By way of Cape Horn or Panama

Most migrants from the Atlantic Gulf Coasts tried to reach California by sea. Either they could take passage aboard a clipper for the 15,000-17,000 mile voyage around Cape Horn and, with luck, disembark at San Francisco six months later, or they could go to the Isthmus of Panama, travel on land to the Pacific, and when there, get another vessel for the northward journey. If everything went without a hitch the Panama route was by far the quickest: ticket agents promised arrival in the goldfields in as little as six weeks. Few who went via Panama made anything like that time, and many did not make it at all. During the jungle journey across the isthmus and the long wait for a ship's passage in Panama City, the Argonauts were often struck down by malaria, yellow fever, or cholera. Some frustrated prospectors actually tried to make it up the coast to Californian by small boats, only to pay with their lives for their impatience. The route around Cape Horn was more certain, at least at first, and earlier prospectors whiled away the voyage in relative comfort. But as the demand for space rose, so did the prices while accommodations grew ever more crowded and uncomfortable. In haste to reach California, groups of easterners often pooled their funds to charter a ship – often an aged wreck whose lack of seaworthiness was concealed by a fresh coat of paint. Such vessels were no match for the brutal winds of Cape Horn and many met their doom in the swirling waters off Tierra del Fuego.

THE JOURNEY BY SEA

If the many diaries kept are to be believed, as many as nine out of 10 Captains were incompetent and the promised travel time of 30 days was rarely met. In spite of this, and the unavoidable crowding of travel by sea, 15,000 people took this route in 1849 and investors for the journey were easy to find. Total per person documented costs ranged from under $600 to over $1,200.

Changes made to ships

Given the tremendous profits to be made by transporting people to California, entrepreneurs set about converting all types of ships into charter ships. Large and slow-travelling cargo ships were patched up, given rudimentary makeovers and set to sea.

◊ Deckhouses and galleys were enlarged.
◊ The size of the aft hatch was increased.
◊ Circular openings were cut in the deck to improve ventilation.
◊ The size of the fore hatch was increased.
◊ Ventilators were added (sometimes)
◊ Companionways for access from decks to dim, stuffy between-deck quarters.

Making money on charter ships

30 cabin berths could be sold at $350 each on a typical converted cargo ship. Seventy below-deck bunks could be sold at $250 each. The total charter would gross $30,000, three times the normal gross. Revenue was $28,000, not counting revenue from freight.

Changes in Cargo

Besides bringing paying passengers ships could turn a profit by bringing tools, iron bars, pans and other goods for commerce. As the population in California skyrocketed so did their needs. The cattle trade, diminished with the reduction in demand for hides, flourished once again as meat became a valued commodity to feed the forty-niners.

Diseases - Common to the Panama Route
-- Yellow Fever
-- Malaria
-- Dysentery

Common to the Horn Route
-- Scurvy
-- Cholera