

The Gold Rush

A man by the name of Johann (John) Sutter came from Switzerland to the United States in 1834. He made his way to California in 1839, became a Mexican citizen, and got himself a large piece of land which he dreamed of turning into a settlement called Nueva Helvetia, "New Switzerland."

[Editor's note: Before California became part of the United States, it was loosely controlled by the Mexican government. Following the Mexican-American war, Mexico relinquished its claims to Texas and ceded present-day California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and portions of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming to the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848.¹]

As part of this development, Sutter tasked carpenter James Marshall with building a sawmill, which cuts logs into boards or planks to be used for building. Marshall found the perfect place on the south fork of the American River in a place called Coloma. The sawmill was finished in January 1848, but the stream needed to be made deeper to provide more power. When Marshall ventured to the river on January 24 to check on how things were coming along, something sparkly caught his eye.

As Marshall later recalled, "My eye was caught by something shining in the bottom of the ditch... I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold... Then I saw another."²

Marshall and Sutter wanted to keep this groundbreaking discovery that could make them a fortune quiet, but as word slowly but surely got out, it ignited a period known as the Gold Rush that forever transformed California.

News of the discovery of gold first arrived in San Francisco. At least one newspaper ran a story about large amounts of gold being found at Sutter's Mill in mid-March, but not many people believed it to be true. That changed when a storekeeper named Sam Brannan waltzed through the town with a sample of the gold to prove that the rumors were true. That summer, the vast majority of the men in San Francisco, and pretty soon the rest of California, left their stores, homes, and jobs to go mine for gold.³ (The Californian newspaper stopped being published because the majority of its readers had taken off to the mines.⁴)

Keep in mind, there were no phones or computers in 1848.



It took a long time for news to travel from one place to another—particularly from California to the eastern states. So those who came next to try their hand at “striking it rich” during the fall of 1848 came from nearby areas or places that were most easily accessible to the coast, namely the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), Oregon, Mexico, Chile, Peru, and China.⁵

Reports had been circulating in East Coast newspapers since the summer, with one September 14 issue of the Philadelphia North American running a letter from California that read, “Your streams have minnows and ours are paved with gold.”⁶ But it all seemed too good to be true. After all, for Americans to uproot their lives and move west in search of gold, they would need more evidence than rumors and speculations.

On December 5, 1848, President James K. Polk delivered his State of the Union address and gave Americans the confirmation they needed. He announced a report that he had received from California’s military governor Colonel Richard B. Mason. Months earlier, Mason had gone to the gold fields himself, but it took a long time for the news to travel back to Washington.

Polk said in his State of the Union: “The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory [California] are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service who have visited the mineral district and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation ... When [Mason] visited the country there were about four thousand persons engaged in collecting gold. There is every reason to believe that the number of persons so employed has since been augmented. The explorations already made warrant the belief that the supply is very large and that gold is found at various places in an extensive district of country.”⁷

In other words, Polk was saying that the reports of there being a lot of gold available for the taking in California may sound like exaggerations, but he confirmed that it was in fact true.

When spring arrived in 1849, thousands of Americans, mostly men, made the trek west to try their hand at getting rich quick. Some traveled over the mountainous terrain, and others went by sea, around Cape Horn or through Panama. Men of all ages left their homes, farms, businesses, and families in the care of the women in search of gold. Some bet it all, spending their life savings, taking out loans, or mortgaging their property. Those who were “seized with the California fever,” as one Western pioneer called it in his memoir, became known as 49ers.⁸

The Gold Rush was the start of California’s explosion in population. Between 1849 and 1855, an estimated 300,000 people from all over the world came to California.⁹ [Editor’s note: Competition and the various prejudices of the time unfortunately spurred animosity, violence, and discrimination toward various groups, namely the Native American and Chinese populations.]¹⁰

Life as a prospector, however, was not as easy as many thought, it was often challenging. A miner from Canada named Augustin Hibbard wrote to his brother in 1850 describing the difficulty of the work. "We soon found that, although, in imagination, it might be agreeable work, yet in reality, it was the most laborious and in the majority of cases the most unsatisfactory that men could be engaged in."¹¹

Panning for gold didn't turn out to be the "get rich quick" scheme many anticipated. Success was based on luck, not effort. Not only did the miners engage in back-breaking work, but there wasn't good food, housing, or sanitation at the time. There were issues as well with violence and criminal activity due to the lack of effective law enforcement and folks choosing to partake in bad behavior. [Editor's note: i.e. alcoholism, prostitution, gambling.]^{12 13}

With all these people coming to California, mining towns developed. Some men did become wealthy during this time, but most often, their riches came from "mining the miners," rather than gold. Samuel Brannan was a merchant and newspaper publisher who became the first millionaire in California. Other successful merchants included Levi Strauss, who made blue jeans; Domingo Ghirardelli, who sold¹⁴ chocolate and coffee; and Leland Stanford, who had a booming grocery business at the time.

In the five years that followed Marshall's discovery¹⁵, 750,000 pounds of gold were extracted from the mountains, streams, and rivers in California. However, by the mid-1850s, most of the surface gold had been scooped up, so individuals joined bigger mining companies that made a business out of extracting gold using hydraulic mining. (It turned out that this technique, which was developed in 1853, was devastating to California's landscape, so it was eventually outlawed in 1884.)

The Gold Rush boom in California paved the way for its admission to the Union in 1850 as the 31st state. In the decades that followed, people continued to flock to California and its economy and industry continued to grow. Today, California pays tribute to its Gold Rush beginnings – that quite literally put the state on the map—with its state motto, "Eureka" ("I have found it") which is believed¹⁶ to be attributed to the discovery of gold and its official State Nickname: "the Golden State."

Footnotes

1. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>
2. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/discovery-of-gold/>
3. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
4. https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1099
5. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
6. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
7. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/annual-message-to-congress-5/>
8. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
9. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
10. <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/docs/CirGuides/Ridge-Crime-Gold-Rush.pdf>
11. <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/california-gold-rush/sources/1912>
12. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-gilded-age/american-west/a/the-gold-rush>
13. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/gold-rush-of-1849>
14. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
15. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
16. <https://www.library.ca.gov/california-history/gold-rush/legacy/>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/guadalupe-hidalgo>
- <https://www.loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/articles-and-essays/early-california-history/discovery-of-gold/>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1099
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/goldrush-california/>
- <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/annual-message-to-congress-5/>
- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-the-gold-rush-transformed-california>
- <https://mhs.mt.gov/education/docs/CirGuides/Ridge-Crime-Gold-Rush.pdf>
- <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/california-gold-rush/sources/1912>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-gilded-age/american-west/a/the-gold-rush>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/gold-rush-of-1849>
- <https://www.library.ca.gov/california-history/gold-rush/legacy/>

