The California Gold Rush: A Personal Journal

A Document Based Question (DBQ)
STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

The California Gold Rush: A Personal Journal

Overview: In 1848, at a place called Sutter’s Mill in California, an event took place that shook the world – the discovery of gold! Over the next several years gold seekers from the states, Europe, South America, and Asia poured into California. The document based exercise that follows requires both creativity and analysis. The exercise has four parts: 1) reading the Background Essay; 2) creating a Gold Rush persona; 3) examining a collection of documents; and 4) writing a personal journal. More specific instructions are given below.

Guidelines for the Gold Rush DBQ
The primary task of this DBQ is to write a journal of your personal experience in the California Gold Rush. Before beginning the journal you will want to do three things:
1. Read and discuss the Background Essay.
2. Do the Gold Rush Hook Exercise. Here you will create a persona (a personal Gold Rush character) who will be your voice when writing your journal.
3. Skim through the documents to gain a sense of what they contain. You will examine them more carefully later as you write your journal.

Journal Entry Suggestions
1. On the first page of your journal, introduce yourself by drawing from the persona you created in the Hook Exercise, e.g. name, age, home town, ethnicity, job, family, and personal circumstances.
2. Date all journal entries and indicate the location where each entry is made.
3. Journals should begin with your decision to join the rush to California and end with your return (if you survive).
4. Write in the first person.
5. Include lots of good detail. Maps and drawings are most welcome.
6. Mix fact with feeling. On the one hand, your journal should show that you have read and digested the Background Essay and the documents. On the other hand, your journal should be personal. Like the author of good historical fiction, be true to the history, then think and write like the person you have created.
7. Include most or all of these elements in your entries:
   a. the decision to go and why you’re going
   b. the journey there
   c. life as a miner or, if not actually mining, life in the mining camps
   d. the economics of the Gold Rush: costs and earnings
   e. matters of ethnicity, race, and gender
   f. the decision to return

God speed. May you find your pockets full of rocks and may your journal be rich with fact, feeling, and detail!

The Documents:
Document 1: I Was Alone in the World
Document 2: William Swain’s Route to California (map)
Document 3: Old Boone on the Upper Platte
Document 4: Descent into Pass (drawing)
Document 5: Grave Markers (drawing)
Document 6: Mining in Diamond Springs
Document 7: Washing Gold (drawing)
Document 8: Alfred Doten in the Mines

Document 9: Swain Letter from the Feather River
Document 10: Where Pa Is
Document 11: An Ounce a Day
Document 12: 1851 New York Budget (chart)
Document 13: California Mining Towns
Document 14: The Alcalde of Monterrey on Slavery
Document 15: Gold Miners at Spanish Flat (photo)
Document 16: Women Doing Full as Well
Document 17: Swain Letter from San Francisco

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For thousands of years, California was the home of numerous coastal Indian groups. The first Spanish mission in California was not established until 1769. In 1821 Mexico won its independence from Spain, but California changed very little. By 1840 coastal California was controlled by Californios, about 800 wealthy families with Mexican and European roots. The California Indians who had lived near the missions mostly died or moved into the mountains to the east.

Yankee Settlers and War

In the early 1840s Americans from the United States began to arrive, some by ship, others by land. These first visitors from the States found coastal California almost empty. The estimated 130,000 Indians in California lived mostly in the north and the interior. For a few years the Californios and Yankees lived in peace, but the quiet did not last.

War broke out between the United States and Mexico in 1846. An American naval force of 250 men joined up with some American military engineers already in California and claimed California for the United States. Though heavy fighting would continue in Mexico for another year, by early 1847 the war was over in California. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo sealed the victory on February 2, 1848, and California officially became part of the US.

The Discovery and the Response

An even bigger change for California was about to come. In late January, 1848, gold was discovered in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. By summer of 1848, perhaps 4000 miners – Indians, Californios, Americans, and Oregonians – were in the riverbeds 200 miles east of San Francisco. Arriving a bit later were several hundred Kanakas (Hawaiians) and Mexicans.

Word arrived slowly back in the States and was not always believed. Gold discoveries had been claimed before. In fact, for some Americans, it took a speech by President Polk on December 5, 1848, to convince them. Polk’s words were quickly reported in newspapers throughout the 30 states. The 1849 gold rush was about to begin!

Travel to the Gold Fields

The question of whether or not to go to California was not an easy one. First there was the expense. Farms would have to be mortgaged, money borrowed, stock companies formed. Then there was the difficult travel. From New York City three routes were possible.

Most gold seekers in the States chose the overland route. Sea travel was easier but it was expensive, and many Americans living away from the ocean feared sea travel. The shorter sea route was through Panama; the longer was around the tip of South America.

For the 29,000 gold seekers who traveled overland across the Great Plains to California in 1849, timing was very important. The idea was to get on the Nebraska plains after the grass had begun to green up so that there was plenty for the oxen and horses to eat. But wait too long and you could get caught by November snowstorms in the Sierra Nevadas of western
California. As for the trip in between, it was one the gold seekers would never forget.

**In (and Out of) the Gold Fields**

Most gold mining in California was done in the six dryer months from May through October. Gold was generally found in three forms – grains the size of sand, little flakes, or, if you were lucky, small pea-sized nuggets. At night it was a ritual in many camps to weigh out the gold dust that had been collected and put it in a little leather pouch that most men carried. This, of course, if any gold had been found.

When the rains came in the fall, many miners headed to their winter digs in San Francisco. It was said that the best way to get rich was not to mine for gold but to mine the miners. Gamblers, saloon keepers, prostitutes, and most everyone with supplies to sell – from boots to potatoes – kept a greedy eye on the miner’s gold pouch. San Francisco was exciting for some but shocking and depressing for others.

When it came time to turn for home back in the States, with or without “a pocketful of rocks,” most miners traveled by sea via the isthmus of Panama. Comfort level aboard ship depended on what one was willing to pay. The total trip from San Francisco to New York might take two to three months. Many miners were happy to get home with their lives and health intact. The journey of a lifetime was over.

**A special note**

A number of the letters and diary accounts that follow were from the pen of 28-year-old William Swain, gold seeker, and Sabrina Swain, his 23-year-old wife left behind in Youngstown, New York. In a beautiful piece of research and writing, historian J. S. Holliday spent over 30 years collecting letters and diaries and weaving together the true and remarkable story of a gold seeker’s journey west. The work is entitled *As the World Rushed In*, and the Swain writings are its core. This DBQ is dedicated to Mr. Holliday, the Swain family, and to the thousands of gold rush families whose story is at least partially told through the documents that follow.
Source: Letter from Sabrina Swain to husband William, April 15, 1849.
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Sunday evening, April 15, 1849
(Youngstown, New York)

Dear, dear William,

I want very much to describe my feelings as near as I can, but in doing so I hope not to crucify yours. I feel as though I was alone in the world. The night you left home I did not, nor could not, close my eyes to sleep. Sis (their one-year-old baby) slept very well, awoke in the morning, and looked over at me seemingly to welcome a spree with her father, but to her disappointment the looked-for one was absent. She appears very lonesome.

Farewell,

Sabrina

Source: Created from data in The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience by J.S. Holliday, Copyright (c) 1981 by J.S. Holliday.

William Swain’s Route to California, 1849
Chimney Rock, North Fork of Platte, June 3, 1849

I believe my last to you was written from the main Platte, since then I have had no chance of sending letters. We are now nearing Fort Laramie... But in advance I must again say you can hardly conceive of the difficulties of preparing letters on our trip...a fellow must tuck himself up on the ground, in the open air, with his legs crossed like a tailor’s and write on his lap. But to the narrative of the news. We are all well and not only well but getting really fat and saucy, and there’s not a man but feels far better than on leaving home, and eats a great deal more. We met with our first Buffalo just above the forks of the main Platt,...sweeter slices you never devoured...than we boiled on our “buffalo chips” that night.

...The season has been altogether an unusually wet one, with more rain and cold than ever known, yet we have tugged along through with remarkable success. We have had no streams to swim, and our stock are in fine order and we yet make from 22 to 25 miles a day. Buffalo are growing very scarce on this route and we have killed none since our first....

We are all surprised at seeing so few Indians, for we have not seen 20 in all along our whole route; they seem to be terror stricken at the multitude of whites swarming through their solitary plains and do not annoy us a particle. We have not lost a single mule, not even for an hour. The 30th of May was our last day on the South fork of the Platte and a memorable day it was.... A cold Northwester set in overnight, blowing down half our tents.... Morning came dark, gloomy and rainy, with a howling wind along, piercing us through our soaked clothing to the very bones. No wood to raise fire, no warm coffee, no dry clothes,...only crackers and water to fill and warm us.

...Our company now consists of...6 wagons and 27 men, and we find that we travel much easier and quicker than before.... We have gained a position far in advance of the great mass, passing by hundreds of ox teams and some pack mule trains.... We hope to make California by the middle of August if no misfortune attends us. This evening we met a Mormon (coming) from Salt Lake who confirms the gold tidings from California.... He is on his way to St. Joseph and propose taking letters for the moderate price of 50 cts.... Tomorrow we get our first peep at the distant peaks of the Rocky Mountains. And I will be either among or beyond the mountains before you hear again from your old friend, till then farewell.

"Old Boone"
Document 4

Source: Drawing by J. Goldsborough Bruff, 1849. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

"Descent into Pass"

Document 5


July 5, 1849 – Clear and calm.
Temp. 64 degrees. Started early.
2 miles below Chimney-Rock, on the plain, left of trail, a grave:

G. McBeth, M.D.
Died
June 21, 1849,
Of
Buffalo, N.Y.

4 or 5 miles below Chimney Rock, another:

P. W. Tolle [Tolle]
of Marion Co. Mo.
Died
June 14 1849,
of Cholera,
Aged 38 years
At 2 P.M.

Wm. K. Colly,
of Ray County Mo.
Died of Cholera,
June 18, 1849,
Aged 49 years.
Has 1 brother in Compy.

Temp. 84 degrees.
Grave 2 ms. in rear of noon half, on the left:

Jno. Campbell,
of Lafayette Co. Mo.
came to his death by the accidental discharge of his gun,
while riding with a friend,
June 21. 1849.
Aged 18 years.
Diamond Springs (California), Feb. 1, 1851

In order to give you some idea of mining in this beautiful country you must imagine yourself a miner. Well, tie your blankets, knapsack fashion on your back; that accomplished, get your cradle next, ...the old fashioned cradles that you and I were rocked in; put that on top of your blankets; next a pick and shovel and pan, coffee pot, some provisions in the shape of flint bread and (the cause of scurvy) pork; straighten yourself, take your rifle in hand and off you go rejoicing! This is what we call “prospecting,” you travel over the worst mountains I ever saw.... I must remark here that all the mines are in the mountains, on the water courses, ravines and gulches. You come to a ravine, take off your rigging, dig a hole from three to six feet deep, you come to the bedrock where the gold is usually deposited, you find that your labor was all in vain. — You dig another hole and another, and find some gold, wash out some dirt as they call it; you find when you wash out about one hundred buckets full, perhaps five dollars, more commonly three; that will not pay; curse the gulch and your own hard fate, then your reflections are soothing in the extreme. You gather some grass...and make your bed; make a fire, eat your flint bread and pork, a little coffee without sugar, smoke your pipe and go to your blankets, where you will sleep sound. I can assure you gold digging makes a man sleep well.

(Nota: The next day Heren joined a group of men who employed a different mining technique.)

...Now you are determined to try the river, and attached yourself to some mere roving vagabonds you meet with.... Well, you determine to turn the river, the company go to work, dig a race (a diversionary channel alongside the river), which is the work of many days for many hands. Next make your dam to turn the water from the bed of the river, and when it is properly drained you go to work to dig the bed of the stream, buoyed with hopes. You pick, shovel and wash and get nothing. So it was on the bed of the Yuba.... I can assure you, sir, that twenty-one races were dug on this river...and nineteen of them paid nothing, the other two did not pay expenses.

Washing Gold
Jan. 4th. Prospected my hole all day.... Just before dinner I picked up a small "slug" which weighed 7 1/2 dollars [an ounce of gold was worth about $16]....

Jan. 24th. Everbeck and myself...run through 40 buckets [of dirt] and only got about 75 cts. But in the afternoon we set our cradle at a new place...and were lucky enough to get 20 dollars from only 60 buckets.

Feb. 16th. I bought a horse for 4 1/2 ounces.

Feb. 25th. Mr. Fisher started for home this morning having got sick of the country. He looked like the devil - all rags, dirt, &c.

Mar. 15th. Everbeck went up the north gulch today & found that the Chinese have been washing dirt there, some of it belonging to me and a large quantity that he and his partners threw up.

Mar. 16th. This forenoon we mustered a strong gang & went up to the gulch to investigate the dirt washing affair. Found the ends of cigaritas...and other indications which induced us to believe that the theft had been committed by Mexicans....

Jun. 10th. Moody and myself prospected all day and found a great place to work over in the North Gulch. There are some ten or fifteen people at work there now and some of them are doing very well - Blakely made 80 dollars. and one piece of it weighed 41 dollars - old Mr. French made about 90 dollars today - and others from 40 to 50 dollars apiece, but these rich spots are very scarce.

Jul. 11th. Afternoon I went to see Dr. Cogswell and had three of my double teeth filled - 10 dollars apiece. A Mr. Stewart was hung for murder by the people, down at the end of the long wharf. He was arrested yesterday.

Dec. 7th ...this day [Sunday] was spent by some in drinking and gambling - by others in reading the Bible and singing psalms, or washing their dirty clothes....
You will of course ask: Have you done nothing yet in mining? Yes, I have done considerable. I have panned along the banks of the river with various success. My first day's work in the business was an ounce; the second was $35, and the third $92. I picked up a lump worth $51 which cost me no more labor than stooping down to pick it up. But such day's work as these are not a common thing.... The merchant, when told that the men find from $16 to $100 a day, very readily concludes they can easily pay $1 for a pound of potatoes, or $2 for a pound of dried apples, as in the state of New York they can pay half a cent for the former and four cents for the latter.

**Document 10**

**Source:** Letter from Sabrina Swain to husband William, June 9, 1850.

Sunday nine o'clock in my room
Youngstown, June 9, 1850

My beloved Husband,

...O! that I could tell you the feelings and the anxiety that I have had for you since you left home — none but God knows or ever can....

Little Cub has been to the door lately several times and called "Papa." We ask her where Pa is. "In Tadaforna gity gol Gamma, Lila," meaning "In California getting gold for Grandma and Eliza."

...My dear, how often — O! how often — I think of various temptations you are surrounded with and how men of good morals at home...have been led to all kinds of vice. O! my dear, you cannot be too cautious....

Kiss this sheet for me. O! William, I cannot wait much longer. I want to see you so bad.

Sabrina

You will ask, what is the average amount daily made by the miners? This much is quite certain, that...every miner who has at least some experience expects to make an ounce [= $16] a day.

1851 New York City minimum budget for a family of 5 for one week

Barrel of flour, $5.00, will last eight weeks ............... $6.62 1/2
Sugar, 4 lbs. at 8 cents a pound .................................. .32
Butter, 2 lbs. at 32 1/2 cents a pound ............................. .62 1/2
Milk, two cents per day ............................................. .14
Butcher's meat, 2 lbs. beef per day ............................... 1.40
Potatoes, 1/2 bushel ................................................... .50
Coffee and tea ......................................................... .25
Candle light ............................................................ .14
Fuel [coal] ............................................................... .40
Salt, pepper, vinegar, starch, soap, soda, yeast, cheese, eggs. .40
Furniture and utensils, wear and tear ................................ .25
Rent ................................................................. 3.00
Bed clothes ........................................................... .20
Clothing ............................................................... 2.00
Newspapers .......................................................... .12

Total $10.37
Document 13

Source: Compiled from several sources.

Selected Names
of California Mining Towns and Camps

German Bar
Iowa Hill
Irish Creek
Cape Cod Bar
Tennessee Creek
Chinese Camp
Georgia Slide
Dutch Flat
French Corral
Michigan Bluffs
Italian Bar
Kanaka* Bar
Spanish Flat

*Kanaka = Hawaiian

Document 14


The causes that exclude slavery from California lie within a nutshell. All here are diggers, and free white diggers won’t dig with slaves. They know they must dig themselves; they have come out here for that purpose, and they won’t degrade their calling by associating it with slave labor: self-preservation is the first law of nature. They have nothing to do with slavery in the abstract...not one in ten cares a button for abolition...all they look at is their own position; they must themselves swing the pick, and they won’t swing by the side of negro slaves. That is their feeling....
Source: Anonymous photo, California Gold Fields, 1852.

Reprinted by permission of the California State Library.
Anonymous letter written in January, 1850

Women here are doing full as well as men. They can get for cooking sometimes as high as $30 per day, and for washing they can get even as high as $50 to $60. One young lady who came in last fall now has over $3000 clear.

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Document 17

Source: William Swain, letter home, November 6, 1850.

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November 6, 1850
San Francisco

Dear Friends,

...I have made up my mind that I have got enough of California and am coming home as fast as I can....

We have taken cabin passage (to Panama) in a large and convenient New York packet ship by the name of Mosconome. Her accommodations are very good and the number of passengers going will not exceed one hundred in both cabins and in deck...Passage, $85.

...I shall get home with only $700 or $800...but I am thankful for small favors. Also I trust Heaven has blessed me beyond my expectations. If I arrive home with health unimpaired, I have no regretting that I left home on this journey. Hurray for home....

I remain as ever,
Your Son, Brother, and Husband,

William S.