The California
Gold Rush

History through the Collections Series

PART I

The California Historical Society
hen James Marshall picked up a shiny bit of gold that cool January morning in 1848, he was not the first person in California to ever find the precious metal. The Native American peoples of California had known about the existence of gold in the Sierra Nevada Mountains for years, and there is an account of gold being discovered in southern California a full six years before James Marshall and his workers made their discovery.

Perhaps what gave James Marshall’s discovery importance was the timing. The 1840s was a decade of increasing change for California. Settlers from the eastern United States had been moving into the California territory to take advantage of its rich land for farming and cattle. Settlers, feeling resistant to the rule of the distant Mexican government, clashed with Californios, native citizens of Mexican lineage, over land issues. By 1846, the U.S. was at war with Mexico, and in 1848, as part of the treaty that ended the war, California became part of the United States.

In the rest of the United States there was a sense of expectancy and curiosity about the new Western territories. California increasingly was looked to as a place of new beginnings, new possibilities. It would only take a special moment or event to turn that curiosity and hope into all-out excitement . . .
On the morning of January 24, 1848, James Marshall wasted no time getting to work at his job as foreman of John Sutter’s Mill. John Sutter, who had established a successful fort-like community at the present-day site of Sacramento, was planning to use his lumber mill to expand his empire. The mill was being built along the banks of the American River in the scenic, tree-covered foothills of the Sierra Nevada. On that cool January morning, however, Marshall took no notice of the beautiful mountain setting. His gaze was focused downward as he inspected the channel of river water. It was there, standing at the channel, that Marshall saw the morning light sparkle off something shiny in the water. He scooped up some tiny, gleaming nuggets, not much more than mere flecks.

Marshall was fairly certain that he held gold in his hand. Over the next few days, he and his workers tested the nuggets. Marshall pounded a nugget and it flattened out, just as gold should. He had Mrs. Wimmer, the camp cook, dip a nugget into a pot of lye. The nugget came out unsathed, just as gold should. Sure beyond doubt, Marshall hurried to tell his boss, John Sutter, of the remarkable find.

Marshall and Sutter tried at first to keep the discovery a secret. Sutter knew that once the word was out, his land would be overrun with gold hunters. When a secret is as big as a river however, it is impossible to hide it for long. Word of the find made its way down the mountains all the way to the sleepy town of San Francisco.

Sam Brannan, who had a supply store at Sutter’s fort and would later open a store at the mill site, saw the chance to make a fortune of his own by selling supplies to gold hunters as they headed up to the foothills. Brannan published reports of the find in his San Francisco newspaper, The California Star, and visited several popular gathering places in the city, waving a jar of “Gold! Gold from the American River!” Within days San Francisco was seized with gold fever and the town emptied of citizens as everyone rushed to the hills.

In the eastern United States, rumors and stories of California gold began to circulate. Then, in his 1848 State of the Union speech, President James K. Polk confirmed the existence of gold in California. If the president spoke of gold, then the rumors and stories must be true! Excitement swept throughout the nation and beyond. The secret was a secret no longer. The world was on its way to California!
People came to California in droves. They came from nations all over the globe: France, Australia, China, and Mexico, to name a few. Ninety-thousand gold seekers came in 1849 alone, forever earning them the name “49ers.” In the age before airplanes and automobiles, most of the gold seekers traveled one of three main routes to California:

1. From the Eastern states and central territories, people traveled the Overland Route. The majority followed the California-Oregon Trail out of Independence, Missouri, while others headed south along trails such as the Santa Fe. The overland journey was a long, hard ordeal that took from 5 to 7 months to complete. Traveling by foot, horse, or wagon, overlanders had to endure extremities of weather, scarce water, disease, and accidents.

2. Gold seekers living within reach of the Atlantic coast often chose the Cape Horn Route, traveling by steam or sailing ship around the tip of South America and north to California. The Cape Horn, like the Overland route, was a long journey (6 to 8 months), and had its own set of perils. Passengers suffered from overcrowding, poor diet, and stormy seas that sometimes sank the ships.

The most impatient gold seekers chose a third, and supposedly faster route, through the Isthmus of Panama. A ship from the East Coast would transport passengers to Panama. Then, after crossing the Isthmus, east to west, travelers boarded a steamship at Panama City and headed north to San Francisco. The whole journey took no more than a couple of months. In truth, crossing through miles of jungle and waterways often proved more difficult than anticipated. Besides hardships such as heat, humidity, mosquitoes, and malaria, travelers, upon reaching Panama City, often had to wait weeks before finding space aboard a ship.

Overland, by sea, or through jungles: whatever route they chose, whatever difficulties they faced, gold seekers were determined to reach California and mine the promises of wealth and well-being.

**Clipper Ships**

These long narrow ships with extra large sails got their name from the term “clip” meaning “to move swiftly.” Originally these fast ships carried tea from China to the United States before the tea spoiled. During the Gold Rush, clipper ships brought many passengers around the Horn in 100 days or less. The fastest trip around the Horn, from New York to San Francisco took place in 1851 when the clipper ship the Flying Cloud completed the journey in 89 days.
After the long, difficult journey to reach California, gold seekers arrived to discover that the hardest part of their adventure was about to begin—finding the gold!

In the early years of the Gold Rush, miners looked for gold in the surface dirt of riverbanks. Miners soon figured out that water, swirled over and through a quantity of dirt, would flush away the lighter material, such as sand, while the heavier gold would settle to the bottom of the container. The first and most basic container used by miners for this process was a shallow pan or basket. Only a small amount of dirt at a time, however, could be sifted this way. Miners invented larger box containers, called rockers and long toms, that allowed them to sift greater quantities of dirt.

Most of the surface gold had been found by the early 1850s, so miners began digging deeper, using hydraulic and hard-rock mining. For hydraulic mining, water was channeled down flumes (long, wooden canals) into hoses attached to giant nozzles, called monitors. Water shot out of the moni-
tors at tremendous force, washing away entire hillsides of soil and releasing the gold within. Hard-rock mining involved tunneling deep into the earth to find layers of rock embedded with rich veins of gold.

Hunting for gold by any method was hard work, and left little time for anything else. Yet miners did try to create a life for themselves in the midst of their toils. Wherever more than a few miners gathered to work claims, a gold-rush town would spring up. Dwellings were canvas tents or roughly constructed shacks. Every town had at least one camp store and one drinking and gambling establishment. Drinking, gambling, and fighting were the main forms of recreation for the weary miners. Occasionally entertainers would travel to the larger gold-rush towns to perform. Miners, isolated for months from larger society, would mob the performances, tossing gold to the performers as an expression of appreciation.

Separated from their families, working hard, and rarely getting rich from their labors, many of the gold seekers found that the Gold Rush changed their lives forever, and in the process, changed the life of an entire state as well!
Oscar Benet came to California to mine for gold in 1849. In one letter he reveals the lonely reality of a miner’s life. “If the suffering among the thousands that are here laying sick destitute of friends and money was only known at home, my word for it, the emigration to this country would be small to what it is now.”

As a child singer and dancer, Lotta became very well known and much loved in the mining towns. In 1852 she moved to Grass Valley, in the gold country, and was soon tutored in the performing arts by Lola Montez, a glamorous, eccentric and popular dancer during the Gold Rush. Lotta traveled all over the gold country performing for enthusiastic miners. As an adult, she started her own touring company and became the highest paid American actress of her day. In 1875 she presented San Francisco with a fountain, known as Lotta’s Fountain, which still stands at the intersection of Market, Geary, and Kearny streets.
A Town by Any Other Name

The gold-rush towns that often sprang up overnight were given imaginative names by the miners. Some town names reflected the harshness of mining life: Rough and Ready, Hangtown, Sucker Flat, and Murderers Bar. Other towns were named after individuals, groups of people, or geographic features of the region: Foster’s Bar, Knight’s Ferry, China Camp, Dutch Flat, Dry Gulch, and Steep Hollow.

The towns often had reputations—true or not—as colorful as their names. Angels Camp became famous as the setting for Mark Twain’s tale about a jumping frog contest. Hornitos was supposedly the hideout for the legendary bandit Joaquin Murieta. San Andreas earned its fame when the elusive stagecoach robber, Black Bart, was finally captured, jailed, and tried in the town courthouse.

The miners of Coulterville gave their town an interesting identity by turning the town’s streets into trenches when a rainstorm washed up gold in the road dirt!

Cost of Living

“When the mines were first opened they were rich and those that were first on the mines made a fortune—but those that work the mines now have got to work the whole day very hard and will average from $5 to $20 per day. Board is $5... Flour is worth $90 per lb. Pork $1.30 per pound—a small pie is worth $1... a common pair of pegged shoes are worth $10.”

Excerpted from Oscar Bennett letter from the North Fork of the American River, ca. 1849. Manuscript collection.

Most gold-rush miners did not find great quantities of gold, and what they did find often went right out of their pockets into the hands of merchants and saloon keepers! The cost of living in California was outrageously expensive for its day. Basic foods such as butter and eggs, which in the 1840s normally sold for a few cents each, often cost from $6 to $10 in gold-rush territory! Hotel owners in San Francisco charged hundreds of dollars to rent a room, and dinner in a good restaurant could wipe out a miner’s entire pouch of gold. With the cost of everything so high, it is no surprise that the majority of gold-rush miners had very few riches to send back home to their families!
The Gold Rush
changed California in ways no one could have imagined. California’s population soared from less than 20,000 in 1846 to over 200,000 by the end of the 1850s. For these new Californians, the Gold Rush was an opportunity to branch out in new directions. Women who had cooked meals and mended clothes daily for their families found they could sell such services to miners and make as much or more profit than the men digging for gold. One gold-rush immigrant, Levi Strauss, made his fortune by turning tent canvas into miners’ pants, while another immigrant, Domingo Ghirardelli, found his wealth in chocolate bars rather than bars of gold.

Sadly, the Gold Rush was not a time of opportunity for everyone. When California became a state in 1850, Californios’ Mexican land grants were no longer honored and they lost their lands and status. In the gold fields, greed led to discrimination in the form of unfair laws and taxes that made it virtually impossible for Chinese, Mexican, and other foreign miners to own or work gold claims. California’s Native American population, already ravaged by the Spanish and Mexican settlers, found their territories and cultures further encroached upon by hordes of miners.

The Gold Rush changed California environmentally as well. Hillsides were stripped of trees as miners used the lumber to build towns and mining tools. Rivers were dammed or diverted...
from their channels in order to reach the gold in river bottoms. Hydraulic mining clogged rivers and buried acres of good farmland under rocky sludge. So great was this destruction that it spurred Californians to pass laws banning the use of hydraulic mining.

The changes, both good and bad, that shaped the California of the gold-rush years also helped to shape the California we know today. California continues to be a place of new ideas, new beginnings. Gold rushes still occur, though the “gold” this time around may be in the form of movies, computers, medicine, or automobiles. Californians continue to speak out and pass laws to protect their state’s natural environment. And California’s people, still some of the most diverse in the nation, continue to work toward equal opportunity and rights for all.
People who lived during the Gold Rush left us many clues about what life was like in the 1850s. These clues can be found in letters, paintings, drawings, photographs, newspapers, artifacts, costumes, and even folklore. Today, hundreds of libraries, museums, and historical societies, including the California Historical Society, preserve and study the objects and even the folklore from the Gold Rush so that we can pass on the stories and information about this exciting time in California history.

There have also been many books, for all ages, written about the Gold Rush. Some of them are listed in the bibliography on page 16.

You might even have gold-rush stories that were passed down in your family. Check with your family, look through family scrapbooks and albums, and forage through those old boxes in the attic (with your family’s permission, of course).
There are many places to visit in the gold country. Here are a few places to start your journey through the Gold Rush.

**Angels Camp**
This small gold-rush town is located in Calaveras County and is probably most known for its Frog Jumping Jubilee. This famous contest is held every year in May in honor of Mark Twain. He lived nearby in 1864, and though he was a successful writer, it was the publication of “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” that made him famous.

The neighboring town of Murphys is one of the most popular towns in gold-rush country. Visitors can stroll down the main street to see many historic buildings including the Murphys Hotel where Mark Twain, U.S. Grant, and even Black Bart had once been guests.


**Benicia Capitol State Historic Park**
The Benicia City Hall building was California's first state capitol. It was only used from 1853-1854, but it is the oldest surviving original California state capitol. Many elements of the building were constructed using parts from abandoned ships in the San Francisco Bay during the Gold Rush. The pillars in the chambers room are from mast poles. Even the whale oil lamps and the floor planking are from gold-rush era ships. Next door to the capitol is the Fischer-Hanlon House that is an example of gold-rush architecture and furnishings. Both sites are open daily for tours.

Visitor information can be found at http://parks.ca.gov/north/silverado/bcs hp221.htm or by calling (707) 745-3385.

**Bodie State Historic Park**
Originally filled with 10,000 residents mining for gold and silver, Bodie is today a ghost town. It was known as one of the wildest and wickedest cities of the California Gold Rush. The buildings that remain have been a state park since 1962 and are kept in a state of “arrested decay.” Information on Bodie State Historic Park can be found on
their website at http://ceres.ca.gov/sierradsp/bodie.html or by writing to Bodie State Historic Park, P.O. Box 515, Bridgeport, CA 93517.

**Columbia State Historic Park**

In 1945 the State of California purchased Columbia and created the Columbia State Historic Park. It is the best preserved of the old mining towns in California where visitors can ride stagecoaches, pan for gold, and visit the historically re-created fire stations, shops, and banks. Costumed docents operate all of the businesses to recreate the gold-rush town.

For more information visit their website at http://www.sierra.parks.state.ca.us/cshp.htm.

**Empire Mine State Historic Park**

Located in Grass Valley off Hwy 49 in Nevada County is the Empire Mine State Historic Park. This was one of the largest gold mines in the world and was in operation from 1850-1957. The Empire Mine offers visitors a glimpse into the life and industry of quartz mining. You can travel partially into a shaft and peer into about 100 feet of the 367 miles of tunnel that run below the surface. Visitors can also tour the mine owner’s mansion and gardens.

In the nearby town of Grass Valley you can also visit the sites of Lotta Crabtree and Lola Montez’s homes.

Please visit the California State Parks website for more information at http://parks.ca.gov/north/goldrush/em343/emshp.htm.

**Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park**

This 3,000-acre park serves as a reminder of the devastating environmental damage done by hydraulic mining. Thousands of acres of mountainsides were washed away with water as miners tried to get beneath the rock to the gold deposits. This practice was eventually banned in 1884, but the severe destruction can still be seen.

More information is available by calling the Nevada City Chamber of Commerce at (530) 622-2692 or toll-free (800) 655-NJOY.

**Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park**

Located in the town of Coloma, this tranquil setting was the site of John Sutter’s Mill where James Marshall spotted those historic gold nuggets in January 1848. This state park, established in May 1890, was California’s first historic monument. Visitors can see a replica of Sutter’s Mill, James Marshall’s cabin, and his memorial overlooking the American River, where he made a discovery that changed California forever.

For more information please visit their website at http://parks.ca.gov/north/american/mdshp/mdshp.htm or call (530) 622-3470.
Bibliography


Inside front cover: Detail. John Haven, Map of the United States and Mexico, Including Oregon, Texas, and the Californias, 1846. Published by Haven and Emerson, No. 3 Broul St., N.Y. Map collection.
The California Historical Society is a statewide membership based organization. Its mission is to engage the public’s interest and participation in collecting, preserving, and presenting art, artifacts and written materials relevant to the history of California and to support historical research, publication and educational activities.

The California Historical Society’s museum, bookstore, and the North Baker Research Library are located in San Francisco, California.

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