

Early Settlers Impact Indian Population

The Spaniards

The Indians thrived in the valley, numbering over 80,000, until the arrival of Spanish missionaries in the late 1700's. Soon the Spaniards began taking Indians as slaves, converting them to Christianity, thus stripping them of their culture. At first the Indians feared the Spanish, but soon grew contempt for them and began fighting back. They would often raid the missions and towns in retaliation.

Captive Indians suffered from strange diseases brought by the Spanish, and those living free often had to forage for food. But it was Malaria that would inflict the heaviest toll on the Indian population. In the 1830's, ships brought Malaria borne by sailors who soon passed the disease to mosquitos. In turn, the mosquitos transmitted the disease to the Indian population.

To make matters worse, small pox was introduced several years later. It began at Fort Ross, just north of San Francisco, and quickly spread. The Miwok and northern Yokuts tribes were devastated by these epidemics. In less than twenty years, the Indian population decreased dramatically and the death toll was estimated to be 100,000 statewide. To this day, most surviving Yokuts have descended from the extreme southern tribes, as the northern fringe were nearly exterminated by disease.

First Settlements

In 1843, Charles Weber and a partner named William Gulnac, acquired land from the Mexican Government where the city of Stockton is now found. Afraid Indians would not allow settlers, Weber approached Siakumne, the chief of the local Yokuts at Sutters Fort in Sacramento, who had taken the name "Jose Jesus". The two became friends and the friendship spread between their two peoples. This powerful alliance allowed Weber to settle in the area which is modern day "French Camp" . . . or "Campo de los Frances", respecting the Indians as valuable allies instead of enemies.

The Mexican-American War and Gold Rush of 1849

California had grown to become a valuable property, and in 1846 the United States and Mexico engaged in a war for the western territories known as the "Mexican-American War". The United States eventually won, and Mexico relinquished control of California in 1848. One year later, Gold was discovered at Sutters Mill. This sparked a rush of settlers to flood in to California in search of their fortune.

The Indian populations were crowded out of their land, and the close proximity soon led to violence. The government responded by placing the Indians on "reservations" and selling or giving away their land. In some instances, land was rewarded as bounty for killing the Indians. There the tribes suffered tremendously from continued disease, starvation and killings. By the late 1800's the statewide Indian population had dropped from 100,000 to less than 30,000 over a 50-year period.

The 20th Century Indian Population

In the late 1700's, the Yokuts were thought to number in the area of 18,000. By 1910 only 600 remained. Today, small villages can be found over a wide area of the central valley.