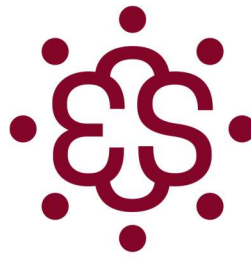


Picturing Mexican Los Angeles



**Ethnic Studies
Educator Support**
esresources.org

Land & Power Under Changing Governments and National Cultures.

Historical Inquiry Guiding Question

How did land ownership change after California became part of the United States, and what does the history of legal and political transition of land ownership in Los Angeles reveal about the continuity and changes in peoples' relationship to a land?

What's Inside?

- [Slide Deck on Historical Context](#): Mexican land grants and the transition from Mexican to U.S. rule of Western regions (1821-1848, with optional extensions before Spanish rule and into present-day).
- Primary Source: *Diseño of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera*, c. 1844 – a hand-drawn map used to show the approximate boundaries and important features of a Mexican land grant.
- [Interactive Map](#) for students to investigate Mexican land ownership across 19th-century Los Angeles – from “Picturing Mexican America,” a digital humanities project designed and run by UCLA Professor of English and Chicana/o and Central American Studies, Dr. Marissa López, in collaboration with the LA Public Library.
- Student Handout, including Close Reading and Spatial Analysis Questions; Complex Thinking Prompts; and Evidence-Based Reflection.
- Extended Enrichment – Optional Extension Activities.

Lesson Summary

This one-day lesson guides students to investigate Mexican connections to and ownership of land in present-day Los Angeles before and after California became part of the United States. Students examine historical documents and an interactive map to trace changes in land ownership, use, boundaries, and control over time. Throughout the investigation, students consider how political and legal power shaped relationships to land in present-day Los Angeles, and how historical records influence what is remembered and what can be claimed. Students begin by examining a nineteenth-century *diseño* of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera, a

*This lesson was created by Jazmin Kent, MA, in collaboration with
ES Resources: Ethnic Studies Educator Support.*

primary source showing the approximate boundaries and geographic features of a Mexican land grant received by Vicente Sánchez in 1843 under Mexican law.

The lesson provides historical context about the Indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. periods of California history and introduces the political transition that followed the U.S. acquisition of California. Students then independently explore the *Picturing Mexican America* interactive map, using historical documents connected to locations across present-day Los Angeles. By examining and comparing multiple locations, students trace what happened to Mexican-owned land over time and use evidence to develop conclusions about land, power, memory, and belonging in Los Angeles.

Ethnic Studies Guiding Questions

1. Whose presence or relationship to land is remembered or made invisible under different historical circumstances?
2. What does it mean to “claim” land? Do people have power over land?
3. What does it require to recover local history, and how might doing so change the way we understand land rights, cultural, political, or social belonging, national memory, and historical evidence?
4. How does change over time affect people's relationships to a place?
5. How might learning the Mexican history of Los Angeles change the way we understand who belongs in the city today?

Support Note: *If you are teaching these materials in Los Angeles County and would like an ES Resources representative to assist with your planning or classroom application, please email contact@ESResources.org. Consider using the **ES Resources AI tool** for lesson planning to adapt these materials for students with different learning, reading, and analytical needs, and to make adjustments that support accessibility and meaningful participation for all learners.*

This lesson is suitable for grades 9-12 and can be adapted for 7-8. It is aligned with the principles of secondary Ethnic Studies education as laid out in the California state-approved Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC). These materials explore California History and local Los Angeles history and can be taught inside a standalone Ethnic Studies course as well as in U.S. History (suggested topics: colonialism, Westward expansion, Mexican-American War), Chicano/x/a and Latino/a/x cultural studies, Human Geography, and Government classes.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- **Analyze visual primary sources** by identifying descriptive features and using those features as evidence to make historical inferences.
- Analyze relationships between power and land by examining how political and legal power affected who could claim, control, use, or define land and **ask historical questions** based on evidence from historical sources.
- Trace change and continuity over time by examining how land ownership, use, boundaries, and status changed across different historical periods and locations in order to explain historical cause and effect.
- **Compare multiple historical cases** to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across locations in Los Angeles using *Picturing Mexican America* to independently investigate historical documents as evidence for interpretation.
- Construct **evidence-based historical arguments** by examining which experiences are represented in historical records and which may be less visible, making a claim, selecting specific evidence from multiple sources, and explaining how the evidence supports a larger historical interpretation.

Background Content for Teachers

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Rancho	<i>A large area of land granted to an individual by the Mexican government.</i>
Diseño	<i>A hand-drawn map used to show the approximate boundaries and important features of a Mexican land grant.</i>
Homestead Act (1862)	<i>A U.S. federal law granting public land to settlers; a historically distinct type of land grant from Mexican-era ranchos, introduced after U.S. annexation.</i>
Land Grant	<i>Land officially given by a government to an individual or group.</i>

Mexican Californian / Californio	<i>A person of Mexican heritage living in California, especially during the period when California was part of Mexico. "Californio" refers specifically to this historical/regional identity from the Mexican and early U.S. periods of California history, distinct from broader pan-ethnic terms like Hispanic, Latinx, or Chicanx, which emerged later and describe different scopes of identity.</i>
Pueblo	<i>A town or community, especially an established civilian settlement during the Spanish and Mexican periods.</i>

Teachers should establish four core pieces of background knowledge:

California was once part of Mexico. Before it was Mexico...?

- Long before any European contact, present-day California was the ancestral homeland of hundreds of thriving Indigenous nations, including the Tongva (*Gabrieleño*) people, who lived in the Los Angeles basin for thousands of years.
- Before it was a Mexican territory, California was a Spanish colony for over 50 years, starting with the founding of the first Catholic missions and presidios (military forts) in 1769.
- Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821. California, then known as Alta California, became Mexican territory. Los Angeles was therefore a Mexican town before it became an American city.

The Mexican government granted land to private individuals.

- During the Mexican period (1821-1848), governors distributed large areas of land called *ranchos*. These lands were generally used for cattle ranching and agriculture. Rancho owners often submitted a *diseño*, or hand-drawn map, showing the approximate boundaries and important geographic features of the property. Students will examine one of these *diseños*.

Political control of California changed.

- The Mexican-American War began in 1846. Following Mexico's defeat, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) transferred California and other large territories to the United States. This meant that Mexican Californians living in

the region experienced a major political change: the land did not physically move, but the government, laws, and institutions governing it changed.

Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera was a land grant that belonged to Vicente Sánchez.

- In 1843, Mexican governor Manuel Micheltorena granted Los Angeles mayor Vicente Sánchez approximately 4,219 acres. The land encompassed areas that are now part of Los Angeles, including areas around Park La Brea and the Baldwin Hills.
- Sánchez was a prominent Mexican rancher, politician, and local leader who served multiple terms as the *alcalde* (mayor) of Mexican-era Los Angeles. In 1843, when he was awarded this land grant, it helped establish his family as major landowners in the region.
- Because he passed away in 1846 just as the Mexican-American War reached California, he lived his entire adult life entirely as a Mexican citizen under Mexican law.
- After his death, his grandson, **Tomás Sánchez**, then spent decades legally defending the family's title in U.S. courts after the U.S. acquisition before eventually selling it to American investors.

Lesson Flow

Slide 6: Warm Up:

Ask: Looking at Los Angeles today,

- What groups do you associate with LA today?
- Were people here before the city we know as LA today? Who were they?
- Who claimed control over this land that is present-day LA 200 years ago? 500 years ago?

Time Period	Peoples/Political Power
Pre-Colonial Contact	<i>Tongva (Gabrieleño) and Chumash peoples – Indigenous/Native</i>
~1526/1542 until 1821	<i>Spanish Empire</i>
~1821-1848	<i>Mexico (first a short monarchy, then a Republic)</i>
1848-present	<i>United States</i>

Ask: **What could cause land to change hands from one group to another?**

Say: Today we're going to investigate one piece of land in Los Angeles and trace what happened to it over time.

Activity 1 (Slide 8): Source A: *Diseño* of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera, c. 1844 (Student Handout, 10-12 min)

Complete Source A in collaboration with students. Beginning with questions 1 and 2, model for and with students how to analyze the map to complete Source A.

Ask: "What do you notice about the land shown on this map?" (descriptive answers, like "hand-drawn mountains"). Based on student answers, redirect towards question 2 by asking: "What does *this* evidence suggests about how people were living on or using this land?"

Slide 9: Mini-Lecture (8-10 min): Mexican California, Land Grants, and the U.S. Acquisition of California.

Using “Background Content for Teachers,” provide students with enough historical context to analyze the *diseño* and primary sources on the interactive map without explaining the larger historical argument for them.

Purpose: Students receive enough historical context to develop critical inquiry questions without the teacher providing a pre-determined interpretation.

Slides 10 & 11: California Was Part of Mexico, 1821-1848

1. Mexico controlled California.
2. Los Angeles was a Mexican *pueblo* (see “Key Terms” table).
3. Mexican governors granted large areas of land called *ranchos* (see “Key Terms” table).

Say: “When we think about Mexican history, Los Angeles, and the United States, we sometimes begin with Mexican immigration. **But that is not where this story begins.**

Long before European colonization, this region was home to the Tongva people. Spanish colonization began in the late eighteenth century, and Spanish authorities established the Pueblo of Los Angeles in 1781. When Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, California became part of Mexico.

During the following decades, Mexican authorities welcomed Anglo settlers into their northern territories while also debating how to regulate growing Anglo migration and its political consequences. The Mexican-American War brought U.S. forces into California in 1846, and the **1848 Treaty of Guadalupe** Hidalgo transferred California to the United States.

Los Angeles thus became part of the United States not because Mexicans migrated into an existing American city, but because U.S. sovereignty expanded over a place where Indigenous peoples, Mexicans, and Californios were already living. Those communities did not disappear when the border changed, and they have continued to shape Los Angeles ever since. This longer history provides important context for contemporary debates about immigration, borders, and belonging.”

Slide 12: How Did Someone Claim Land?

Mexican Land Grants

- Landowners could receive land from the Mexican government.
- A *diseño* was a hand-drawn map used to describe the land. *Diseños* might show:
 - Mountains
 - rivers or springs

- Roads
- Buildings
- neighboring properties
- natural boundaries

Slide 13: Then display a small example of the *Rancho La Cienega diseño*.

- Say: “These maps won't look like Google Maps. They weren't meant to. Natural landmarks helped identify where one property ended and another began. Today we're going to treat one of these maps as historical evidence.”
- Teacher note: Don't ask students whether the *diseño* is “accurate” by modern mapping standards. Guide them towards historical inquiry questions related to what the document was created to establish and what it tells us about people's relationship to the land and documentation in the time period in which it was created.

Slide 14: Vicente Sánchez

- Resident and political leader in Mexican Los Angeles
- Served as mayor of Mexican Los Angeles
- Received Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera in 1843 from the Mexican government
- The *rancho* contained approximately 4,219 acres

Say: “Sánchez wasn't receiving land somewhere far away from the Los Angeles we know. Much of this land is still recognizable in Los Angeles today. You're going to see where this land was and what eventually happened to it.”

On [Slide 15](#), show students where the *Diseño of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera*, c. 1844 maps onto present-day Los Angeles.

Slide 16: Then the Government Changed, and with it, Sovereignty and Control over Land

Date / Period	What Changed?
Before Spanish contact	Indigenous peoples , including the Tongva (Gabrieleño) and Chumash, lived in and cared for the land
1500s–1821	Spanish Empire: Spain claimed and governed territory in what is now California and Mexico through colonization, establishing

	missions, <i>presidios</i> , and <i>pueblos</i> . Indigenous peoples experienced displacement, forced labor, disease, and loss of land and freedom, while also resisting and maintaining their communities and cultures.
1821	Mexico gains independence from Spain and California becomes part of Mexico.
1843	Sánchez receives Rancho La Cienega from the Mexican government
1846	Mexican-American War begins and lasts for two years.
1848	"Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo": Mexico cedes California and other territory to the United States, including present-day Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming.
1848-present	California is part of the United States territory. The U.S. then exercised sovereignty over California, and California became a U.S. state in 1850.

Slide 17: Discuss

Say: "Here's the question I want you thinking about. Vicente Sánchez received this land legally from the Mexican government. Five years later, the government controlling California had changed. What questions would that create about a) whether that land is still his? B) How he can prove it? and c) Land ownership more generally?"

Students should answer the questions with a follow-up question:

- Does he still own it?
- Does the U.S. recognize the Mexican grant?
- Does he have to prove it's his?
- Can the government take it?
- What happens to his family?
- Who had a right to tell him that?

Transition – Teacher Says: "Because we don't yet know what happened to Sánchez and his land grant in 1848 when the U.S. government acquired California, we're going to use additional historical evidence to trace what happened to Mexican-owned land across Los Angeles, not just for Sánchez and his family."

Activity 2 (Slide 18): Interactive Map ("Investigating Land, Power, and Memory: Interactive Map – Graphic Organizer")

Have students complete the *Picturing Mexican America* interactive map graphic organizer to investigate what happened to Mexican-owned land in Los Angeles as political, national, and economic control of the region changed.

Then, have students complete the “Compare Your Four Locations Worksheet”

Activity 3: Closing Activity and Student Reflection (Handout)

Teachers tell the “end” of Sánchez’s *diseño* story.

Say: “Vicente Sánchez died in 1846, during the transition from Mexican to U.S. control of California. He did not live to see how his land grant would be treated under the new U.S. government. After his death, his grandson, Tomás A. Sánchez, became one of the heirs. In 1852, Tomás and the other claimants filed a claim with the U.S. government to establish their ownership of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera. When the United States took control of California, Mexican land grants did not automatically disappear, but landowners had to go through the U.S. legal system to have their ownership recognized. The Sánchez family had to have their Mexican land grant recognized through the U.S. legal system. Their claim was reviewed and confirmed in several stages before the U.S. government formally issued them a land patent. In 1873, after more than two decades of proceedings under U.S. law, the rancho was finally patented to Tomás Sánchez. Two years later, in 1875, Sánchez and his wife sold nearly 3,700 acres of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera for \$60,000 to four Los Angeles businessmen. The historical record tells us when and to whom Sánchez sold the land, but it does not clearly tell us why he decided to sell.”

***Patented:** When the U.S. government officially recognized a person’s legal ownership of a piece of land and issued a document proving that ownership.

Students complete the handouts, “**Closing Activity & Student Reflections**,” “**Ethnic Studies Closing Reflection**,” and “**Final Thoughts**.”

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Extension 1: "Follow the Paper Trail" (20-30 min, any grade)

Students research what happened to one specific rancho (not just Sánchez's) using the California Land Commission records, Huntington Library digital collections, or the Picturing Mexican America map itself. They produce a short timeline (grant → U.S. annexation → land commission case → final outcome) and identify one moment where the outcome could have gone differently.

Extension 2: The Land Act of 1851 Deep Dive (one class period, best for 11th-12th)

Students read excerpts (teacher-selected, age-appropriate length) about the Land Act of 1851 and the burden it placed on Californio landowners to prove title in U.S. courts. Discussion/writing prompt:

- Was the Land Act of 1851 a neutral legal process or a mechanism of dispossession? Use the Sánchez case and at least one other example to support your position. This pushes students from descriptive history (land changed hands) to causal/critical history (specific policy mechanisms drove the change) – appropriate for AP-level historical argumentation (HAPP/DBQ-style skills).

Extension 3: Mapping Memory: A Present-Day Investigation (multi-day / project option)

Students choose a present-day LA neighborhood that overlaps with a historic rancho (Sánchez's grant, for example, touches Park La Brea and Baldwin Hills). They investigate:

- What is that neighborhood known for or associated with today?
- Is the Mexican/Californio history of that land marked, named, or memorialized anywhere (street names, plaques, museums)? Or is it absent?
- Students produce a short multimedia product (annotated map, StoryMap, or short op-ed) arguing for how that history should be represented today.

Extension 4: Indigenous Ways of Relating to Land in Los Angeles

The main lesson asks students to investigate how Mexican and U.S. governments defined, documented, and exercised control over land in Los Angeles. Students return to the *Diseño* of Rancho La Cienega o Paso de la Tijera and consider what the

map shows, and what it does not show. The *diseño* was created within a Mexican legal system that used boundaries, landmarks, and written documentation to establish a claim to land. But the Los Angeles basin had been home to Indigenous peoples, including the Tongva, for thousands of years before the creation of Mexican ranchos. This extension asks students to consider a different question: *What might a historical source look like if it were created to show a relationship to land rather than to establish property ownership?* Students investigate a local Tongva place or source connected to present-day Los Angeles and examine how it can provide evidence of Indigenous relationships to land, water, plants, animals, community, movement, and place.

Suggested local case study: Kuruvungna Springs in West Los Angeles, a site associated with the Tongva people and a place where students can investigate the continuing presence and relationship of Indigenous people to the Los Angeles region.

- What does this source tell you about how Tongva people related to this place?
- How is this relationship different from the kind of relationship to land represented by Sánchez's *diseño*?
- What does the *diseño* make visible about land? What might it leave out?
- What kinds of evidence can historians use to learn about Indigenous relationships to a place?
- What changes when we ask, "Who owned this land?" versus "Who lived here, cared for this place, and had relationships with it?"
- How might our understanding of the history of Los Angeles change if Indigenous history is treated as more than a period that came "before" Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. history?

Writing Prompt: Return to the *diseño* of Rancho La Cienega. Write a short response explaining how adding Indigenous perspectives changes what you notice about the map and the history it represents. Use evidence from the *diseño* and the Indigenous source you investigated.

Creative Entry: Create a second map of the same area that represents something the *diseño* does not. Instead of drawing property boundaries, students might map places, resources, waterways, movement, community, or other relationships to place represented in their Indigenous source. Students should include a brief explanation of what their map makes visible that the original *diseño* does not.