Gold Rush

The event that transformed San Francisco from a frontier settlement into a bustling town was the discovery of gold on Jan. 24, 1848, at the sawmill of John Sutter on the American River to the north. News of this bonanza reached East coast cities by midsummer, and thousands of would-be prospectors made their way west.

The influx brought a new prosperity to San Francisco. One of the less beneficial results was a breakdown of the social order. The town was overwhelmed by thousands of men and women who needed basics—housing, sanitation, and protection—that the city could not provide. Gangs of hoodlums roamed the city, especially the waterfront area, committing crimes and terrorizing the citizenry. After a particularly savage attack in 1851, an irate population formed the Vigilance Committee. This citizens’ army was police force, judge, and jury all in one. It hung several people found guilty of crimes and forced many others to move elsewhere.

Homestead Act of 1862

By 1849 two steamship companies were running vessels twice a week from both coasts. An alternative was the overland stage. Travelers to San Francisco favored the central California Trail over the more southerly Santa Fe Trail. To transport the mail more quickly, the Pony Express was started in April 1860, linking St. Joseph, Mo., and San Francisco’s northeastern neighbor, Sacramento. It was rendered obsolete in October 1861, however, when the overland telegraph finally stretched across the country. Funds for a transcontinental railroad were voted in 1862, and in May 1869 rails from both sides of the nation were joined in Utah.
Homestead Act of 1862, in U.S. history, significant legislative action that promoted the settlement and development of the American West. It was also notable for the opportunity it gave African Americans to own land. The U.S. government passed the Homestead Act to encourage western migration. The act, which took effect January 1, 1863, granted 160 acres of unappropriated public lands to anyone who paid a small filing fee and agreed to work on the land and improve it, including by building a residence, over a five-year period. The Homestead Act proved one of the most important pieces of legislation in the history of the American West, as hundreds of thousands of people moved to the Great Plains in an effort to take advantage of the free land.

The only personal requirement was that the homesteader be either the head of a family or 21 years of age; thus, U.S. citizens, freed slaves, new immigrants intending to become naturalized, single women, and people of all races were eligible. The potential for free land attracted hundreds of thousands of settlers to move to Kansas, Nebraska, the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), Dakota Territory, and elsewhere in the West and enticed a migratory wave of thousands of African Americans from the South. Rumors of better race relations in the West served as an added attraction; more than 25,000 southern blacks moved to Kansas during the 1870s and 1880s as a part of the Exoduster Movement—the name given to the migration or “exodus” of blacks from the South to escape Jim Crow oppression. While the rumors regarding racial attitudes proved exaggerations, the black farmers who took advantage of the Homestead Act found the West more hospitable than the South. While black access to land never equaled that of whites, the Homestead Act of 1862 gave thousands of ex-slaves the opportunity to own their own land, something that was unattainable in the South.

In all, some 270 million acres were distributed under the 1862 Homestead Act. The act remained in effect for more than a century, and the last claim made under it was granted in 1988 for a parcel of land in Alaska.