

CALIFORNIA IN TIME:
The Fight Over Slavery through the Civil War.

INTRODUCTION

"I have long desired to see California; the production of her gold mines has been a marvel to me, and her stand for the Union, her generous offerings to the Sanitary, and her loyal representatives have endeared your people to me; and nothing would give me more pleasure than a visit to the Pacific shore, and to say in person to your citizens, 'God bless you for your devotion to the Union,' but the unknown is before us. I may say, however, that I have it now in purpose when the railroad is finished, to visit your wonderful state."

~Abraham Lincoln, speaking to his friend Charles Maltby, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for California, on March 25, 1865.

This timeline is designed to provide a source for reference for any person who desires or needs information regarding California's first 15 years of statehood. Reflecting my desire for an informative, useful timeline for historical education, many of the events listed here include a short narrative designed to explain the significance, causes, and effects, of the said event. The American Civil War and its causes are a particularly important focus of this era, as this extraordinary event impacted Americans throughout the continent, including California.

In this Civil War experience, California was unique in some ways and yet similar in other ways when compared to the bloody ordeal endured by U.S. states in the East, as many of the same divisions that split apart the nation were likewise dividing Californians against each other. Slavery was already rampant throughout the state, as Native Americans were denied any rights or protection under the law, and Indian slavery was actually upheld and codified in the state legislature. The debate over African-American Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law, however, would exacerbate the already strong political divisions between Northern and Southern California, and this tension was experienced here much as it was throughout the North, where citizens often refused to send escaped slaves back to the South, as was required by federal law. Much of the Civil War here would be fought for the hearts and minds of Californians, which was already divided culturally between its own Northern and Southern regions well before the outbreak of the "War of the Rebellion".

This is not to suggest, however, that California was free from the violence of the fight over slavery and secession, as the reader will find numerous examples of related conflict and tension throughout the state during this era, including violent acts within the divided California legislature. Union troops from California also battled and pushed the Confederate Army out of New Mexico Territory, which in 1862 had been reorganized as the Confederate Territory of Arizona. Likewise, the contribution of over 17,000 volunteers to the Union Army (from a state of less than 400,000), massive financial contributions to the Sanitary Commission, and the flow of much-needed gold made California an important asset to the Union cause, and many Californians would experience the large battles of the Civil War firsthand as soldiers. Many Civil War Generals, such as Henry Halleck, Ulysses S. Grant, and William T. Sherman, lived in California and established lasting friendships here prior to the war, when conflicts with Native Americans made the state an attractive place to prove one's merits as a soldier. Confederate Generals such as Lewis Armistead and Albert Sidney Johnston would avoid arrest by sneaking out of the state in a party of secessionists, before assuming their commands of Confederate forces in the East.

California in the 1850's-1860's was a very wild and untamed Western state, and its history throughout this period also reflects the desire to become more modern and also more connected to the rest of the nation. California was still in the early stages of its economic development, but improvements in communication and travel were made in this time that dramatically enhanced the state's connection with the rest of the nation. Another important aspect of California's 19th century history is the story of continuous conflict between Euro-American settlers and Native Americans. As soldiers from western forts and outposts joined the Civil War in the East and in the Southwest, an upset to the old order occurred, resulting in more wars and incidents of violence with native tribes.

This timeline uses several thematic headings under the "events" column in order to provide the reader with an easier method of seeking out the information that he/she is looking for, and to better illustrate the major concerns that characterize this turbulent period. Both national and state historic events are listed under these themes. An explanation of the most important themes and a summary of the events included under these headings are provided below:

INDIAN WARS:

As western states filled in with Euro-American settlers, the U.S. Army followed, constructing numerous forts and outposts typically placed in areas where Indians were seen as a threat to communities, mining claims, or mail routes and trails. California experienced an increase of this turmoil as its soldiers headed to the Civil War and military establishments throughout the state became depleted and were replaced by volunteer forces comprised mostly of white settlers. Settlers formed many militia groups not only to fill the vacuum of federal troops, but also to seek revenge and carry out war against tribes in their respective areas. This included numerous massacres and raids on Indian camps and villages, often against tribes considered to be friendly.

CIVIL WAR:

Many Californians of this era had only recently left their homes in the East, and were very anxious to help support the side of their homeland. As mentioned above, many Californians were sent to participate in the massive war in the east, but there is also an especially important connection with California troops and the smaller battles and incidents that wrested control of the New Mexico Territory away from the Confederacy. Some violence and military incidents related to the Civil War, however, took place in California, and Union forces felt it necessary to keep a watchful eye on the California population, to ensure it would not join or assist the Confederate States of America. The war would become the dominant concern for most Californians when news from the East reached the state, a process that became much faster once transcontinental telegraph lines were put in place.

THE FIGHT OVER SLAVERY:

Arguments regarding the status of African Americans divided the State of California in much the same pattern as it divided the states of the East, with anti-slavery sentiments dominating in the North, and pro-slavery Southern sympathizers dominating the political landscape of Southern California. Like the states of the North, California will have many difficulties in accepting the Fugitive Slave Law that requires all citizens, including those in Free states, to return escaped slaves to their southern masters. Conflicts over the issue became commonplace in California, evidenced by examples of legal challenges, demonstrations, political fights in the state legislature (several of which result in pistol duels), impassioned speeches, new political organizations, and by the exploits of "filibusterers" such as William Walker. Walker will leave California several times in an attempt to begin a slave-owners utopia in Mexico and later in Nicaragua, where he succeed establishing and ruling a pro-slavery regime for nearly 10 months before he is executed by Hondurans in 1860. The majority of Californians will ultimately side with the Union and begin removing pro-slavery leadership in exchange for moderate anti-slavery Republicans, resulting in the election of Leland Stanford in 1861, California's first Republican governor and a close ally of President Lincoln.

CONNECTING THE WEST:

The Western United States was the most remote area of the United States during this era, and California was an especially far-flung destination within this context. California's population, due to its impressive natural ports in Northern California and the effects of gold fever, grew at a much faster rate than its neighboring territories, and it became a national goal to connect the major city of San Francisco to the rest of the nation. California was on the minds of innovators in travel and communications, a common goal that will be made apparent first in the accelerated development of the telegraph and also in the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad.

SECESSION CRISIS:

The culture of the West leading up to the Civil War can generally be described as one of aggressive utopianism and idealism. Even prior to the Civil War, many Californians were proactive in trying to secure the state as a separate "Pacific Republic" or to divide the state into two. In fact, the state government succeeded in passing the Pico Act to separate Southern California from Northern California in 1859; it was only fear of Southern secession in 1860 that pressured the U.S. government to kill the legislation through inaction. Throughout the West, similar attempts were made to either end Union control of the West or to create separate republics, as was the case in the "Mormon War" of 1858, when U.S. troops were sent into a deserted Salt Lake City to quell the separatist leader Brigham Young and the Mormon Army. Northern and Southern California had developed differently economically and culturally from each other, as the gold rush economy had modernized Northern California industry and lifestyle at a much faster pace than in the agricultural economy of the South. Settlers from Northern states dominated the population of Northern California, while ranchers in Southern California generally originated from Southern states and from Mexico. Similar to the divisions that existed in "Bleeding" Kansas, California was a mix of anti-slavery Northerners and pro-slavery Southerners, and endured violence as a result of the same ideological differences that were tearing the nation apart. Activists were present representing both sides throughout the state, including in the California State Legislature. Military occupation of Southern California would be required, but successful, in maintaining order against the efforts of secessionists there, and the Confederacy will fail in its stated military goal of capturing the region.

COMPETING CULTURES:

California's location makes it an important area for the meeting of cultures and the emergence of new ethnicities in America. Western port cities in Northern California received travelers from traditional sources of European immigration, but also accepted the entrance of newcomers from China and the Far East. Mexico, which had only recently lost control of the state to the Americans, was both an important source of immigration and emigration for the state, as the city of Los Angeles remained a primarily Spanish-speaking agricultural center very connected to trade with its Southern neighbors. Adding to the mix, Mormon settlers established towns throughout the state, while African Americans begin coming to the state to seek opportunity and to flee the repressive slave control of the South. The Chinese, Mexicans, Native Americans, African Americans, Mormons, Euro-American settlers often conflicted with one another, resulting in numerous episodes of violence in the large cities and in the mining towns of the Sierra Nevada. Each group also made important contributions to the culture and development of California. These conflicts are discussed under this theme, as are the laws which enforced discrimination and Anglo economic control. Also included are some of the important contributions made by newly arrived cultural groups.*

*It should be noted that Native Americans are not included in this theme, as their story is told here under the heading of "Indian Wars". Native Americans were treated far differently than the other ethnicity in the state, as Native Americans were being actively exterminated through a violent series of military attacks, starvation, disease, and were still being captured and sold as slaves under the legal framework of state law. These actions speak of a genocidal war, not merely discrimination and exclusion, and thus their history requires a separate theme altogether.