

Diversity in California

Chinese, Italian, Mexican, and Thai foods are popular in California. So are Ethiopian, Japanese, and Peruvian foods. Diverse restaurants are commonplace. What does that tell us about our state?

California has always been diverse. Every group that settles here is unique. Each contributes to our history and culture.

Native American and Spanish Origins

Europeans came to the New World in 1492. Many scholars estimate that about 300,000 Native Americans lived in California when Columbus first landed in America. (Of course, they did not call it "California," yet.) They spoke 135 languages. Each tribe had its own culture.

Today, the state has 115 Native American tribes. In the south, there are Chumash and Gabrielino. Farther north are the Pomo and Yurok. Lucy Thompson was a famous writer of the Yurok tribe. Her writings showed many Americans the native California culture.

These tribes contributed numerous place names that are still used today. Some of these places are Malibu, Lake Tahoe, Yuba County, Yolo County, and Simi Valley.

The Spanish were the first Europeans in California. In the 1500s, Hernan Cortez and Juan de Cabrillo were key explorers. Later, settlers built *pueblos* (towns). Spanish-style buildings in California are still common.

The Spanish developed cattle ranching. In fact, "ranch" comes from the word *rancho*. American cowboy culture has its roots in the ranchos.

In the 1700s, many Spanish wanted to bring the Roman Catholic religion to Native Americans. They built missions. A mission was a church with a farm and work areas. Today, the missions are historic sites.

Countless places in California have Spanish names. Think of San Jose, San Diego, and Sacramento. Big cities, like Los Angeles, began as Spanish pueblos.

Vocabulary

diversity – the presence of many cultures within one society.

philanthropist – a person who donates money to good causes.

pueblo – town; a word of Spanish origin.

rancho – ranch; a word of Spanish origin.



Basket weaving has traditionally been an important craft for the Yurok people of northern California. (National Park Service, Wikimedia Commons.)

Today, almost 40 percent of Californians are Hispanic. Hispanics include people of Latin American, Mexican, and Spanish ancestry.

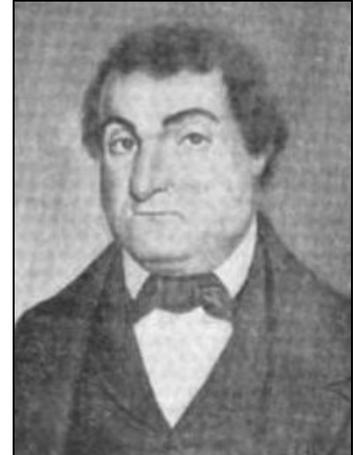
Mexican Heritage

Mexico became free from Spain in 1821. For 27 years, California was then part of Mexico. The U.S. got California after a war with Mexico in 1848.

The *Californios* were Mexicans born here before 1848. Californio families owned much land. Today, many Californians are descended from these families. Many more people in California came from Mexico and settled here after 1848.

Mexican heritage is part of California's tradition. Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta began the non-violent movement for farm workers' rights in central California. March 31 is Cesar Chavez Day, a state holiday.

Judy Baca and Rupert Garcia are painters who have enriched the visual arts. Both Luis Valdez and Richard Rodriguez are famous California writers whose parents migrated from Mexico.



Jose Antonio Carrillo (1796-1862) was a rancher and politician in the Mexican territory of Alta California. He served as mayor of Los Angeles between 1826 and 1834. (Wikimedia Commons.)

"The World Rushed In"

The Gold Rush made California more diverse. One historian said, "the world rushed in." People came from Italy, Russia, Ireland, and England. They came from Mexico, China, and Australia.

Americans of European descent immigrated here in great numbers after the war with Mexico. According to the U.S. Census, 74 percent of today's state population is white. Many of these people descended from Europeans who came in the 1840s and after.

African Americans

Free black people came in the 1840s, too. William Leidesdorff, a free black man, built the first hotel in San Francisco in 1846. About 20 years later, Mary E. Pleasant, a former enslaved person, sued a San Francisco streetcar company. It had refused her a seat. She won at trial.

California's African Americans have contributed to modern literature. Octavia E. Butler from Los Angeles was the first science fiction writer to win a MacArthur "genius" grant of \$500,000. Walter Mosley is a best-selling mystery writer, also from Los Angeles.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

By 1870, over 100,000 Chinese lived in California. By 1910, most of the United States' 70,000 people of Japanese ancestry lived in California. Korean immigrants

began to arrive in the 1880s. Today, Asians make up over 13 percent of the state population.

They have contributed to California industry. Chinese people reclaimed swamps for farming near Sacramento. They fished for shrimp and squid along the coast. Japanese people developed the farms and vineyards of central California.

Well-known Chinese-American authors from California are Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. Korean-American Nam June Paik pioneered video art. Younghill Kang was a major 20th century Korean-American novelist.

Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are a small group in California. But they outnumber the Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Hawaii. Samoans in Southern California have contributed to art and music there.

Growing Diversity

Modern diversity includes persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered ("LGBT"). Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon met in 1949 in San Francisco. They created the first social group for lesbians. Harvey Milk later became the first openly gay man in public office in California.

Many LGBT persons have contributed to the arts here. Well-known California LGBT writers are Christopher Isherwood, Joseph Hansen, and June Jordan. David Geffen is a successful music and film producer. He is also a philanthropist. Though the science fiction writer Octavia Butler did not speak publicly about being a lesbian, after her death, friends revealed that she was.

Persons with disabilities have also added to California's history. Edward Roberts had polio as a child. As an adult, he had to use a wheelchair.

In the 1960s, he began the independent living movement. This enabled persons with disabilities to care for themselves. Roberts helped make these persons more visible in society.

In 1977, Judy Heumann led a 28-day sit-in of 150 people at a federal office in San Francisco. This action helped persuade U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Joseph Califano to enact civil rights protections for people with disabilities nationwide.

Today, there are almost 40 million people in California. No state has a bigger population. Perhaps none is more diverse, either.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How has California always been a diverse society? Explain.
2. What do you think are the benefits of a diverse society? What are the challenges?
3. In 1965, U.S. immigration law changed. Specific quotas, or maximum limits, on immigration from many Latin American and Asian countries ended. Do you think that has had a big effect on California's society? Why or why not?



Science fiction author Octavia Butler signing a book in 2005. (Nikolas Coukouma, Wikimedia Commons.)