lives of their captors. Retaliation seemed to be the most logical option. To end their abuse



Artist: Rafael Montoliu.
A mother and child survive the Bloody Island Massacre by breathing through tulle reeds underneath the surface of the water.

and avenge the stolen lives of their loved ones, they decided to kill Stone and Kelsey in the winter of 1849.

19. Word spread through newspapers and rumors that Native laborers had killed white settlers. When word reached the US cavalry nearby, they did not distinguish the guilty from the innocent. They went on a killing spree of the local Native Tribes. Then, in a murderous event called the *Bloody Island Massacre*, US soldiers killed as many as 800 innocent Pomo elders, women and children in May 1850. This was one of the biggest organized mass killings in US history. Entire Native communities were often targeted because

a few tried to protect their families from settler abuse. The Bloody Island Massacre is a prime example of this *collective punishment*.

Anti-Native Propaganda

20. To the public, Natives were becoming more and more of a "problem." Few voices stood up against the extermination of California Indians. The government sold *war bonds* to American citizens as an incentive to support the war against Indians. Militia group volunteers received tracts of stolen land from Native communities for joining the cause.

21. One of San Francisco's major newspapers, *The Californian*, listed all the reasons they wanted California to be a slave-free state. The seventh reason stated a popular view:

SEVENTH - We desire only a white population in California, even the Indians amongst us, as far as we have seen, are more of a nuisance than a benefit to the country; we would like to get rid of them.

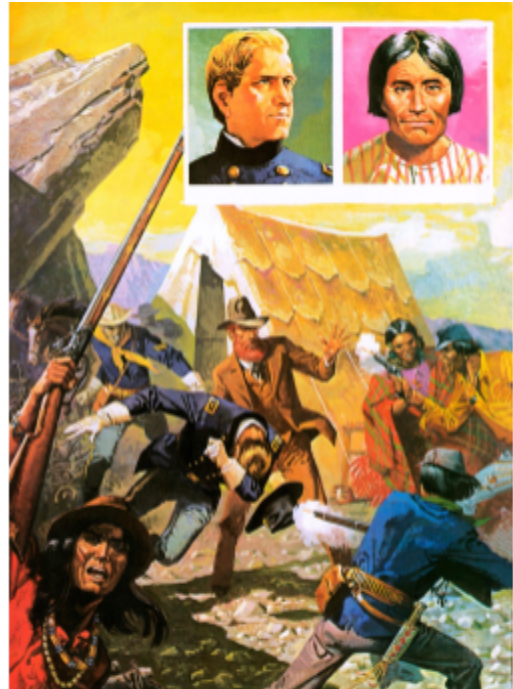
22. Newspapers blamed "thieving Indians" for petty crimes, thus spreading fear and hatred. State and local governments allowed *punitive expeditions* to continue without telling apart the guilty from the innocent. The ultimate goal: to teach other Natives a lesson.

23. By the Fall of 1855, it was clear to many that California Natives were on a path to total annihilation. Newspapers all over the State were reporting on the “war of extermination” against California Natives. These narratives normalized the extinction of the Indigenous groups of California. Their extinction seemed inevitable.

Resisting Forced Removals

24. Following years of killing sprees, the government forced surviving California Indians onto reservations. Some believed this was a civilized way of “dealing” with the Natives, but it often led to mass death anyway. The *Nome Cult Walk* of 1863 was among several military-enforced relocations. Thousands of *Wintu, Maidu, Konkow, Wailaki, Pomo, Coast Miwok* and other Tribes walked hundreds of miles to the Round Valley Reservation in Mendocino County, on *Yuki (A'tat)* homelands. If they grew sick, or starved, or moved too slowly during the walk, they were killed. If they tried to run away, they were shot. If they survived, they were whipped, beaten, or run over with horses the entire length of the march. Hundreds died.

25. Many Native peoples resisted these relocations. In 1873, a band of *Modocs* fled the Klamath Reservation to return to their homelands. The Modocs refused to return to the “Klamath Concentration Camp,” so they fought back. This resistance fueled the Modoc War, an incredibly costly war for the US government. Chief Kientpoos, or Captain Jack, led fewer than 60 men into battle. For almost eight months they resisted the US armed forces, which grew to over 1,000 men. In the end, though, Captain Jack and five of his warriors were tried for war crimes. The government relocated all surviving Modocs to “*Indian Territory*” in Oklahoma, where many still live today.



Modoc Indians. “Take away you soldiers and give us back our land”, cried the Indian chief Kintpuash (inset right). When General Edward Canby (inset left) refused, the Indians drew hidden guns and sprang into action.
Credit: © Look and Learn



Hydraulic mining in California caused severe environmental damage.

Denying the Genocide

26. By 1873 in California:

- **\$2.2 million in federal money had been spent on reimbursing State militia for expeditions against California Indians.**
- **There were about 370 separate massacres, along with hundreds of smaller-scale killings, murders, and executions.**
- **More than 16,000 California Natives had been slaughtered, likely more.**
- **12,000 tons of earth had been excavated for gold, destroying many important indigenous foods and cultural resources.**
- **7,600 tons of toxic mercury had been released into waterways from gold extraction, harming countless ecosystems.**

- **White intruders expressed their savagery through many rapes and beatings.**
- **Many villages had been burnt down and food stores destroyed.**
- **Survivors had been driven into inhospitable desert and mountain regions.**
- **Malnutrition and physical exposure had drastically lowered fertility and increased miscarriages and stillbirths.**
- **Three to four thousand children had been sold at prices ranging from \$60 for a boy and \$200 for a girl.**

27. In 1873, State funds for expeditions ran out. Natives gained the right to serve as witnesses and testify against Whites in the courts. The government-sanctioned genocide finally came to an end. But not before decimating more than 90 percent of the California Native population.

28. Violence against California Indians did not stop, though. The government's next goal was to eradicate the Natives through forced *cultural assimilation*. Controlling governments forced Native children into boarding schools. Here, they could not contact their families, could not practice their traditional ways, or speak their languages. Native communities today still live with the trauma of boarding schools and forced assimilation.

29. The consequences of the forced removals also continue to impact California's original peoples. Many Tribes still do not have a land base in their ancestral territory. Not having access to land makes it difficult to gather traditional foods and medicine. It also makes it easy for private landowners to violate sacred sites that are not protected. This disconnect perpetuates trauma and prevents healing amongst California Natives. It is also a violation of the inherent sovereignty of California Indian Tribes.
30. Today, many do not acknowledge the connection between the California Indian Genocide and current environmental challenges. Land, water, plants and animals are all a part of Indigenous communities. When Native people were removed from the land, they were no longer able to properly care for it. Land stewardship turned into resource extraction. Settlers dammed up rivers so that salmon could not travel upstream. They illegalized prescribed burning, causing larger wildfires. They replaced indigenous grasses with invasive grasses, destroying biodiversity. Without Native people present, the land has not been cared for in the way it has been used to for thousands of years. The land requires healing, too, yet many traditional stewardship practices are still outlawed today.
31. In 2019, over 150 years later, Governor Gavin Newsom apologized for the first time on behalf of the State of California for its role in the genocide. Even so, there are some people who deny that a 'genocide' occurred during the Gold Rush era. They claim that the US government won control of California fairly through military victories. Some say that it was an "ethnic cleansing," not a genocide. Yet, the political speeches and newspapers of the time clearly point to the genocidal intent of the State.
32. Despite it all, Natives are still here. Their communities have survived and protected their cultural knowledge for future generations. Today, there are 110 federally recognized Tribes in California. They have their own governments, economies, laws, and cultures. There are many more unrecognized Tribes who also continue to practice their cultures and tend to their lands. California Natives are leading the fight against climate change today. They are working to restore their ancestral languages, food systems, and lifeways. Despite the trauma, descendants of survivors are finding ways to thrive.

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TIMELINE

Gold Rush / Reservation Period

