

The largest mass migration in usa's history: 300.000 men searched california for ...

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An Overview of the Gold Rush

California has always been associated with cutting edge development and ideas. For over a century and a half it has been the leader of what the rest of the country follows. No single event has been as groundbreaking (literally and metaphorically) as the Gold Rush of 1849. This historic event single-handedly connected the East to the West in what proved to be the perfect model of expansion. It was what brought hundreds of thousands of Americans and immigrants alike to the fast-paced, ever-changing world of California.

To fully understand the history of the Goldrush, one must know what was actually happening before the lure of gold overwhelmed the country. In 1844, John C. Fremont ordered the U. S. Army to lead a scientific expedition to California. During a second trip in 1846, he encouraged ranchers located in northern area to revolt. These events lead to the seizure of Sonoma and the proclamation of a republic. The flag that they raised that year was a figure of a bear. It was not yet known that the Mexican War had started and that troops had been sent to quell the battles. According to the New Standard Encyclopedia, there was little fighting in the north, and the south was taken quickly under the forces of General Stephen W. Kearny and Commodore Robert F. Stockton (C38a). In 1849, Mexico ceded California to the United States. (New Standard Encyclopedia C-38 and C38a)

One of the most little understood men of the gold rush, John Augustus Sutter, had fled from Switzerland to avoid his debtors in the mid 1800s. Abandoning his family and friends he came to America in hopes of making it big and

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making a fortune. In July of 1839 he arrived in California and acquired a land grant from the Mexican government. He dreamed of one day owning a vast empire of agricultural lands. It was a dream that ultimately ruined him.

According to a biography done on him by California State Library, he built Sutters Fort and sold important supplies to the new inflow of people traveling to California. His fort still lies on the present-day site of Sacramento. (Cal State Library, 1)

Luckily for Sutter, he got the local Indians to work for him. In a book written by Donald Jackson, the Indians harvested his wheat and ate in animal troughs in the courtyard of his adobe fort. He had Mexican Vaqueros tending to vast herds that roamed the fort and its surroundings. He also grew vineyards that European-born vintners looked after (8). All in all, Sutter was building what he thought to be his future dream castle. (Jackson 7, 8)

After the war with Mexico, John Sutter was left with the spoils that had been left in the aftermath. The book Gold Dust states that about 150 Mormons who had been soldiers of the war had been ordered to stay in California by Mormon leaders in Utah. A messenger from Salt Lake had told them to stay there through the winter due to the lack of food in Zion (8). The 150 Mormons consisted of carpenters, tanners, wagonmakers, and mechanics. Sutter had badly wanted to build a flour mill and a sawmill. This gave him the opportunity to do so immediately. (Jackson 8, 9)

The sawmill was located forty-five miles up the American River in Coloma Valley (8). To supervise the building of the sawmill he employed the services of James Marshall. Marshall was a strange, sober man who had wondered

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down from Oregon two years earlier (8). Jackson states that Marshall believed that he could see visions of the future, which caused him to be labeled as peculiar. (Jackson 8)

It was January 24 when James Marshall noticed a few glimmers of something in the mud a few miles upstream from the mill. He and his crew had been working on widening a tailrace for Sutters Mill. He only had a faint idea of the types of minerals in the area, yet seeing the glimmers of the mineral excited him. When he told his workers of his find they only believed it be another one of Marshalls odd notions. It is said that not one of them even bothered to look where he had been poking around (Jackson 9).

Marshall proceeded to put the pieces that he had found into his hat and walked back to the mill. The following occurrence took place:

The first man that he came to was William Scott, at the carpenters bench. Boys, by God I believe I have found a gold mine, he exclaimed. Scott glanced at the metal flakes in the hat. Marshall set the hat on a workbench. Azariah Smith pulled out a five-dollar piece and compared it with the flakes; the coin looked brighter and whiter the result of the alloy, they guessed. James Brown stuck a piece in his mouth and tried to twist it, but it wouldnt give. Their skepticism was eroding. (26)

It turned out that what Marshall had found was what he had said it was, gold. (Jackson 9)

After bringing his findings to Sutter they worked out a plan, first to establish legal title to the gold by drawing up an agreement with the local Yalesumni Indians (12). After that they marked up their own claims and agreed that the

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mill hands could work the claims for half of what gold that they discovered.

(Jackson 12)

Sutter wanted the gold to be kept a secret for at least six weeks until he could finish his mills. That being too big of a secret, it proved to be something that none of the men could keep to themselves. Charles Bennett had been sent to Monterey with a bottle of gold dust. On his way there he overheard some men talking about a recent gold discovery (13). Bennett was unable to stop himself from pulling out the bag and showing it to the men. (Jackson 13)

During the course of a few weeks, word had spread from the mill workers and also Bennett, to all of California. On February 15, word of the gold finally made it to the press in the San Francisco Californian. It was only one paragraph long and it read as follows:

In the newly made raceway of the Saw Mill recently erected by Captain Sutter, on the American Fork, gold has been found in considerable quantities. One person brought thirty dollars worth to New Helvetia (Sacramento), gathered there in a short time. California, no doubt, is rich in mineral wealth; great chances are here for scientific capitalists. Gold has been found in almost every part of the country. (15)

The book states that the person who wrote it, wrote it in a fashion that made it seem like he knew he was telling a huge lie. The rest of San Francisco remained unmoved by the paragraph. (Jackson)

Nothing much was said or done about the gold that was discovered until Sam Brannan came into the picture. He was a hard businessman who knew what

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he wanted and how to get it. Already a famous man, he acquired a printing press from a newspaper back east. Brannan printed two thousand special copies and sent them to the Midwest to be devoured by the Missouri and Mississippi valleys. From there they went to St. Louis and St. Joseph. Unfortunately, the reprints of the paper failed to mention that any gold was found. (Jackson 18, 19)

On or around May 3 was the time that Sam Brannan started making his big moves. He had traveled to Sutters Fort and found it mostly abandoned by the gold-frenzied workers. They had all left to find the wealth in prospecting gold. This was enough for Brannan to open up two stores in the Coloma region. He returned to the fort to tell Sutter of his plans to build the Sacramento River Landing in the heart of what would soon become Sacramento. (Jackson 24, 25)

Later that day Brannan ordered that Kit Carson take letters and a copy of the California Star the first news of the gold discovery and sent him off to the East Coast (25). By May 15 the population had risen to six hundred. On May 12 it had only been up to two hundred. News had spread fast and by May 25 the news had spread along all of the settlements up and down the coast. Soon it would be every man for himself. (Jackson 25-27)

In two years the population of California had risen to 90, 000 souls. By 1854, it had reached 300, 000. The gold rush ripped families apart and took men from their cities. In an article written by Steve Wiegand he states that it changed the countrys view of the relationship between wealth and labor. And it ensured that California would always be a different kind of place in <https://assignbuster.com/the-largest-mass-migration-in-usas-history-300000-men-searched-california-for-gold-treasures/>

America (1). He wrote that California was unlike any other movement that America had ever experienced. It was a take all place instead of a place that families came to and settled down with their families. To many it was an adventure, and many of the men that came called themselves Argonauts (1). The rest of the world remembers them as the 49ers. (Wiegand 1)

There were three basic routes that would get a traveler to California. All three proved both dangerous and deadly to anyone that chose to take them. One route was to travel across the United States. The Oregon Trail became very popularized by this route. Another was to sail from New York, and go around Cape Horn (located at the bottom of South America), to the destination of San Francisco. The third route was to sail to Panama City, walk or canoe through the jungle, and then sail to San Francisco from that point. No route was safer than the next, and thousands of people died on each one. (Marks 82)

Traveling by land across America took the average traveler three months. The trip was an easy 15, 000 miles of open land and prairies. There were also many different routes in which a traveler could take, making it easy for the average person to get lost. Besides that, cholera proved to be just one of the many dangers that most men were being constantly confronted with. Marks stated that the fatal sickness lurked on the main route from St. Louis to the one of the three Missouri River outfitting towns and westward across the prairies and plains along the artery used by Oregon farm immigrants, the Oregon Trail (Marks 56). In 1849, steamboats were regularly docking and depositing blanket-wrapped corpses in hurriedly dug holes on river bars. At

least fifteen hundred travelers died along the Oregon Trail in 1949. (Mark 56, 57)

Nearly all the routes on the trail led the traveler to the Sierra Nevadas. The ones that didnt led through Death Valley. Either the mountain range or the desert had to be crossed in order to get to the Sacramento Valley or Los Angeles, respectively. Both routes had their challenges, and climatic changes were always a factor in which the travelers were constantly battling. (Marks 60, 61)

The trip across the land proved to be a great adventure for all who undertook it. Women made up a mere 2% in the early years. This gave men the chance to experience a certain crude freedom (68). They could curse freely and in general some became very cutthroat. Men were found burning the trails behind them and a great many dead animals were found along the trails. Along with rotting corpses, scores of wagon skeletons were left behind in what one woman described as long chains in any number, trunks and clothing and bacon and flour in piles and piles (70). The trip proved to turn men into animals. (Marks 68-71)

The route that took travelers around Cape Horn proved to be the safest way to make it to California. Although it could take up to half a year, many New Englanders opted for this route due to the amount of experienced mariners that had traveled the route for forty years or more. There were of course those who hadnt sailed a vessel in forty years as well. Paula Marks stated that of the thousands that went by way of Cape Horn, about fifty died by

drowning, or as a result of scurvy and various illnesses (84). This type of travel was considered the easy way to go. (Marks 82-84)

Halfway through the trip, a seafarer would inevitably come to Cape Horn. Violent winds and tricky currents were a common problem that mariners came across on this trip. Once around the Horn, the vessels reached the calm Pacific waters. It was relatively smooth sailing from there. From there they would sail up the coast making stops in the various ports along the way, eventually making their way to San Francisco. (Marks 82-84).

The third discussed route was to travel through Panama. This way could take as little as eight weeks if good weather prevailed. Once the traveler arrived in Chagres, they were to take a three-day, forty-mile trip down the Chagres River. There was little signs of life along the river and the bungo operators (natives who would take travelers down the river in a certain kind of boat) would often demand more money as the trip came to an end. Most travelers had no choice to pay or be stranded in the jungle. (Marks 85, 86)

After boating down the Chagres, travelers had to walk another twenty miles to reach Panama City. From there they would try their luck trying to find a steamboat. Most would take anything that came along at this point in their voyage. In truth, most Panama travelers were happy to board anything that looked as if it might reach San Francisco (87). A few weeks later, most travelers did eventually make it to their final destination. (Marks 87, 88)

Once travelers finally reached their destination, they had to find their claims and start mining the gold that they had yearned for so badly. There were

various types of ways to mine gold in this era, including gold pan and cradle, sluice and board tom, and the Californian pump to name a few. It was all a matter of preference and experience that led each man or group to his chosen method of mining gold. (Hoban, Lewis, 1-6)

The gold pan and cradle was one of the earliest methods of mining and is still used today by many. It consisted of a pan and cradle. The miner would fill his pan or cradle with riverbed. Since gold is heavier than other minerals, it would fall to the bottom first. The trick was to remove the other rocks while leaving the gold behind. The cradle had a sieve on the top of it that would separate the larger rocks and keep them on the top and let the other pieces fall to the bottom. Water was constantly being run through to keep the flow going. (Hoban, Lewis 1)

The sluice and broad tom was a long contraption that involved the use of flumes, riffles, and of course a sluice. A flume was a method of keeping water constantly running down the sluice. The sluice was a long trough that ran a certain distance. Riffles are pieces of wood that catch the gravel and gold on the way down the sluice. The broad tom was located at the end of the machine and it held the final remnants of what had made it down the sluice. Here the miners could sort through the rocks and gravel easier, enabling them to find more gold. (Hoban, Lewis 2)

The California pump was the process of moving water uphill. It took into account the use of pulleys and the bottom end was placed in the water. One man had to constantly be pumping the handle to pull the water up a tunnel

to bring it to the top. This method wasn't as popular as most for obvious reasons. (Hoban, Lewis 2)

Mining the earth was also a popular, yet a very dangerous way to mine gold. It involved digging shafts into the ground and sending men down to mine the ore that was hidden in the depths of the earth. Empire mine located in Grass Valley was a very popular mine and can still be seen by people today. It was one of the most famous mines and an estimated \$2, 000, 000 was taken out of just the first few feet of the surface. (Morley, Foley 5-7)

With the coming of settlers and travelers came the ever-alluding boomtowns that would rise and fall within months, even weeks sometimes. It is not commonplace to drive through parts of California today and still see them. Towns throughout California popped up, lasted for a few years, then promptly died away after the gold was taken out of them. Towns such as Altaville, Bodie, Fiddletown, Mother Lode, Swansea, Timbuctoo, Volcano, and Whiskeytown can still be seen today. Empty shells of what they once were. Some still even have plates out on the table, as if all somebody had to do was serve diner. (Florin 156)

The gold rush spurred the hearts of thousands of men, both common and famous. Men like John C. Fremont who was already a famous figure in society. One man, Phillip Armour, came not to prospect gold, but to prospect the miners. He opened up a meat shop in Placerville and soon earned enough money to open up a meat packing plant in Milwaukee. One of his neighbors sold wheelbarrows. According to Wiegand, his family later went

into the car business. His name was John Studebaker. Those mentioned are just a few of the many. (Wiegand 2)

Also mentioned by Wiegand was the diversity of California. In a census done in 1850, California proved to be a culturally diverse society including immigrants from England, Spain, France, Portugal, Hawaii, Hamburg, Bremen, Belgium, Sweden, Chile, Peru, Russia, Mexico, Norway, Tahiti, China, Ireland, Italy, and Australia. Wiegand states that no other place on earth was as racially and ethnically diverse as California (2). A trait that has continued to mark California ever since. (Wiegand 2)

It was very dangerous and to live in California. Insurance companies refused to write policies for anybody going to the gold fields. It was estimated that one in every five miners that came to California was dead within six months. Milo Quaife states that at least one-third of the miners suffered from a disease of some type (Quaife 147). Newcomers had to find ways to adapt to the new type of life that California represented. There were no rules when it came to living here. (Wiegand 3)

Racism ran rampant in the new republic. According to Chatterjee, California had spent one million dollars in 1851 to exterminate the Native Americans that inhabited the surrounding areas (1). Violence had escalated by most whites taking out any form of retaliation against other races. In some places, natives were even barred from working gold claims that were on their own tribal land. They basically had no rights. (Marks 285-286)

Its hard to believe that a 175 years ago California was thought of as a faraway land. All it took was the findings of a few ounces of gold dust to start a revolution that would someday be considered one of the most vital events in the expansion of the United States. From the get go California was considered to be a place where things were made to happen. Even in the first glimmers of its existence it proved to be a place of innovation and wild imagination. It was a place that started out as being one mans dream and ultimate failure of an agricultural empire, and ended up being the nations future.