

LESSON PLAN

LOS CALIFORNIOS:

California's Spanish, Native American, and African Heritage

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Grade level recommendation: 4

Time required: 4 1-hour sessions

Unit Overview

Los Californios were the early land-holding families of California descendants of Spanish, Indian, and African peoples who colonized the present-day state of California after 1769. Alta California, as it was known then, marked the northern frontier of the Spanish empire in the New World. This unit focuses on Rancho De Buenos Ayres, located in what is now the Westside area of Los Angeles. Students will use primary resources to develop an understanding of how the Californios had to adapt to an order to retain ownership of their land in California.

Chronology

This unit requires students to have a basic understanding of the Spanish (1769–1821) and Mexican (1821–1848) periods of California history, including these important events:

- 1769: Portolá Expedition into Alta California, beginning Spanish settlement and the establishment of the mission system
- 1781: The founding of the Pueblo de Los Angeles
- 1810: Mexico begins war for independence from Spain
- 1821: Mexico becomes an independent nation
- 1846: The United States provokes war with Mexico
- 1848: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is ratified by Mexico and the United States, with more than a third of Mexico's territory annexed by the United States.

Historical Background

Los Californios were the descendents of Spanish, Native American, and African peoples who colonized the present-day state California after 1769. Alta California, as it was known then, marked the northern frontier of the Spanish empire in the New World.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed that the Mexican citizens living in California — now part of the United States — would retain certain rights, including the right to remain on their own land. However, as Anglo Americans moved into the state, especially during the frenzy of the Gold Rush in mid-century, Californios soon found themselves in the minority and marginalized.

During the Spanish and Mexican periods, the governments of New Spain and Mexico had issued more than 500 land grants to Californios. These landowners mostly used their land for cattle grazing and agriculture. After 1848, however, the US government established a new set of laws that often worked against the Mexican landowners. Their legal claims to the land were challenged by the new Anglo-American settlers, who enjoyed a distinct advantage because they could speak the new language of the land. They were familiar with the legal procedures and they had the power of the new government behind them. The legal battles often dragged on for 15 or more years, forcing many Californios to mortgage or sell their lands to pay for the cost of litigation. Even when they won claim to their land, many were forced to sell it to pay their attorney fees.

This unit focuses on Rancho De Buenos Ayres, which was located in what is now the Westside area of Los Angeles.

Objectives

- Obtain historical data through the use of primary source documents.
- Develop an understanding of how the Californios had to adapt to a new language and legal system in order to retain ownership of their land in California.
- Learn to analyze and interpret information from a variety of primary sources.

Assessment

- Student products from the learning experiences
- Journal entries

- Letters to state government officials
- Visual representations

Conceptual Links to Prior Understanding and Knowledge

Before beginning this lesson, students should:

- Understand what a timeline is and how it can be used to develop a greater understanding of change over time.
- Understand something about the values, beliefs, customs, and daily life of the original settlers in Alta California.
- Understand that when the first settlers from New Spain arrived in Southern California, native peoples had been living here for thousands of years.
- Be familiar with the historical periods in Spanish and Mexican history from 1769 through the Mexican period from the 1820s through 1846.
- Understand the geographic boundaries of these people and their neighbors and how important these geographic regions are to their daily life and survival.

CALIFORNIA CONTENT STANDARDS

History-Social Science

Grade 4: California, a Changing State

Students learn the story of their home state, unique in American history in terms of its vast and varied geography, its many waves of immigration beginning with pre-Columbian societies, its continuous diversity, economic energy, and rapid growth. In addition to the specific treatment of milestones in California history, students examine the state in the context of the rest of the nation, with an emphasis on the US Constitution and the relationship between state and federal government.

4.2 Students describe the social, political, cultural, and economic life and interactions among people of California from the pre-Columbian societies to the Spanish mission and Mexican rancho periods.

5. Describe the daily lives of the people, native and nonnative, who occupied the presidios, missions, ranchos, and pueblos.
7. Describe the effects of the Mexican War for Independence on Alta California, including its effects on the territorial boundaries of North America.
8. Discuss the period of Mexican rule in California and its attributes, including land grants, secularization of the missions, and the rise of the rancho economy.

4.3 Students explain the economic, social, and political life in California from the establishment of the Bear Flag Republic through the Mexican-American War, the Gold Rush, and the granting of statehood.

3. Analyze the effects of the Gold Rush on settlements, daily life, politics, and the physical environment (e.g., using biographies of John Sutter, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, Phoebe Apperson Hearst).
5. Discuss how California became a state and how its new government differed from those during the Spanish and Mexican periods.

NATIONAL UNITED STATES AND WORLD HISTORY STANDARDS

Grades K-4

Chapter 2: Standards in Historical Thinking

Children's study of history rests on knowledge of facts, names, dates, and places. In addition, real historical understanding requires students to engage in historical thinking: to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to read historical narratives and fiction; to consult historical documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, and other records from the past; and to do so imaginatively-taking into account the time and places in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time... Students engaged in activities of the kinds just considered will draw upon skills in the following five types of historical thinking:

1. Chronological Thinking
2. Historical Comprehension
3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation
4. Historical Research Capabilities
5. Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

DAY 1: ACCESSING PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Materials

- Modern map of the United States
- **Image 2:** *Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Mejico* (See Primary Sources, at the end of this lesson plan.)

Discussion Questions

- When was this map created?
- Why do you think it was created?
- How does this map differ from a modern map of the United States?
- What are some items on this map that you recognize?

Activity 1

Orient the class to place: On a modern map of North America, have students locate the political boundaries of the states of the American Southwest and Mexico. After a brief discussion, have them identify the present-day states of California, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, and Utah. Remind them that these states are part of the region we call the American Southwest.

Then display the map of New Spain (Primary Source **Image 2**). Have them analyze and compare this map to the one they just observed. How are they similar? How are they different? Refer to the discussion questions above.

Have students work in cooperative groups to discuss what they think are the reasons for the differences in the maps. Have them brainstorm these ideas and share them with the class. Chart any questions they have regarding these differences.

Remind the students that this area was part of New Spain before it became the northern part of Mexico in 1821.

Activity 2

Orient the class to time: Have the students create a timeline that depicts these important dates in the history of California:

- 1769: The Portolá expedition to Alta California
- 1776: Mission Dolores founded in San Francisco
- 1781: Pueblo de Los Angeles founded
- 1790: First census in California counts 969 persons people living in Alta California (excludes more than 200,000 Indians, roughly 30,000 of whom lived in coastal areas controlled by the Spanish).
- 1821: Mexico becomes a new nation, wins independence from Spain.
- 1846–1848: Mexican-American War
- 1846–1852: Gold Rush in California
- 1850: Federal census counts 92,597 Californians (excludes many Indians).
- 1850: Foreign Miner's Tax targets Spanish-speaking miners.
- 1851: California Land Grant Commission established to oversee legal challenges.

Have students create a double-entry journal in which they will reflect on the events that led to the Californios' struggles to retain their lands.

DAY 2: LAND GRANT RANCH, SAN JOSE DE BUENOS AYRES, 1887–1889

Materials

- **Doc 1:** *Report on abstract of title to the Rancho de San Jose de Buenos Ayres.* (See Primary Sources, at the end of this lesson plan.)
- **Doc 2:** *Last will and testament of Maximo Alanis* (See Primary Sources, at the end of this lesson plan.)

Teaching

Read the transcription of **Doc 2:** *Last will and testament of Maximo Alanis* (see Primary Sources):

1851 Oct 20 Will of Maximo Alanis filed. Said will is in Spanish and a translation of the material portions thereof is as follows.

In the city of Los Angeles on the 20th June 1847 I Maximo Alanis, native of Real del Rosario in Sinaloa legitimate son of Jose Santiago and Maria Bacilia both deceased finding myself by Divine compassion in my entire and complete judgment, memory and natural understanding [Recites his religious convictions]

Fearful of the death that is so natural, to be provided with testamentary dispositions when it shall come. I execute, make and ordain this my will in form following

[In regard to his death and funeral and masses]

I declare that I was first legally married to Juana Miranda by which marriage we begot and had as our lawful children Nicolas, Ysidro [already dead and without issue] Dorotéa married to Jose Antonio Romero. Paula married to Crecenció Valdez [already dead] and Juliana married to Luis Manriquez [also dead]. I also declare that said Juana Miranda having died I contracted marriage again and was lawfully married to Juana Reyes by which marriage we have begotten and have as lawful children Concepcion, Marcos, Susana, and Josefa of whom I appoint my said wife guardian as to their Estates [curadora AS bond] and I relieve her of all bonds and I make over to her the products for her support. I declare that when I married Juana Miranda I owned a house and some cattle and during that acquired a vineyard of some 2000 vines or more. Said house I granted to my older son Nicolas for his having aided me in the labors, and the herd of

cattle that was in his care was disposed of. I declare that when I married a second time I had only the said vineyard. I declare that my actual property consists of the said vineyard, one house in this town somewhat ruined, a small rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres with a little house and corral and one small tract of farming land in size one and one fourth *fanegas*. [a fanega of arable land was understood to be 400 fathoms square] *****

[Recites his debts]

To comply with this my will I appoint as my Executor my wife Juana Reyes and in the second place in case of her failure to act my children Marcos and Concepcion jointly and I give and confer on them complete power for its fulfillment after all the foregoing has been complied with and discharged. Of the remainder of my property personal, real, rights and actions present and future, I constitute as my sole and universal heirs all my children, preferring in the third thereof my four children of the second marriage because of the special care for which I am indebted to them in my old age, and in the fifth to Maria Concepcion for her constant labor in the duties of the household. The appraisers having to remember at the time that I gave to my son Nicolas [as I have said before] the house that I possessed when I contracted my first-marriage and to the remaining children of my said marriage after they had married I have given certain quantities of *aguardiente* from my vineyard that valued perhaps to exceed the sum of \$100 to each which I declare in discharge of my obligations and not to prejudice anyone. And hereby I revoke and annul whatsoever will and other disposition that I may have heretofore made, as to be my will that only this my will shall have force.

Thus I execute and sign. At request of Maximo Alanis as he cannot write.

Antonio Jose Cot. (?)

Discussion Questions

- What is a will?
- Why is it created?
- Who determines whether a will is authentic and accurate?
- What is property?
- How is ownership of property determined today?

- Do you think ownership of property was determined in the same way during Mexican period of California history as it is today? Why or why not?

Activity

Have students form the same cooperative groups as in Day 1, and have them analyze both **Doc 1** (*Report on abstract of title to the Rancho de San Jose de Buenos Ayres*) and **Doc 2** (*Last will and testament of Maximo Alanis*).

In their reflective journals, have the students list the names of the family members involved in the will and the property, if any, that they received. Ask: Did they all receive something? Why or why not?

Have students select a member of the Alanis family. Based on how the property was distributed, have them respond in their journals about how they think that person might have felt after reading the will.

Reflection

During the Spanish and Mexican periods of California history, all official papers were written in Spanish:

- Do you think this English version is true and accurate?
- Why or why not?
- Who do you think wrote the English version of this document?

DAY 3: LAND GRANT RANCH SAN JOSE DE BUENOS AYRES, 1887–1889

Materials

- **Doc 3:** *Deed of Rancho San Jose De Buenos Ayres for Benjamin Wilson* (See Primary Sources, at the end of this lesson plan.)

Discussion Questions

- What is a deed?
- Who decided the ownership of property?
- Josefa Alanis, the daughter of Maximo Alanis and the wife of Martin Lelong, contested the transfer of ownership of her father's land. Why do you think she did this?
- If the sellers of a property only spoke and read Spanish and the buyers and the government officials spoke only English, do you think that there could be a fair and just transfer of ownership of a property? Why or why not?

Activity 1

Have the students dramatize a possible transaction after the sale of a property.

Activity 2

Have two different groups of students take on the different sides of the transaction.

Reflection

Benjamin Wilson eventually assumed ownership of Rancho San Jose De Buenos Ayres. What do you think happened to the Alanis family? Write your thoughts in your journal

DAY 4: DISEÑOS OF THE CALIFORNIA RANCHOS

Materials

- **Image 1:** *Diseño del Rancho San José de Buenos Ayres* (See Primary Sources, at the end of this lesson plan.)

Teaching

Show class the transcription of text in **Image 1:** *Diseño del Rancho San José de Buenos Ayres*:

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San Jose de Buenos Ayres

To the North: Sierra de San Fernando (mountains)

To the east: Rancho San Vicente

To the South: unknown

To the West: Rodeo de las Aguas

In the center: Casa y Coral

Escala de una legua

1 acre to Abel Stearns 12/52

Discussion Questions

- What is a diseño?
- Who created these documents?
- Were they official documents? Why or why not?

Vocabulary, Concepts, and Terminology

For this lesson students must have background information on how to look at political and physical maps. They should understand some basic concepts and terminology, including:

- Legend
- Directionality
- Titles
- Location

A *diseño* is a map that was created to illustrate the location and boundaries of a tract of land that was owned primarily by the Mexican landowners. It was an official map that was recognized by the Mexican government, although it is not clear who exactly drew the maps. Some, like historian Robert Becker, believe that a small group of Mexican men acted as the principal artists of these “surveyed” lands. Others believe that the landowners themselves were responsible for creating these maps.

By today’s standards the maps were very simplistic. However, they are considered to be fairly accurate and often beautiful as well.

In this lesson the students will analyze the *Diseño of the Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres*.

Have the students form the same cooperative groups as in previous lessons. Ask them to analyze the *diseño* and discuss what information can be found by looking at this map. Refer to the questions above.

Guiding Questions

- What type of information do you see in this map?
- What do you think is missing?
- Do you think it is possible to determine the exact boundary of ownership? Why or why not?
- Do you think that it is possible for others to contest the exact location of the Rancho’s boundary? Why or Why not?

Activity 1

Have the students create a map of their neighborhood, school, or home using only natural resources as markers and guides.

Activity 2

Then have them compare their map to a Thomas guide of the same location.

Extensions

Extensions may include teacher questions to prompt further enquiry and the introduction of additional primary and secondary sources.

PRIMARY SOURCES



Image 1: Southern California District Court. *Diseño del Rancho San José de Buenos Ayres*, manuscript map, ca. 1845. The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (Land Case Map A-1352). Available online at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb4q2nb276/?brand=calcultures> (accessed June 2006).



Image 2: Disturnell, John. *Mapa de los Estados Unidos de Mejico, segun lo organizado y definido por las varias actas del Congreso de dicha republica: y construido por las mejores autoridades*, 1847 (reprint by Bancroft Library and Friends; Baltimore, Berkeley: A. Hoen & Co., 1949). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Item Number G4410 F2 1847). Available online at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb467nb68c/?brand=calcultures> (accessed June 2006).

Doc 1: Gillette, Gibson and Wood (Firm). *Report on abstract of title to the Rancho de San Jose de Buenos Ayres*. In *Abstract of title of that certain real property in the county of Los Angeles, state of California, bound and described as follows : Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres*, manuscript, November 6, 1883-June 29, 1887. Pages 1-6. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Item Number 170/24). Available online at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb429005hj/?order=4&brand=calcultures> (accessed June 2006).

Doc 2: Gillette, Gibson and Wood (Firm). *Last will and testament of Maximo Alanis*. In *Abstract of title of that certain real property in the Rancho San Jose de Buenos Ayres, county of Los Angeles, state of California, bounded and described as follows : all of said Rancho as per map appearing on page 53 of this abstract*, manuscript, October 26, 1887-August 10, 1889. Begins on page 3. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Item Number 170/25). Available online at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb4d5nb2jw/?order=4&brand=calcultures> (accessed June 2006).

Doc 3: Gillette, Gibson and Wood (Firm). *Deed of Rancho San Jose De Buenos Ayres for Benjamin Wilson*. In *Abstract of title of that certain real property in the Rancho San Jose de*

Buenos Ayres, county of Los Angeles, state of California, bounded and described as follows : all of said Rancho as per map appearing on page 53 of this abstract, manuscript, October 26, 1887-August 10, 1889. Begins on page 26. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Item Number 170/25). Available online at <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb4d5nb2jw/?order=26&brand=calcultures> (accessed June 2006).

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Gillingham, Robert Cameron. *The Rancho San Pedro: the Story of a Famous Rancho in Los Angeles County and of its Owners the Dominguez family*. Los Angeles: Cole-Holmquist Press, 1961.

Gutiérrez, Ramón, and Richard J. Orsi, eds. *Contested Eden: California before the Gold Rush*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Monroy, Douglas. *Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Perez, Crisostomo N. *Land Grants in Alta California*. Rancho Cordova, CA: Landmark Enterprises, 1996.

Pitt, Leonard. *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846–1890*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Robinson, W. W. *Land in California: The Story of Mission Lands, Ranchos, Squatters, Mining Claims, Railroad Grants*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948.

Related Web Sites

[A History of Mexican Americans in California: Introduction.](#)

<www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/5views/5views5.htm> A brief introduction to the history of California, from the early days of Spanish settlement to the American occupation in the mid-1800s.

[Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\) in California.](#) <www.ca.blm.gov/pa/cadastral/records.html>

This branch of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for the protection, distribution, and sales of survey records made by the General Land Office (GLO) and the BLM throughout California.

[California State Archives: Archives and Museum.](#)

<www.ss.ca.gov/archives/archives_e.htm#land> The California State Archives collections document the broad scope of California government and its impact on the people of the state.

[Los Angeles GenWeb Project: Archived Records.](#) <www.cagenweb.com/re/losangeles/>

USGenWeb Project's archived records for Los Angeles County.

[Ranchos of California.](#) <www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/rancho.html#private> UC Berkeley Library.

Extracts from: Grants of land in California made by Spanish or Mexican authorities, by Cris Perez. Boundary Determination office, State Lands Commission, 1982.

[US National Archives And Records Administration \(NARA\): Resources for Teaching History in California: Fourth Grade. Land Ownership in California and the Transition to a New Government.](#)

<www.archives.gov/facilities/ca/laguna_niguel/workbook/land_ownership_diseno.html> An educational website that includes primary and secondary sources including: Diseño, Survey Plat, and Extract of Treaty of Land Measures.