Exploration and Early Settlement

The Spaniards were the first European explorers to reach California. Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo arrived in San Diego Bay by ship in 1542. Spain did not begin to settle California until 1769, however, when four expeditions (two by land and two by sea) left Baja California and agreed to meet in San Diego. Gaspar de Portolá led one of the land expeditions and then continued north to establish an outpost at Monterey. Presidios were constructed in San Diego and Monterey to defend the Spanish claim to the territory. In the following years, Spanish missionaries and settlers came to convert Indians to Christianity, establish new towns, and access available land. In 1826, trappers searching for beaver belts arrived from the east, soon followed by American explorers, and prospectors looking for gold. California’s reputation for excellent climate and soils spread quickly, and Europeans settled the fertile lower Sacramento Valley and the coastal plains from San Francisco to San Diego.