

# Her Side of the Story: Tales of California Pioneer Women Curriculum Guide

**Among the treasures in *The Society of California Pioneers* archives are rare, first-person narratives by pioneer women. After uniting to ensure that future generations could recognize, and would acknowledge, the role women played in the formation of the state, *The Association of Pioneer Women of California* collected and preserved the experiences of its members. Their remarkable stories are the foundation of this exhibition and online resource for teachers. The website includes unpublished first-person accounts of women who came to California during the gold rush, rare images from our archives, and activities using primary sources that illuminate the experience of California's pioneer women.**

## **The Society of California Pioneers**

Established in 1850, *The Society of California Pioneers* is dedicated to the study and enjoyment of California art, history, and culture. Founded by individuals arriving in California before 1850 and thriving under the leadership of several generations of their direct descendants, *The Society* has continuously served the academic community and the public. Today, as a nonprofit organization, it operates a research library and a museum, both housed in one of the iconic Montgomery Barracks Buildings on The Presidio of San Francisco. Our archives document the founding and early history of California, including The Gold Rush, The Earthquake and Fire of 1906, and other defining events. The collection includes rare manuscripts and diaries, paintings, prints and drawings, photographs, books, maps, newspapers and journals, the business ledgers of mining and transportation companies, as well as historic artifacts and decorative objects.

*The Society of California Pioneers* offers free museum education programs that illuminate and honor the diverse experiences of those who came before us. Programs can be adapted to the age, interests and special needs of any group, giving students equal and direct access to the primary sources in our collection.

Pioneer Hall at The Presidio is centrally located on the Main Post, near other educational and recreational opportunities that enrich and expand the experience of park visitors. Our hour-

long education programs are designed to stand alone as a meaningful and interactive experience. They can also serve as part of a full-day Presidio experience when combined with other programs (including those offered by The National Park Service, The Presidio Officers' Club, and The Walt Disney Family Museum – all just steps away from Pioneer Hall).

### **The Association of Pioneer Women of California**

As preparations were being made for the commemoration of California's Golden Jubilee (marking fifty years of statehood on September 9, 1900), a letter printed in a San Francisco newspaper asked why "no provisions had been made for the pioneer mothers" and, in turn, *The Association of Pioneer Women of California* was formed. Their mission was to collect and preserve the reminiscences of women arriving in California before January 1, 1854. Bound in an unpublished, handwritten book (now archived at *The Society of California Pioneers*), their remarkable stories are the foundation of our current exhibition, as well as the concurrent museum education program and online resource for teachers.

The original members of *The Association of Pioneer Women of California* and their female descendants had a log cabin erected in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park where they hosted events honoring the contributions of pioneer women; although the organization disbanded in 1970s, the log cabin remains popular with park visitors.

Of greater interest to historians, however, are the members' unique first-person accounts of historic events, the bylaws and constitution of their organization, as well as the annual membership rosters they compiled.

## **Teaching with Primary Sources**

### **What is a primary source?**

According to The Smithsonian, a primary source is "a document or object that was created by an individual or group as part of their daily lives" or "any original source of information that provides a direct, first-person connection to a historical event." Examples include birth certificates, photographs, diaries, letters, newspapers, clothing, art and decorative objects, as well as public records.

### **What is first-person testimony?**

The written account or spoken reminiscences of a person who participated in an event are first-person testimonies. Examples include interviews, diaries, letters, photographs and drawings created to illustrate an event, as well as the court testimony of an eyewitness.

### **What are the benefits of using primary sources and first-person testimony to teach history?**

According to The Library of Congress, the use of primary sources:

- provides a window into the past through unfiltered access to the social and political thought of the time and place being studied.
- helps students create a personal connection to events in the past and, in turn, fosters both a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events and a compassionate, humane regard for those who came before us.
- encourages students to seek additional evidence through research; students can use prior knowledge and seek multiple sources to define patterns.
- allows students to explore differing points of view, often directly confronting contradictions, misconceptions, and misrepresentations.

“Primary sources provide authentic materials for students to practice the skills required by the Common Core State Standards. Encouraging students to grapple with the raw materials of history, such as photographs, newspapers, film, audio files, government documents, and economic data, provides opportunities for them to practice critical thinking, analysis skills and inquiry.”

Primary Sources: The Heart of the Common Core State Standards

Richard Cairn, Library of Congress

### **Are there drawbacks to using primary sources and first-person accounts?**

Primary sources, including the reminiscences presented here, can add to our understanding of a specific topic about which little is known or that otherwise lacks documentation (in this case, the experience of women during The California Gold Rush). Still, some first-person accounts are simply anecdotal and entertaining, detailing experiences that are unique to an individual without making a meaningful contribution to the study of history. Some may not be completely accurate since memory is fallible, while others may be influenced by a cultural bias or self-serving motives.

*The Association of Pioneer Women of California* included restrictive membership requirements in their bylaws; the stories of their members do not represent the experiences of a true cross-section of the population. Care has been taken to address this directly both in our museum exhibition and on this website; we encourage teachers to use this example (of a primary source compromised by bias) to discuss the important steps historians must take to ensure they are putting forward a balanced and inclusive narrative.

## Visiting the Exhibition

### What will students see and experience in the museum?

The hour-long museum education program for this exhibition is designed to give students direct access to primary sources in an interesting and engaging way. Students are able to analyze multiple accounts of the same event, noting similarities and differences in the point of view they represent (a key tenet of the Common Core State Standards). Photographs and artifacts featured in the exhibition are used to give context to the first-person accounts of California's pioneer women.

The exhibition includes:

- the original handwritten book containing almost 800 accounts of those who joined *The Association of Pioneer Women of California*, as well as the organization's founding documents
- the reminiscences of individual women in print and in digital audio, selected and annotated by our staff
- objects from our collection that illuminate themes found in their writing
- early maps of California, as well as other contemporaneous publications
- rare photographs and panoramas that provide context for the experiences described by the women
- images of women about whom little is recorded or known, coupled with questions that explore how bias and omission skew historic records

The museum education program includes:

- a private, guided tour of the exhibition
- an introduction to key concepts and vocabulary
- activities that illuminate the diverse experiences of those who came before us
- an opportunity to do research using primary sources and first-person testimony
- projects that encourage students to see their own story, as well as those of their parents and grandparents, as an important part of California history

### Are there materials or activities I can introduce in the classroom before or after our visit to the exhibition?

Our museum education program is designed to support your history and social studies curriculum. This guide includes materials, as well as suggestions for ways to use them in your classroom, to complement the experience students have during their time in the museum.

## Classroom and Curriculum Resources

The following will give you a more complete understanding of what is included in the exhibition and, in turn, provide options for classroom activities; these materials and ideas can be adapted to the needs and interests of your students, before or after participating in our museum education program.

Our exhibition website ([pioneerwomen.californiapioneers.org](http://pioneerwomen.californiapioneers.org)) gives you access to:

- the handwritten, first-person accounts (compiled by *The Association of Pioneer Women of California* in 1900) reproduced in an interactive, digital format for students to explore, page by page
- an easy-to-read transcription of every entry
- audio files featuring a diverse cast of women reading the thirty entries selected for the exhibition
- the images used to create the exhibition's gallery of forty portraits of unidentified women (representing the thousands of women whose stories were never recorded)

### Questions for discussion and/or writing exercises before or after visiting the exhibition:

- Courage and self-confidence are common themes in the stories of pioneer women. What is something you have done that required courage?
- Many pioneers left their homeland knowing that they would never return. What would you miss about San Francisco if you had to move away?
- Today, we call those who take any brave, first step “a pioneer” – for example: “Rosa Parks was a pioneer of the civil rights movement.” Who do you think is a pioneer of our time?
- Pioneer families brought their cultural traditions with them to California. What family traditions and holidays will you celebrate no matter where you live?
- Many pioneers, both young and old, kept handwritten diaries. How do you record your thoughts, feelings, experiences, and secrets?

### A sample entry:

Each of the entries selected for the exhibition is an example of a *first-person narrative* that is, by definition, a *primary source* – and can be used to introduce those concepts.

Harriet Virginia Peyton's entry is a good example. She describes her experience as an adventure, including details that impressed her as a young woman and that she recalled years later.

Working with the original document could be difficult for some students because it was handwritten in cursive; this transcription, as edited for inclusion in the exhibition, can be used in the classroom in place of the original:

“When the cry of gold rang over the world, and California answered *Eureka! I have found it* ... people everywhere made ready to rush to the gold fields in the far away West, but the problem was how to get there for no railroads or steamboats ... and the great Panama Canal offered no transportation in those days. We had either to cross the plains and rugged interweaving mountains, have the dangers of the Isthmus of Panama, or go around the continent of South America on a sailing vessel.

With the family of my brother, The Reverend William Taylor, I left Baltimore in April 1849, in the ship *Andalusia* and sailed on the long voyage to California. We had a voyage religious service held every Sunday. A weekly paper was published with Father Neptune as editor ... whose diversity of life was playing around the ship - shoals of whales, flying fish. We celebrated Fourth of July off Cape Horn. The Declaration of Independence was read. Coming up the coast of the Pacific we stopped at Valparaiso, the first land we had seen since we had left Baltimore. We enjoyed its fruits and flowers and the music of its happy people.

Never shall I forget with what eagerness and thankfulness we watched that beautiful day as our ship glided into that wonderful harbor of safety, The Bay of San Francisco, which today invites the commerce of all nations and the fleets of the world to come and rest on its placid waters. We anchored far out in the bay as the water came up to Montgomery Street and, in small boats, landed near Pacific and Montgomery. We arrived Sept 25, 1849, five months after leaving Baltimore.”

This example:

- features words teachers can use to expand vocabulary (eureka, isthmus, shoal, and placid)
- raises questions teachers can use to encourage research (Why was the Panama Canal created and when was it completed?)

- encourages speculation and the sharing of opinions (Based on what you've read, how old do you think Harriet was when her family sailed to California? Harriet describes the people of Valparaiso as "happy" - what do you think she might have seen there?)
- demonstrates what can – as well as what cannot – be gleaned from a first-person narrative (Harriet's charming account is romanticized, since it makes no mention of the hardship of five months at sea.)

Teachers should feel free to use or adapt this material to meet the needs of their students, and to contact our staff with questions, to request additional information, or to make a reservation. There is no admission charge for students, your staff, or any number of chaperones; only a simple reservation is required.

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