

John Sutter | Lesson Plan

How did John Sutter's actions and experiences shape westward expansion and the California Gold Rush, and why are his contributions significant to American history?

Students will understand how John Sutter's entrepreneurial vision and the establishment of Sutter's Fort contributed to the migration patterns of westward expansion and set the stage for the California Gold Rush. They will also explore the broader impact of his actions on the development of California and its economy.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify and explain the who, what, where, when, and why of John Sutter's life and contributions to westward expansion.
- Analyze the challenges and opportunities Sutter faced, and how these reflect broader themes of immigration and settlement.
- Summarize key events from the book, including the founding of Sutter's Fort and the California Gold Rush.
- Reflect on the importance of learning about Sutter's impact and his enduring legacy.

Key Vocabulary:

- **Alta California:** The northernmost province of Mexico during the early 19th century. Alta, or "Upper" California, included parts of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming.
- **Sutter's Fort:** A settlement established by John Sutter in 1839 in what is now Sacramento, California, that served as a hub for trade, agriculture, and supplies during westward expansion, providing resources and shelter to settlers, traders, and immigrants traveling to California. Sutter's Fort became a key landmark in early California history and played a significant role in supporting pioneers and facilitating the California Gold Rush.
- **California Gold Rush:** A mass migration of settlers moving west to California to find gold. The migration began when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill on the American River in 1848 and peaked in the early 1850s.
- **Confluence:** The place where two rivers meet and flow together.
- **Land Claim:** A legal declaration stating that a person owns a piece of land. In frontier history, settlers often made land claims by simply settling in new territory.
- **Perseverance:** Continuing to work hard and not giving up, even when things are difficult.
- **Tenacity:** Determination; not giving up easily.
- **Charisma:** Special charm or appeal that makes people like someone.

Educational Standards: CCRA.R.1, CCRA.R.2, CCRA.R.7, CCRA.R.10, CCRA.W.2, CCRA.W.4, CCRA.W.7, CCRA.W.8, CCRA.SL.1, CCRA.SL.2, CCRA.SL.4, CCRA.SL.5, CCRA.L.4, CCRA.L.6

Academic Subject Areas: Language Arts, History

What You'll Need

- PragerU Kids Book *Trailblazers of America: John Sutter* (Download [Here](#))
- Worksheets: *Trailblazers of America: John Sutter* (Click [Here](#))
- Optional: Purchase the book from Amazon (Click [Here](#))
- Highlighters, pencils, index cards



Pre-Lesson Preparation: Reading the Book

For Teachers:

1. Assign the John Sutter book as a pre-reading activity.
 - Depending on your schedule and grade level, this can be completed in class or as homework.
 - Use this pre-reading time to introduce students to the themes of exploration, perseverance, and Sutter's pivotal role in American history. A short introduction is included below.
2. Optional Pre-Reading Activities:
 - Vocabulary Preview: Introduce the key vocabulary terms (e.g., Alta California, California Gold Rush, etc.) using visual aids or an interactive activity like matching terms to their definitions. Discuss how these terms set the stage for understanding Sutter's story.
 - Anticipation Guide: Provide students with a list of thought-provoking statements to agree/disagree with before reading, such as:
 - John Sutter's vision of creating a utopian settlement in California was realistic for his time.
 - The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill was the best thing to happen to John Sutter's settlement.
 - Sutter's Fort was one of the most important hubs for westward expansion in California.

For Students:

1. As they read the John Sutter book, encourage students to:
 - Highlight or underline key events, challenges, and achievements in Sutter's life.
 - Note surprising facts or write down any questions they have about Sutter's journey.
2. Optional Student Task:
 - Ask students to jot down a list of personal qualities they think an explorer or pioneer like John Sutter would need to succeed. This will help them connect Sutter's story to broader values like perseverance and innovation.

Introduction for Pre-Reading (15 minutes)

1. **Introduce John Sutter:**
 - Share that John Sutter was a key figure in westward expansion, known for founding Sutter's Fort, which became a hub for settlers in California, and for his connection to the California Gold Rush.
2. **Show images of Sutter (e.g., the one from page 5) and ask:**
 - *What can we learn about him from his appearance?*
 - *What qualities might someone need to build a settlement in an unknown land?*
3. **Discuss the Setting:**
 - Display a map of the United States during the mid-1800s and highlight California as part of Alta California under Mexican control.
 - Point out Sutter's journey to California, including his challenges traveling through treacherous terrain and the Great Basin (pages 8-9).

- Mention key hardships settlers like Sutter faced, including isolation, limited resources, and dealing with Native American tribes.
- 4. Ask students:**
 - *Why might someone choose to leave their home and start over in a faraway place like California?*
 - *What challenges might Sutter and other settlers have faced in building a new life?*
- 5. Brainstorm and List:**
 - Write students' ideas on the board under "Motivations" and "Challenges."
Examples may include:
 - Motivations: Land opportunities, adventure, creating a better life
 - Challenges: Lack of government structure, dangerous travel, risk of failure
- 6. Conclude with Context:**
 - Briefly explain that during Sutter's time, California was under Mexican rule and largely unsettled by European Americans. Sutter envisioned it as a land of opportunity and worked to make his dream of a settlement come true.
 - Share: "As you read about John Sutter, think about the determination it took to establish a settlement in such a wild and untamed environment—and how his story shaped the development of California and the American West."

Post-Reading Lesson Plan (one 60-minute class period)

Warm-Up: (10 minutes)

1. Show an image of Sutter's Fort from the book (page 20). Ask:
 - *What do you think life was like in Sutter's Fort?*
 - *Why might settlers have been drawn to California during this time?*
2. Share a fun fact from the book, such as the different ways settlers could travel to California (pages 12-13), and prompt students:
 - *How would you choose to travel to California in the 1840s, and why?*
3. Brief class discussion: Why is it important to learn about individuals like John Sutter when studying westward expansion?

5 Ws Chart (25 Minutes)

1. Hand out the 5 Ws graphic organizer to each student. Explain that the purpose of this activity is to analyze the key elements of Sutter's life and accomplishments by answering five key questions.
2. This activity is designed to build a strong foundation of knowledge about John Sutter, which students will use later to analyze their contributions and legacy in more depth.
3. Go over each section of the 5 Ws Chart to ensure students understand what is expected. Provide examples to guide their thinking:
 - **Who:** Identify who the book is about, including key figures associated with John Sutter's story.
 - Examples: *John Sutter, James Marshall (discovered gold at Sutter's Mill), settlers who traveled to Sutter's Fort for supplies, and Mexican officials like Governor Alvarado, who allowed Sutter to settle in Alta California.*
 - **What:** Describe Sutter's major accomplishments.
 - Examples: *Founded Sutter's Fort, a key hub for settlers and traders; played a significant role in the California Gold Rush when gold was discovered at his mill; negotiated with Mexican officials to acquire land in Alta California*

- **Where:** Identify the locations tied to Sutter's life and work.
 - Examples: *Kandern, Germany (his birthplace), Alta California (modern-day Sacramento), where Sutter's Fort was built, and the American River, where Sutter's Mill was located.*
 - **When:** Record the time periods and key events in Sutter's life.
 - Examples: *1834 (Arrived in New York City), 1839 (Established Sutter's Fort in Alta California), 1848 (Gold discovered at Sutter's Mill, starting the California Gold Rush)*
 - **Why:** Explore Sutter's motivations and the reasons behind his actions.
 - Examples: *Sutter wanted to create a utopian settlement where settlers could thrive, his vision of prosperity and opportunity drew him to California, the Gold Rush was a pivotal moment that brought thousands to California, though it ultimately caused Sutter personal loss.*
4. Model Expectations:
- Choose one or two sections to model for students. For instance:
 - **Who:** Write "John Sutter - Entrepreneur, Pioneer, Visionary." Ask students to come up with other people who were part of his story, like James Marshall.
 - **What:** Write: "Founded Sutter's Fort." Ask students to add other accomplishments, like the discovery of gold at his mill.
5. Guide Student Work:
- Encourage students to use evidence from the book, class discussions, and notes to complete their chart.
 - Allow students to work in small groups or pairs, brainstorming together before filling out their charts.
 - Circulate the room to answer questions and offer prompts.
6. Class Discussion and Sharing:
- After students complete their charts, facilitate a class discussion to share their findings.
 - Create a master chart on the board, asking students to contribute ideas for each section.
 - Reinforce connections between Sutter's actions and the broader themes of westward expansion and the California Gold Rush.

Pioneer Legacy Profile: (15-20 minutes)

1. Hand out the Pioneer Legacy Profile graphic organizer to each student. Explain that this activity will help them understand John Sutter's contributions to westward expansion and the California Gold Rush, as well as his relevance to American history.
2. Define and explain the three sections of the organizer to ensure students clearly understand what is expected. Provide examples to guide their thinking:
 - **Values & Traits:** Students should identify the personal qualities and values that enabled John Sutter to establish Sutter's Fort and adapt to challenges in Alta California. Encourage them to consider how these traits helped him achieve his goals.
 - Examples: *Visionary thinking: Sutter envisioned a thriving settlement in California; Resilience: Overcame hardships, including a failed business in Switzerland and challenges in traveling to California; Charisma: Gained the trust of Mexican officials and settlers to establish his colony.*

- **Impact on History:** Students will evaluate the long-term significance of Sutter's work and how his actions shaped the development of California and the United States. Encourage them to think beyond what Sutter did and focus on why his accomplishments mattered in shaping history.
 - Examples: *Sutter's Fort became a crucial hub for trade, supplies, and settlement during westward expansion.*
 - *The California Gold Rush, which began at Sutter's Mill, changed the course of U.S. history by driving mass migration and economic development.*
 - *Sutter's legacy illustrates the complexities of westward expansion, including the impacts on settlers, Indigenous people, and the land.*
 - **Lessons for Today:** Students will reflect on the relevance of Sutter's story in the modern world. This section encourages them to consider what we can learn from his experiences and how his legacy continues to inspire or caution us about perseverance, ambition, and the unintended consequences of success.
 - Examples: *the importance of resilience and adaptability in pursuing goals; lessons on the potential risks of rapid economic expansion, as seen in the Gold Rush's impact on Sutter's dream; recognition of how individuals' actions can have far-reaching consequences for communities and nations.*
3. Model Expectations:
- Use one example for each category to demonstrate how to fill out the organizer effectively. For instance:
 - **Values & Traits:** Write "Resilience" and explain how Sutter overcame challenges like financial struggles and adapting to the rugged California landscape.
 - **Impact on History:** Write "Sutter's Fort became a hub for settlers," and explain its role in westward migration.
 - **Lessons for Today:** Write "Ambition can lead to both success and unintended consequences" and connect it to Sutter's story and the Gold Rush.
4. Guide Student Work:
- Encourage students to use evidence from their reading, class discussions, and notes. Allow them to brainstorm individually, in pairs, or in small groups before completing the organizer independently.
 - Circulate the room to answer questions, provide prompts, and ensure students are drawing meaningful connections.
5. Class Discussion and Sharing:
- After students complete the organizer, facilitate a class discussion where they share their responses. Write key ideas on the board for each category to reinforce understanding and encourage collaboration.
 - Highlight recurring themes like resilience, vision, and the dual impacts of progress.

Wrap-Up: (10 minutes)

1. Begin wrapping up the lesson by posing the following reflective questions to the class. Encourage students to share their thoughts and connect their answers to what they wrote in their Pioneer Legacy Profile organizer:
 - *Why do you think John Sutter is still remembered today?*
 - *What do Sutter's actions teach us about resilience, ambition, and adaptability?*

- *How might westward expansion and the California Gold Rush have been different without Sutter's Fort and his role in establishing a hub for settlers?*
- *What values from Sutter's life—like perseverance, vision, or innovation—do you think are still important in today's world?*
- 2. Reflection Exit Ticket: Distribute an index card or have students complete a short journal entry answering one of the following prompts:
 - *What is one thing about John Sutter's legacy that is most important for people to remember, and why?*
 - *How does learning about John Sutter help you better understand the challenges and triumphs of westward expansion?*
 - *If you were inspired by John Sutter's story, what actions or values would you embrace to make a difference in your life or community?*
- 3. Conclude the lesson by connecting Sutter's legacy to larger themes such as resilience, vision, and the impact of ambition. Highlight how these values shaped California's history and continue to inspire individuals today, while also acknowledging the complex outcomes of Sutter's actions during westward expansion.
 - Example Closing Statement: John Sutter's life teaches us that bold visions and determination can open new frontiers and create opportunities for others. Sutter's Fort became a cornerstone of westward expansion, helping settlers realize their dreams of a better life. At the same time, his story reminds us of the complexities of ambition and the unforeseen consequences of progress, like the California Gold Rush, which reshaped the region forever. Sutter's legacy challenges us to think critically about how one person's actions can leave a lasting impact on history and inspire us to pursue our own dreams with courage and perseverance.

Enrichment Activity Options

These activities are designed to extend learning by exploring the natural and technological aspects of John Sutter's time, as well as the cultural and economic impact of Sutter's Fort and the California Gold Rush. Teachers can use these options to encourage creativity, critical thinking, and hands-on exploration of Sutter's world.

1. A Field Guide to West Coast & Sierra Animals and Plants:

- **Animal Research and Presentation:**
 - Assign each student or group an animal from the book's *Field Guide to West Coast & Sierras Animals* (e.g., California Grizzly Bear, Kit Fox, Garter Snake, Sea Lion).
 - Students create a visual presentation that includes:
 - The animal's habitat and diet.
 - Its significance to settlers or Indigenous people in Sutter's time.
 - How it might have impacted settlement efforts or survival.
 - Encourage students to sketch the animal and describe its behavior and adaptations to the region.
- **Plant Identification Exploration:**
 - Using the *Field Guide to West Coast & Sierras Plants* (e.g., Redwood, Coffeeberry, California Poppy), students can:
 - Sketch and describe the plant's features (e.g., leaves, flowers).

- Hypothesize how settlers might have used these plants for building, food, or trade.
 - Optionally, take a nature walk to identify plants in the local environment and compare them to those from Sutter's era.
 - **West Coast Diorama:**
 - Students can create a diorama of Sutter's Fort and the surrounding landscape, including labeled plants and animals from the West Coast. Use clay, paper, and paint to emphasize life in the region and the environmental challenges settlers faced.
- 2. A Field Guide to the West Coast & Sierras Technology**
- **Sluice Box Experimentation:**
 - Have students design a miniature sluice box using simple materials like cardboard, sand, and water to simulate panning for gold.
 - Discuss the importance of sluice boxes during the Gold Rush and how they impacted mining efficiency.
 - **Pickaxe Challenge:**
 - Provide students with craft sticks and clay to build a small model of a mining pickaxe.
 - Discuss how tools like the pickaxe were essential for breaking rocks and accessing gold.
 - **Blue Jeans Design Challenge:**
 - Have students sketch a design for durable workwear, inspired by the invention of blue jeans during the Gold Rush.
 - Encourage them to include features like reinforced seams, extra pockets, or weather-resistant materials.
 - Discuss how Levi Strauss's innovation addressed miners' challenges and how practical designs can solve real-world problems.
- 3. Cross-Sectional Project: Mapping Sutter's World**
- Combine field guides into a larger project:
- **Mapping California in the Time of Sutter:**
 - Provide a blank map of California and have students label key locations from Sutter's life, including:
 - Sutter's Fort
 - Sutter's Mill (site of the gold discovery)
 - Key routes taken by settlers to reach California (e.g., Oregon Trail, Sierra Nevada)
 - Discuss the challenges settlers faced traveling these routes and why Sutter's Fort was a critical stop.
 - **Settler Supplies Packing List:**
 - Ask students to create a packing list for settlers heading to Sutter's Fort in the 1840s. They should consider the tools, food, and other supplies they would need to survive and thrive in California's rugged environment. Have them justify their choices based on the challenges faced during westward expansion.
- 4. Historical Reflections:**
- **Writing Prompt:**
 - Imagine you are a settler arriving at Sutter's Fort. Write a letter home describing your journey, what you see at the fort, and your hopes for the future.

- Encourage students to use historical details from the book to make their letters vivid and accurate.