



# California Resources

## Family History Sources in the Golden State

### California History

Almost 1 out of every 8 Americans lives in California. If you don't have relatives or ancestors from California, you very likely know someone who does. Today's Californians have a variety of ancestries including Mexican, German, Irish, English, Italian, Russian and Asian.

Modern-day California is home to Hollywood, Silicon Valley, breathtaking National Parks, many types of agriculture and diverse landscapes.



San Juan Capistrano mission, California, 1921

Spain sent missionaries and a few military men to explore the new world and they arrived in what would become San Diego in 1769. Spain had missions built along El Camino Real (the King's Highway) no more than a day's journey apart. These missions were often built in fertile valleys beside streams. Although a few of the missions were destroyed in an earthquake in 1812 construction continued until 1833 when the Mexican government secularized the missions. Many of the early settlers were Spanish and Mexican.

Gold was discovered in California thirty five miles north of Los Angeles in 1842 by a Francisco Lopez. In 1848, a larger discovery was made at Sutter's Mill in Coloma. While you might suspect that these gold discoveries gave California its nickname as "The Golden State," there's more to the story. California was dubbed the Golden State based on its many treasures, including oil, fruit orchards, agricultural abundance, and an early sea otter and cattle-hide trade.

After the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, the U.S. acquired California, Arizona, Colorado, Utah and Nevada as territories. This and the discovery of gold opened California up to large influx of new settlers. In 1869, California saw another large population growth with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. Thousands of Chinese had migrated to California to provide labor to build the railroad as well as work in the mines.

California has always been subject to the devastation of earthquakes. The largest recorded earthquake was April 18, 1906 in San Francisco. The initial damage and the fires that swept through the city killed about 3,000 people and left thousands homeless.

In the 1930s, California's population increased again as farmers fled the Dust Bowl conditions in the Midwest looking for a better life and better farming opportunities.

From 1940 to 1960 the population of the state doubled to over 15 million residents; from 1960 to 2000 it doubled again. Early settlers came to California for fishing, trapping, agriculture, and gold. Later migrants came to the "Golden State" attracted by the entertainment, aerospace, and technology industries.



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## California Censuses

California's 1849 state constitution dictated that a census be taken in 1852, in 1855, and every 10 years after that. The 1852 census was the only one taken, but it proved to be an important count.

The Gold Rush would bring about 300,000 people to California between 1848 and 1854. The 1850 U.S. Federal Census tallied California's population at 92,597. The 1852 California state census count came in at 260,949 (neither census would include the entire Native American population). Not only did the 1852 census provide a record of an additional 150,000 people, but records from three counties from the 1850 census—Contra Costa, San Francisco, and Santa Clara—have since been lost or destroyed. In addition, the accuracy of the 1850 census was called into some question because of the rapid growth and mobility of the population at the time, as miners poured into the state.

Although voter registrations are not as rich in genealogical information as census records they do help pinpoint your ancestors in a specific place and time.

The first voter registrations in California took place in 1866 as the result of a legislative act. The act called for "the registration of the citizens of the State, and for the enrollment in the several election districts of all the legal voters thereof, and for the prevention and punishment of frauds affecting the elective franchise." The voter registers are also known as the "Great Registers." Prior to 1866, voter records consisted of county poll lists.

In 1872 another law required that counties publish an index or alphabetical listing of all registered voters every two years. This usually happened in even-numbered years.

In California, women were granted the right to vote in 1911. Therefore, the first year women will appear in the registers is in 1912.

<i>Population</i>	
<b>1850</b>	<b>92,597</b>
<b>1860</b>	<b>379,994</b>
<b>1870</b>	<b>560,247</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>864,694</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>1,213,398</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>1,485,053</b>
<b>1910</b>	<b>2,377,549</b>
<b>1920</b>	<b>3,426,861</b>
<b>1930</b>	<b>5,677,251</b>
<b>1940</b>	<b>6,907,387</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>10,586,223</b>
<b>1960</b>	<b>15,717,204</b>
<b>1970</b>	<b>19,953,134</b>
<b>1980</b>	<b>23,667,902</b>
<b>1990</b>	<b>29,760,021</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>33,871,648</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>37,253,956</b>

### California State Census and Voter Registrations on Ancestry.com

- [California State Census, 1852](#)
- [California, Voter Registers, 1866-1898](#)
- [California, Voter Registrations, 1900-1968](#)



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## Significant Dates (through 1941)

- 1769 – San Diego was first settled by the Spanish
- 1776 – The Spanish settled San Francisco
- 1821 – Mexico gained its independence from Spain; California was a northern colony of Mexico
- 1830 – Russians begin to settle northern California
- 1841 – First overland travelers arrived
- 1847 – After the Mexican-American war, California became a territory of the U.S. along with Arizona, Nevada, Colorado and Utah
- 1848 – Gold discovered in the Sierra Nevada Mountains
- 1849 – Large Chinese population began arriving
- 1850 – California admitted to the Union
- 1858 – Chinese were barred from entering California
- 1869 – The Transcontinental Railroad was completed opening up California to more travelers and others who wish to settle there
- 1890 – Japanese began arriving in large numbers
- 1906 – Major Earthquake hit San Francisco killing approximately 3,000 people
- 1928 – St. Francis Dam flood killing over 600 people
- 1933 – San Joaquin Valley became a common destination for farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl
- 1937 – Golden Gate bridge was finished
- 1939 – World's Fair was held in San Francisco
- 1941 – Japanese-Americans relocated to internment camps

## California Vital Records

- [California Birth Index, 1905-1995](#)
- [California, Marriage Index, 1960-1985](#)
- [California, Death Index, 1940-1997](#)
- [California, Divorce Index, 1966-1984](#)
- [Web: California, Find A Grave Index, 1775-2012](#)
- [California, Marriage Index, 1949-1959](#)
- [California, Death Index, 1905-1939](#)
- [Web: Western States Marriage Index, 1809-2011](#)
- [California, Birth Records from Select Counties, 1872-1987](#)
- [California, Mortuary and Cemetery Records, 1801-1932](#)
- [California, Biographical Index Cards, 1781-1990](#)
- [California Marriages, 1850-1877](#)



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### California Military Resources on Ancestry.com

- [California, WWI Soldier Service Cards and Photos, 1917-1918](#)
- [California, WWI Soldier Photographs, 1917-1918](#)
- [California, World War I Soldier Citations, 1918-1921](#)
- [Records of California men in the War of the Rebellion, 1861 to 1867](#)
- [Record of Eighty-sixth Company California Military Reserve](#)
- [Register of officers of the National Guard and Naval Militia of California](#)

### Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about California history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies, so check for a local resource when researching.

- [California State Archives: Family history resources](#) held by the state archives in Sacramento include census, military, court, prison, county, and many other records.
- [California State Library](#): Describes the extensive resources the [California History Room](#) in Sacramento and the genealogy-focused Sutro Library in San Francisco.
- [California Genealogical Society and Library](#)
- [California GenWeb](#): Links to county-level genealogy pages, searchable archives, and research helps such as marriage records and the California Pioneer Project.
- [RootsWeb California Resources](#): Contains links to California genealogy resources, including state- and county-level websites; societies and organizations; and personal and miscellaneous web sites related to California research.
- [Southern California Genealogical Society](#): Sponsors the Jamboree, a popular annual genealogy conference, and maintains a large research library.
- [California Historical Society](#)
- [Online Archive of California](#): This finding aid contains detailed descriptions of collections held by museums, archives, and libraries, and includes digital images from many institutions.
- [National Archives at Riverside](#): This facility holds materials from Federal agencies and courts in Arizona, southern California, and Clark County, Nevada.
- [National Archives at San Francisco](#): This facility holds materials from Federal agencies and courts in northern and central California, Nevada (except Clark County, which is held at Riverside), Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, and the former Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (i.e., Marshall, Caroline, and Northern Mariana Islands).



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## Family History Sources in the Golden State

- [Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\) General Land Office Records](#): The BLM administers Federal Land for public land states including California, and maintains records of land patents which granted land from the Federal Government to individuals. Use the Land Patent Search to locate land grants by name. Many record images are available on the web site. See the FAQ for more information on how to locate and use land patents.
- [Library of Congress American Memory collection](#): includes *California as I saw it*, a series of first-person narratives from California's early years, and *The Chinese in California*.
- [Chronicling America: Online newspapers](#): Provides searchable online versions of selected California newspapers.
- [California Historical Newspaper project](#): The Center for Bibliographic Studies at University of California, Riverside maintains several projects related to California newspapers, including a searchable collection of digitized newspapers; a listing of California newspapers; and a listing of titles in the California Newspaper Microfilm Archive.

## Special Collections

### Help and Advice

- [California Family History Research](#)
- [Counties of California](#)
- [Gold Rush Adventurers](#)
- [The French in Early California](#)
- [Using Ancestry: Inside the California Voter Registration Database](#)
- [Digging Deeper: Prospecting for Genealogical Gold Out West](#)
- [Track Down Your Western Trails Travelers](#)

[View all California collections on Ancestry.com](#)

