



# The New *El Dorado*

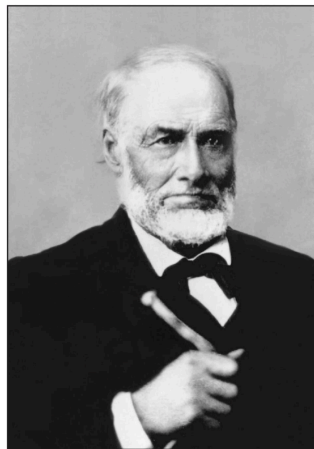
**O**n May 12, 1848, Sam Brannan waved a quinine bottle filled with glittering dust at San Franciscans, shouted his fabulous news, and perhaps calculated its impact on his own fortunes. "Gold!" he cried. "Gold, gold from the American River!" Reaction was immediate. Within days, half of the city's population had departed. Within weeks, settlements from Sonoma to San Diego became virtual ghost towns. And within months, reports of the discovery crossed oceans and continents to lure adventurers from all points of the globe to the new *El Dorado*.

### The Great Discovery

**T**he sequence of events that set the world in motion began almost by chance. In 1847, John Sutter and his employee James Wilson Marshall decided to build a sawmill. Born in New Jersey in 1810, Marshall learned his father's skills as a carpenter and wheelwright, drifted into the Ohio Valley as a young man, and joined a wagon train to Oregon in 1844. He eventually wandered south to California where he worked for Sutter, joined the Bear Flag Revolt, and soldiered in the California Battalion. Shortly after the Caluenga Capitulation, Marshall returned to Sutter's employ and convinced Sutter that the sawmill business would be profitable.

Marshall located a suitable site on the South Fork of the American River, 30 miles from New Helvetia near a Maikdu village called Cullumah (Coloma). A construction crew composed of village Indians and Mormon Mexican War veterans began construction and the mill was almost done by the end of 1847. To accelerate the process, Marshall allowed the river to flow through the millrace each night, using erosion to clear debris.

Q&A icon



**John Sutter and James Marshall**

Sutter (left) and Marshall (right) were, quite unexpectedly, among the losers in "Nature's great lottery scheme." Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

During his regular morning inspection of January 24, 1848, he made the discovery that changed the course of California history: he spotted a glint in the bottom of the ditch. Marshall scooped up a handful of gravel, examined it, and concluded that he had found gold. He took a sample to Sutter. When tests proved the substance actually was gold, the partners concluded that they must keep the discovery secret. Surprisingly, their workers obeyed, for the moment at least. The men remained at their tasks, kept reasonably mum, and prospected on their own time.

Most Californians at the time doubted the rumored strike, but a few were able to reap handsome rewards. Sutter and Marshall were not among them; both ultimately joined the ranks of gold rush casualties. When Sutter died in a Philadelphia hotel room in 1880, he was alone and destitute. Squatters and speculators had stripped him of his land and the state had terminated his

\$250 monthly pension. Marshall remained at Coloma, trying unsuccessfully to collect private debts, secure confirmation of his land claims, and to convince the state and the nation that he deserved some sort of compensation. He died a drunkard in 1885, with \$218 to his name. Sam Brannan, the man who announced *la bonanza* (rich vein or fair weather) and brought the world to California, fared no better.

#### Sources of *La Bonanza*

The lure of gold that brought fortunes to some and ruin to others was nothing new in human history. Yet in at least one sense the rush to California was unique. Most of the ore was placer gold—transported, deposited, and eventually extracted by the action of water—and located in areas of dense Indian habitation. Generations of Native Californians could not have missed its glitter



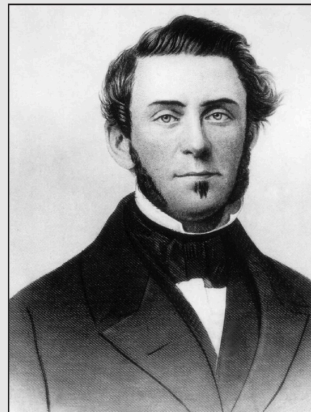
### Sam Brannan Forty-Eighter

Although he was not yet 30 when he arrived in California, Sam Brannan was an Elder of the Mormon Church, chosen in 1846 to lead East Coast Saints "out of Babylon." He chartered the ancient *Brooklyn* and loaded her with supplies (including his printing press) and 200 California-bound Mormons. Upon arrival in the Mexican village of Yerba Buena, the flock set about its mission: preparation for the coming of the Nauvoo Saints, who were already on the overland trail from Illinois. But Brigham Young, who succeeded the murdered Joseph Smith as leader of the church, chose the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, not California, to be the Mormons' New Zion.

Conflict with Young over that decision and other matters eventually led to Brannan's excommunication, but personal ambition competed with religious zeal from the time of his arrival on the West Coast. Publication of the *California Star*, speculation in Yerba Buena (San Francisco) real estate, and other ventures made him rich, and he built the finest house in the village using tithes and labor commandeered from the Brethren. Few *Brooklyn* comrades, however, attended the galas held there; nor did Brannan share his affluence with the church.

Late in 1847, he embarked on a new venture: a general store at Sutter's Fort, where in 1848 workers began to pay for purchases with gold. Brannan went to Coloma to investigate, confirmed the source of his customers' wealth, and began to stockpile goods useful to miners in his warehouse. In May 1848 he returned to San Francisco to break the news, and as prospectors spread throughout the Sierra, Brannan & Co. followed them. Profits from sales (the Sutter's Fort store then grossed up to \$5,000 a day) went into new stores, into land speculation, and into investments in railroads, shipping, and waterfront development. Brannan also involved himself in local politics and in the Vigilance Committees of 1851 and '56.

Success and fame brought the final conflict with Brigham Young. When the Leader heard of Brannan's wealth, he sent emissaries to collect \$40,000 of "the Lord's money." But the San Francisco Elder had an ultimatum of his own: the money in return for a receipt "signed by the Lord." This finished Brannan as a Mormon, but as California's first millionaire he used his resources to promote the state and to increase his wealth. He helped to organize the Society of California Pioneers and endowed fire companies, drill teams, and other civic and social associations. He founded a bank and a mint and financed a mail service, and in 1861 he bought an immense tract of Napa Valley land where he built his estate, Calistoga. During the 1860s, however, Brannan began to suffer reverses. A dandy and a social lion, he also made enemies, including a squatter whose bullet left him partially paralyzed. Speculation in Hawaii land and Nevada silver, and plans to finance a revolution in Mexico, depleted his assets. Finally his wife, who preferred cultured Europe to raw California, sued for divorce and was granted half of his fortune in cash.



Sam Brannan  
Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

(continued ...)

The settlement brought poverty, and the pain of paralysis and arthritis led to alcohol, which alienated friends. Still, Brannan remained ambitious. During the 1870s, he promoted settlement on Sonora land granted in recognition of his services to Mexico. Later, he sold real estate near San Diego and, in the garb of a *campesino* (peasant), raised figs at Escondido. All of the ventures failed, and Sam Brannan finished his days supported by brother Odd Fellows lodge members and relatives. When he died in 1889, only his landlady, Magdalena Moreno, was present to ease his passing. (WAB)

as they crossed streams or followed trails where rivers once ran, but unlike their Central and South American counterparts, they considered gold of little use. Thus the wealth of the Sierra waited thousands of years to be "discovered" by people sufficiently "civilized" to appreciate it.

Natural forces formed California's mountains during the Mesozoic Era (200 to 70 million years ago) and distributed and deposited their gold. Over millennia, upheavals fragmented ore-bearing rock and erosion scattered it. Rivers carried it in their currents and dropped it in holes in their beds or pockets along their banks. During the Tertiary Period of the Cenozoic Era (70 to 3 million years ago), streams altered courses and left deposits buried under layers of rock and gravel or exposed as cliffs. The process created the fabled Mother Lode, a band more than 100 miles long and up to 20 miles wide along the Sierra's western slope, and similar deposits in the Feather-Yuba River and Trinity-Shasta-Siskiyou regions of California. Nature also trapped gold in the bowels of the earth, where magma cooled in fissures. Throughout the gold rush decades, miners scoured the Sierra for such veins, believing them to be origins of placer gold.

Potential bonanzas provided a main ingredient in the mythology of gold stretching from Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece to the search for *El Dorado* ("the golden one") to Garcé Ordoñez de Montalvo's tales of Calafia's island. Fantasies of gold inspired the legend of Cibola and prompted explorers and visitors from Sebastian Vizcaino to Richard Henry Dana. But until 1842 there was no tangible basis for the myth of gold in California. That year, Francisco Lopez found a *placero* (pocket of gold) in San Feliciano Canyon (now Placerita Canyon) north of Mission San Fernando. The discovery generated some enthusiasm among Mexican officials and a modest influx of miners from Mexico. The first 20 ounces of California gold were sent to the U.S. Mint. But well before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, the *placero* was exhausted.

### The Gold Rush of 1848

Skepticism following the San Feliciano episode may explain doubts about the authenticity of the 1848 discovery, when word began to leak out. Sent to Monterey to register his American River claim, Sutter's emissary crowded about the discovery to men that he met along the way. Children of sawmill employees chattered about it to a teamster delivering supplies. Workers at Sutter's Mill began to offer nuggets and dust in exchange for goods at Sam Brannan's nearby store. Sutter himself could not resist telling his friends John Bidwell and Mariano Vallejo. But not even physical proof—actual gold samples—could convince the skeptics. Nor were news-hungry journalists impressed. The first report appeared as a kind of postscript on the last page of the *Californian* of March 15. Subsequently, Edward C. Kemble reported events at Coloma in the *California Star*, the province's only other newspaper, comparing the new strike to the San Feliciano episode. In April Kemble traveled to Sutter's Mill himself. Back in San Francisco, he wrote enthusiastically about the beauty of the region but said little about the mines.

Still, some took the find seriously. A mill worker, for example, found a rich deposit and conveyed his success to friends from his Mormon Battalion days. The friends visited Coloma and returned home to discover their own bonanza near Mariposa. As spring approached and the weather improved, new visitors arrived to investigate. Bidwell, noting geological similarities between the American River terrain and his own region near Chico, went home and started digging at Feather River. Pierson B. Reading visited Sutter's Mill, made observations like Bidwell's, and returned home to begin successful prospecting on the Trinity River and near Mt. Shasta. Charles M. Weber of Stockton assembled a crew of Indigenous workers and put them to work taking gold from the Stanislaus and Mokelumne rivers.

Marshall's workers managed to complete the mill, but they soon contracted gold fever. Their defection,

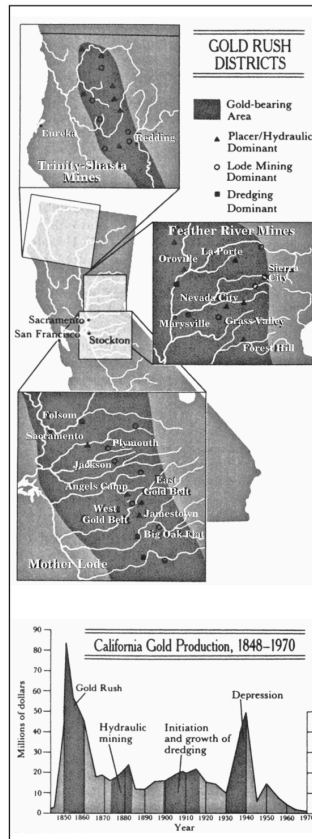


beginning in March, marked the beginning of the end for Sutter. By early April, he had only a skeleton crew at the sawmill and little timber to cut—most of Sutter's logging crews had gone prospecting. Work at New Helvetia ground to a halt as workers abandoned the flour-mill and tannery, leaving thousands of hides and bushels of grain to rot. Clerks, carpenters, and teamsters all abandoned the certainty of Sutter's high wages for the seduction of gold.

This handful of local miners and a few more from southern California monopolized the gold fields from January until May, when Brannan's announcement ended their quiet interlude. Although Kemble announced that the stunt was "a sham, got up to guzzle the gullible," the effect in San Francisco was electric. Residents departed in droves, with little thought for preparations or provisions. Some set sail aboard anything that would float; others struck out overland on horses or mules, trailed by scores more on foot. Sailors deserted ships, often led by their officers, and soldiers from local garrisons were close behind. Realtors, physicians, merchants, and lawyers boarded doors and windows and followed their clients to the mines. By mid-June, only 200 souls—a fourth of the population—remained in town. As news of gold rippled through the territory in May and June, residents of other towns repeated the San Francisco exodus. Like a magnet, news from the mill on the American attracted Californios, *gringos* (whites), and Indians. It seemed, the editor of the *Californian* wrote, that "the whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles and from the seashore to the base of the Sierra Nevada responds to the sordid cry of . . . GOLD!"

### Spreading the News

Californians did not monopolize the bonanza for long. Traders carried the news quickly to Hawaii, the Pacific Northwest, Mexico, and the Pacific coast of South America. By the end of 1848 word of the discovery had reached China, the east coast of the United States, and Europe. The population influx increased California's non-Indian population to about 20,000 in 1848. Hawaiians and Hispanic-Americans accounted for most of the growth. Through the winter of 1848, migration from "the States" remained insignificant. Although Thomas O. Larkin sent the *Californian's* announcement to the U.S. State Department, apparently no one read it. The *New York Herald* printed a letter from California that predicted a "Peruvian harvest" of gold. In mid-September, the *New Orleans Picayune* published an interview with Lieutenant Edward F. Beale, then on his



way to Washington with confirmation of the discovery. During subsequent months, eastern newspapers printed stories from California, often grossly exaggerated, and samples of dust appeared. Nevertheless, Americans east of the Mississippi remained skeptical.

On December 7, 1848, Lieutenant Lucien Loeser arrived in Washington with a dispatch from military governor Richard B. Mason and 230 ounces of gold. By the time he arrived, President James Knox Polk already had a copy of Mason's report, confirming the presence of gold—perhaps enough to finance the Mexican War “a hundred times over.” Polk appended the document to his annual message to Congress. When Loeser's sample arrived, he had it placed on display in the War Office. Response to the president's confirmation of the discovery was instantaneous. Horace Greeley's description of the “California frenzy” appeared in the *New York Tribune* on January 30, 1849:

A resident of New York coming back after a three month's absence, without having heard of California fever, would be almost doubtful of the identity of the place. He would find it impossible to account for the remarkable activity in certain branches of trade which are not usually subject to sudden change. He would wonder at the word “California,” seen everywhere in glaring letters, and at the columns of vessels advertised in the papers as about to set sail for San Francisco. And finally, he would be puzzled at seeing a new class of men in the streets, in a peculiar costume—broad felt hats of reddish brown hue, loose rough coats reaching to the knee, and high boots. . . . Even those who have watched the gradual progress of the excitement are astonished at its extent and intensity. The ordinary course of business seems for the time to be changed. The bakers of sea-bread keep their ovens hot day and night. . . . without supplying the demand; the provision stores of all kinds are besieged by crowds of purchasers; manufacturers of India rubber goods, gutta percha, oil cloth, etc. have very large demands to supply; the makers of rifles, pistols and bowie knives can scarcely furnish as many of the articles as called for; and even the vendors of nostrums share a part in this windfall of business. . . . In fact, goods of every description sell just at present, and articles which have long been unsalable are packed up and sent away. Boxes, barrels and bales crowd the sidewalks, and hundreds of drays convey to the wharves the freight now being stored away in 70 vessels [bound] for the Gold Regions.

Greeley did not exaggerate. By the middle of the year, similar accounts had appeared in journals from Hamburg to Hong Kong. As a result, by the end of 1849,

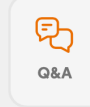
California's non-Indian population reached nearly 100,000. When the state conducted a census in 1852, the count exceeded 200,000.

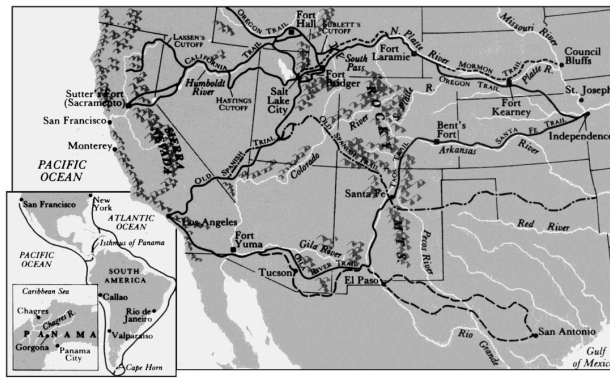
### By Sea to California

Residents along the East Coast felt the bite of the gold bug first. With a strong maritime tradition, departure points close at hand, ships at the ready, and the routes well known, most traveled to California by sea.

For many Argonauts, the route across the Isthmus of Panama seemed most promising. Shorter, theoretically faster and safer than the five-month, 17,000-mile Cape Horn passage, the Isthmus was open year round. Moreover, Congress had subsidized steamship service between the two coasts via the United States Mail and the Pacific Mail companies beginning in 1849. Hopes for a safe, swift journey by ship to the Isthmus, across to the Pacific, and then by sea to San Francisco seldom materialized, however. Steamships could accommodate only a few of those eager for passage, so ancient sailing vessels, often grossly overloaded, were pressed into service. Tickets covered only the ocean legs of the trip, leaving travelers to negotiate with Panamanians for transit 40 miles up the Chagres River and 20 more overland to the Pacific, where passengers usually encountered additional inconveniences. The first Pacific Mail steamer, the *California*, arrived on the western side of the Isthmus in mid-January, and found more than 700 ticket-holders clamoring for its 250 berths. Vessels dumped as many as 1,000 passengers daily at the eastern mouth of the Isthmus, but only a handful of ships were available on the Pacific side. By the end of February, several thousand Argonauts were stranded in Panama, where the delays depleted both resources and health. Conditions improved in 1850, when steamship lines began to coordinate services, and again in 1855, when a trans-isthmian railway was completed. From 1855 until completion of a mainland transcontinental railroad, the Panama passage was the gold-seeker's favored route from “the States” to California.

A greater volume of seaborne traffic to California arrived by way of the long and hazardous Cape Horn route around the tip of South America. About half of those who rounded “Cape Stiff” formed joint-stock companies, some of them well capitalized and outfitted. Members of the Northwestern Mining & Trading Company of Boston, for instance, refitted an old ship, turned her into a “floating dry goods emporium,” and set sail with uniforms, a cook, and a brass band. When they reached San Francisco, the company hoped to sell





Routes to the Gold Fields

the ship and cargo to finance the voyage, but too many others had the same idea. The San Francisco waterfront quickly became a graveyard for derelict ships and a dump for surplus merchandise, and even the best-organized companies disbanded to search for gold as individuals or with a few companions.

The voyage around the Horn did little to prepare Argonauts for mining. Even seaworthy ships manned by competent crews (and they were few) took fearful beatings from the elements, and so did their passengers. Seasickness, spoiled food and stagnant water, boredom, and confinement in close quarters added to the misery. Months of inactivity and poor diet inevitably took their toll when the hard labor of mining began. But the Cape Horn passage had at least one positive result: to pass the time, many travelers kept journals, making the California gold rush one of the best-documented migrations in history.

### Crossing the Plains

For those who crossed the Plains, journeys began in spring, when grasses provided food for animals and warmer weather melted some of the snow barriers in the mountains. For most, knowledge of the Donner tragedy

in 1846 inspired caution, but a few parties tempted the elements by leaving too early or too late, or by setting off alone, typically with disastrous results. In 1849, for example, the Royce family stopped to rest at Salt Lake City, instead of joining a guided party then preparing to leave. The decision put them far behind schedule. Following hand-written directions for crossing the Humboldt Sink, they lost even more time and severely fatigued their oxen. Sarah Royce walked and carried her child to conserve their animals' energy, but ultimately the family had to abandon its wagon and finish their journey on foot. They were among the last to cross the Sierra in the bitter winter of 1849, and only the timely arrival of a rescue party prevented a tragedy like the Donners'. A similar error in 1851 was more costly to Roys Oatman and his family. After they left their train and set out alone on the Gila Trail, Yavapai warriors killed most of them and sold two daughters, Olive and Mary Ann, into captivity among the Mojave.

Fortunately, most of those who crossed the Plains in 1849 and the early 1850s traveled in companies. During March and April, they transported wagons and supplies to departure points such as Independence, Missouri, where they bought animals and additional provisions, and the wisest among them hired experienced guides.

When all was ready, the trains departed many wagons abreast. Although there was safety in numbers, there were also dangers. As a member of one of the first companies to head west observed,

Our daily task will be to get past those in advance of us, and to so travel that no trains will overtake us. In this way only can we hope to maintain our animals. The locusts of Egypt could scarcely be a greater scourge than these great caravans, as grass and whatever else is green vanish completely before them.

Very soon, kegs of nails, anvils, iron stoves, and other heavy cargo jettisoned to lighten loads littered the Plains.

Many adventurers were certain that their greatest menace would be Indians. In fact, the early gold-seekers were their own worst enemies. Some brought cholera up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, where it took a terrible toll. So did accidental wounds from guns or axes, fractures caused by animals or wagon wheels, and injuries sustained while hauling wagons up and down mountains and across rivers. Equally dangerous, perhaps, were the useless guidebooks published in 1849 and 1850, and the temptation to leave established routes for unproven "cut-offs."

Despite the hazards, between 25,000 and 30,000 crossed the Plains in 1849. They paused briefly to rest at trading posts and among the Mormons at Salt Lake City, and then joined the 40,000 souls who had already arrived in California by sea, plus a few thousand more who came by land from Mexico and the Southwest. During the 1850s, more than 200,000 sojourners arrived by overland routes, but not all remained. Records of the U.S. Customs House at San Francisco indicate that annual departures were as high as 70 percent of arrivals.

**Table 11.1 San Francisco Maritime Arrivals and Departures**

Year	Arrivals	Departures
1850	36,000	26,000
1852	64,000	23,000
1855	31,700	23,000
1858	40,700	28,000
1860	30,800	14,500

Although similar data do not exist for overland routes, estimates suggest that between 500 and 1,200 traversed the Plains eastward during each year of the 1850s.

Of those who remained in California, nearly one-fourth were foreign-born. They came from points in the United States and from around the globe, contributing to the Babel that Dame Shirley described. Despite vast differences between them, however, the newcomers had points in common. Whether from New England or Canton, they were young (less than 30 years old, on average) and male (more than 90 percent). In gold rush California "a gray beard was almost as rare as a petticoat." Argonauts also tended to be enthusiastic and optimistic. When he arrived in San Francisco in 1849, Stephen J. Field observed:

There was something exhilarating and exciting in the atmosphere which made everyone cheerful and buoyant. . . . Everyone in greeting me said, "It's a glorious country," or "Isn't it a glorious country?" . . . or something to that effect. In every case the word "glorious" was sure to come out. . . . I had not been out many hours before I caught the infection, and though I had but a single dollar in my pocket and no business whatever and did not know where I should get my next meal, I found myself saying to everybody I met, "It's a glorious country."

Although just another exuberant adventurer at the time, Field would ultimately be elected to California's first legislature, write the state's first civil and criminal codes, serve as chief justice of the state supreme court, and be appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1863.

Whether California was "glorious" or not, few Argonauts regarded it as fit for permanent residence. Instead, most saw California as a land to be exploited and divested of its treasure, before they returned home in style.

### Searching for *La Bonanza*

In addition to being predominantly young, male, and enthusiastic, early Argonauts shared another attribute: most were professionals, semiprofessionals, skilled craftsmen, and small merchants. Because the cost of transportation and equipment was substantial—\$750 to \$1,000 in an era when "a dollar could do wondrous things"—a winnowing process took place before the gold-seekers ever left home. Few of the earliest arrivals belonged to the laboring classes. Ultimately, the talents they brought to California became assets to local life and society. But as miners, they began as rank amateurs—in many cases, experiencing physical labor for the first time. Having the resources to buy untested manuals or devices actually increased their disadvantages, since few of the authors or inventors had never seen a mine either.



For most Forty-Niners and those who followed them, searching for gold meant learning an unfamiliar skill by trial, error, and imitation. Fortunately, many useful techniques were outlined in translations of Georgius Agricola's sixteenth-century treatise, *De Re Metallica*. The Sierra strike also attracted teachers: the novices relied on Sonorans from Mexico, Southerners from earlier strikes in the Carolinas and Georgia, coal and iron miners from both Pennsylvania and Britain, lead miners from the Midwest, and experienced Europeans to teach them their new trade.

Equally fortunate were the early conditions in California. Amateuism mattered little in the early days. Abundant surface deposits of placer gold were easily mined with rudimentary tools and little skill. Spoons, knives, shovels, and even cooking utensils could be used to scoop pay-dirt from river banks and beds. Readily mastered washing techniques separated gold from sand and gravel without complex equipment. Mexicans and Southerners used panning to wash small amounts of pay dirt, flush away sediment, and leave only the heavier gold behind. Mexicans used a wooden *batea* with sloped sides, Southerners a metal pan designed for the purpose. As washing greater quantities of dirt became necessary, Georgians and Carolinians introduced another device—the “rocker” or “cradle.” Simple enough to be constructed on the spot, the cradle was a variation on panning, but its operation required a team of at least three miners: one to shovel dirt into a hopper, one to pour in water, and one to “rock the cradle.” The process carried away debris and left gold particles behind cleats that were inspected and cleaned periodically.

Mining conditions changed rapidly, however. By 1852, all the surface deposits had been discovered and claimed. It became necessary to process tons of dirt to recover ounces of gold. Ore-bearing gravels were sought deeper in the earth, and the “long toms” and other devices that Dame Shirley described became essential. No longer could an individual or a few partners work a claim. Miners organized companies to supply the labor and to attract the capital needed to construct flumes, dams, and sluices, and to dig the ditches that could transport water from distant sources. Companies also tunneled into hillsides to reach gold-bearing tertiary gravels. The work was expensive, up to \$20 a foot. If pay dirt was found, hauling it out of tunnels for crushing and washing also required costly equipment. All too often, months or even years of effort and investment brought disappointment, disaster, or both.

### Mechanized Mining

In 1852, while working a low-yield Nevada County claim, Anthony Chabot devised a more efficient means for moving large quantities of earth to uncover gold deposits. He attached a hose to his flume and used water pressure to erode topsoil. A year later, Edward E. Matteson refined the method by attaching a nozzle to the hose; hydraulic mining—California's principal contribution to mining technology—was born.

The technique was an immense success as early as 1854 when the *Sacramento Weekly Union* described “a claim on Iowa Hill [that] had been worked . . . by the application of hydraulic power until it was 120 feet from the top of the hill to the bed rock of the claim.”

With a perpendicular column of water 120 feet high, in a strong hose, . . . ten men who own the claim are enabled to run off hundreds of tons of dirt daily. So great is the force employed, that two men with the pipes, by directing streams of water against the base of a high bank, will cause immense slides of earth, which often bring with them large trees and heavy boulders. To carry off these immense masses of dirt, they have constructed two sluices. . . . After these immense masses of earth are undermined and brought down by the streams forced from the pipes, those same streams are turned upon the tons of fallen earth, and it melts away before them, and is carried away through the sluices with almost as much rapidity as if it were a bank of snow. No such labor-saving power has ever been introduced to assist the miner in his operations.

Decades later, valley farmers would launch attacks on hydraulic miners, whose debris choked irrigation streams and flooded towns, and still later environmentalists would condemn their devastation of the landscape. But at the time Californians accepted the damage as the inevitable price of progress.

Another form of placer mining, dredging, caused more severe environmental damage, but it became important only after an 1884 court decision restricted hydraulic mining. Dredging had been tried in 1850, when a group of New England capitalists converted a river steamer to work the Yuba River near Marysville. The efforts failed, but the Risdon Iron Works of San Francisco later developed a bucket dredge, based on a New Zealand design and first put into operation near Oroville in 1898. From then until the 1940s, the process remained an important mining method in California, and it was profitable even if each cubic yard of earth yielded less than a half-ounce of gold. Eventually these clattering monsters—often

several stories high—worked around the clock to gouge tons of rock and gravel from river beds, process it to wash gold free, and dump the piles of tailings that remain visible alongside rivers from the Smith and Trinity in the north to the Stanislaus and San Joaquin in the south.

Least significant in early California was tunnel mining, also called quartz, hard-rock, or lode mining. Most early efforts to burrow into underground deposits of placer gold were bankrupt by the mid-1850s; lack of both capital and experience destroyed them. Argonauts learned from Cornishmen and others to sink reasonably safe shafts and to ventilate them at great depths, and Mexican miners introduced the *arrastra* to crush ore brought to the surface; through a circular rock-lined trough, an animal dragged stones around a central pivot to grind gold-bearing quartz. Chileans made the device somewhat more efficient by substituting an axle and stone wheel for the cumbersome grinders. Experienced Hispanics also taught neophytes to use mercury or quicksilver to extract gold from pulverized rock.

Tool-making and foundry operations like the Risdon, Union, and Vulcan works in San Francisco soon refined crude implements. They produced improved equipment for drilling and tunneling, rail cart and elevator systems to transport ore to the surface, pumps to reduce flood hazards, the California stamp mill to smash rock more efficiently, and steam engines to power them all. Mining entrepreneurs like Alvinza Hayward in Amador County and his counterparts in Trinity and Nevada counties used such locally developed advances in mining technology with substantial success during the 1860s and '70s. In the process, they helped to sustain the state's gold production after the initial boom years. The new equipment and techniques became even more significant, however, when they were applied in the Comstock silver mines in Nevada during the 1860s and as they gave impetus to California manufacturing.

### Life in the Mines

Shortly after completing a voyage around Cape Horn in December 1849, Dr. J.D.B. Stillman described conditions surrounding the Sacramento hospital that he established with two partners:

The people at home can have no conception of the amount of suffering in the vicinity. Hundreds are encamped in tents, throughout the rains and storms, scantily supplied with food and covering. Men are driven from the mines for want of food, and are begging for employment. Yesterday there were 25 deaths. The sickness does not arise from the severity

of the climate but largely from overwork, scanty and bad food, disappointment and homesickness.

Clearly life in the mines could be physically and emotionally devastating. But Stillman's presence illuminates another aspect of gold rush history: urban services arrived with the first Argonauts, the doctor and his hospital being but one example. Gold seekers dispersed rapidly from the American River region northward to the Feather River and Trinity-Shasta-Siskiyou diggings and southward to the Amador and Mariposa districts, carrying with them blueprints for the societies they had left behind.

Little can be added to Dame Shirley's eloquent descriptions of life in mining camps, except to emphasize the reluctance of most of their residents to abandon the cultural norms of communities left behind. To be sure, some easily tolerated the bedrolls, brush huts, and crude nourishment. But others quickly built sturdy cabins and acquired the furniture they deemed necessary to make life comfortable. Drinking, gambling, and carousing often characterized miners' diversions. But a book was as highly prized as a deck of cards. The arrival of a live performer, physician, or even a clergyman was cause for jubilation. Photographers (who often doubled as barbers or dentists) found eager clients for their tintypes, daguerreotypes, and other services. And a "petticoated astonishment" typically brought out the best in the miners. Mining camps were more than bastions of unfettered male hedonism. They helped to keep miners in touch with the societies they had left behind; they offered not only saloons, brothels, and gambling dens but also schools, churches, newspapers, and similar institutions.

Mining camps also introduced rudimentary political structures to California's wild interior. Because the mining districts were quite literally lawless, miners formed committees, elected officials, and carefully devised rules for mining and other necessary activities. They specified methods for making and maintaining claims, recorded titles and transfers, and settled ownership disputes. Often a rough logic prevailed. Where gold deposits were rich, claims might be limited to a ten-foot square. In another region, a miner stood at the center of his prospective "dig" and heaved his pick at the points of the compass to establish his corners. Principles originated by local committees were sound enough to eventually be incorporated into the state's mining code, its land ownership laws, and its water policies.

Other aspects of mining-camp law proved far less worthy of emulation. Initially the camps had very little serious crime. When theft, claim-jumping, or the like occurred, miners' tribunals, sometimes supervised by a



locally-elected justice of the peace or an *alcalde*, convened to deal with the problem. There were no jails, so punishments were immediate: fines, banishment, or flogging. The explosion of newcomers from a variety of backgrounds and strange lands soon altered the situation. Now the newcomers included the kinds of fugitives memorialized in the contemporary ballad:

What was your name in the States?  
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?  
Did you murder your wife and flee for your life?  
O, what was your name in the States?

Early miners rarely asked such questions of their comrades. But as crime and competition for gold increased, so too did suspicion and demands for swift justice.

Unfortunately, popular tribunals degenerated all too easily into lawless mobs. The first recorded incident occurred in January 1849 at Dry Diggings (subsequently called Hangtown and now Placerville). Five miners who spoke only French and Spanish were reportedly caught stealing; they were tried and flogged. Two of them (some accounts say three) were accused of a previous theft and murder and were lynched over the protests of local citizens. An even more egregious episode occurred in Downieville, a small mining community on the North Yuba River. Residents were celebrating the nation's birthday with a drunken spree that began on the Fourth of July and lasted into the wee hours of July 5, 1851, when a Latina named Josefa ("Juanita" in some accounts) killed a popular Englishman, Fred Cannon. According to the *Alta California*, the intoxicated Cannon had broken down Josefa's door and entered her cabin during the festivities. According to Cannon's friends, he returned on the 5th to pay for the damage. But Josefa's supporters claimed that Cannon had been pursuing her sexually. Josefa herself reported that she stabbed Cannon in the heart, killing him instantly, when he called her a whore. For Josefa, Cannon's slur on her honor, more than his physical threat, justified her actions. But Cannon was popular with the miners, their nativist sentiments inflamed after a day of hard drinking and patriotic speeches. An enraged mostly American throng carried Josefa to the town plaza for a pseudo trial. A Dr. Aiken asserted that Josefa was pregnant; he pleaded for leniency for the sake of her innocent child. The angry crowd shouted him down. Another defender spoke up, but he soon abandoned Josefa for his own safety. Among the spectators was future governor John B. Weller, who was later accused of pandering to the mob for votes. Josefa was hustled to the Jersey Bridge where she climbed a scaffold and then walked a plank

out over the river. The crowd cheered as the plank was cut away and Josefa fell. Her body twisted and writhed for half an hour before she was cut down.

Had she not been lynched, students of California history probably never would have heard of Josefa. Hubert H. Bancroft admitted that "no one ever thought of her" until she was hanged. Those who stood by, and even those who participated, seemed troubled by the event. Observers uniformly condemned the mob, but many condemned Josefa as well, suggesting that her status as a "foreigner" and prostitute were somehow to blame. More recently, historians have refocused attention on Josefa, viewing her as a symbol of Latina resistance in Anglo- and male-dominated gold rush California.

Bancroft exaggerated when he described the trees of mining districts as "tasseled with the carcasses of the wicked," but extra-legal punishments like these happened often enough to cast a dark shadow over the state's early history. Through the first half of the 1850s, mob justice broke out regularly in rural as well as urban areas, including San Francisco and Los Angeles. Some of the individuals punished may have been criminals, but many others were targets of local political animosities, moral prejudices, economic frustration, or nativist and racist sentiments.

### Bonanza to Borrasca

During the first half of the gold rush decade, mining changed significantly from an individual pursuit of instant wealth to an organized corporate enterprise that required specialized skills and equipment and substantial capital. The transformation had a major impact on the development of California society, especially on the expectations of the thousands of Argonauts who crossed the isthmus, rounded the Horn, or traversed the Plains in search of fortune. For many of them, the anticipated bonanza soon became *una borrasca* (a storm or tempest). The value of gold extracted by various means during the first dozen years of the California gold rush was spectacular indeed:

Table 11.2 Value of Gold by Year

1848	\$245,000	1854	\$69,433,931
1849	10,151,360	1855	55,485,395
1850	41,273,106	1856	57,509,411
1851	75,938,232	1857	43,628,172
1852	81,294,700	1858	46,591,140
1853	67,613,487	1859	45,846,599

Search keywords

Totals must be multiplied at least tenfold to place them in the context of present dollar values. They must also be assessed in terms of the worth of gold in the nineteenth century, \$16 an ounce, and the number of miners at work: 5,000 in 1848; 40,000 in 1849; 50,000 in 1850; 100,000 in 1852. Between 1852 and 1860, the number remained fairly stable.

Gold production tended to decrease as the number of miners increased, and that had important implications. Initially, the quest for gold was fairly democratic. Deposits encompassed some 35,000 square miles, room for a multitude of prospectors. In addition, the treasure was located in the public domain, apparently there for the taking. Under the circumstances, few willingly submitted to legal, political, or economic authority or accepted work for wages. During the halcyon years of 1848–50, when each miner searched for the “big strike,” a daily wage was defined as the value a person extracted from the ground. As the volume of gold diminished and miners more frequently worked for others, however, the term acquired a more conventional meaning and rewards diminished significantly.

**Table 11.3 Average Daily Wage for White Miners**

1848	\$20	1852	\$6
1849	16	1853	5
1850	10	1854–55	5
1851	8	1856–60	3

Chinese, Indians, and other nonwhite miners received considerably less. For individuals arriving in California expecting to make their fortunes, disappointment at declining potential was severe.

Through the 1850s, Californians’ compensation compared favorably with the average daily wage in “the States,” \$1.00 to \$1.25 for a skilled eastern miner, but living costs in California were far higher. More importantly, declining wage levels and the fact that after 1855 most miners were employees, not independent prospectors, suggest that the average Argonaut did find the anticipated bonanza. Rare enough even in 1848 and ‘49, big strikes became rarer still in later years. Once placer deposits were depleted, mining became an increasingly complex and corporate enterprise. Individual prospectors virtually disappeared, replaced by wage-earners working for entrepreneurs who organized labor forces, supplied essential machinery, and furnished the capital. The situation was not what most participants in “nature’s great lottery

scheme” anticipated, and many of them vented their frustration on Californios and Indians.

### Californios in the Mines

More effectively than war with Mexico, waves of Argonauts flooding the region accomplished the American conquest of California. Two-thirds were Yankees who carried with them their customs, attitudes, and prejudices—including the nativism that prevailed in “the States” at mid-century. Eventually, all people of color in California, especially the Chinese, became targets. But the first to suffer from American bigotry were the Californios and Natives, all of whom were reduced to minority status in their own homeland. For Spanish-speaking residents, loss of lands would later complete what Leonard Pitt called “the decline of the Californios.”

Californios in the mines did not immediately experience the tempest. During the rush of 1848, about 1,300 Hispanic settlers found success in the gold fields. Members of the Coronel, Sepulveda, and Carrillo families of Los Angeles organized a party that headed for the Stanislaus River. They mined on their own, traded trinkets for nuggets with some Indians, and hired others to work for them. Antonio Coronel accumulated 45 ounces of gold in just one day. An associate found a 12-ounce nugget, and another gathered a “towelful of nuggets” in a few hours. He then sold his claim to another, who extracted 52 pounds of gold in a week. A third owner of the site also became rich.

When the mining season of 1848 ended, successful Californios returned to their homes to enjoy their wealth and to lay plans for 1849. By then, however, conditions were less congenial. During Coronel’s return journey, a belligerent ex-Bear Flagger attacked and severely injured a companion. In the diggings, the party encountered Yankee hostility and open threats to all “foreigners.” They also witnessed California’s first lynching, the flogging and execution of a Frenchman and a Chilean at Hangtown. Coronel’s group retreated to more isolated regions but found Americans there, who announced that the gold belonged exclusively to Yankees. Confronted by overwhelming numbers, obvious hostility, and a genuine potential for violence, these and other Californios made the logical decision: they left. Coronel later wrote: “For me, mining is finished.” He probably spoke for most of his compatriots, who were rare in the mines after 1849. Occasionally a *patron* (sponsor) led a party into the southern districts, only to be intimidated by surly gringos who resented Hispanics and their

competition. Hispanics remained in all mining regions, but most were neither California-born nor independent prospectors. Instead, they were Mexicans and South Americans employed by American companies. A few also were cooks, merchants, *arrieros* (muleteers) whose mules carried supplies to remote camps.

After 1848, Yankees assumed proprietary rights and asserted their sense of ethnic and moral superiority. They argued that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo made California a "white man's country," conveniently ignoring treaty provisions that protected the rights of provincial residents and offered them citizenship. Like Dame Shirley, Yankees inaccurately lumped all Hispanics together as simply "Spaniards" (although only 470 individuals from Spain lived in California as late as 1860). As competition and antagonism increased, "Spaniards"—including Californios—became "Sonorans," "greasers," "*cholos*" (a disparaging term for Hispanic males), or worse. Americans justified their hostility by claiming that their hosts engaged in gambling, prostitution, and other allegedly "Latin" vices.

Initial efforts to control the Hispanic presence were spontaneous and informal: threats, mob action, claim-jumping, and occasional beatings. Quickly, however, local miners' committees enacted laws excluding "noncitizens" from many districts, giving prejudice a semblance of legality. Whether formal or informal, nativist attitudes were often vicious. Miners' tribunals consistently meted out the severest punishments to Hispanics, often demanding flogging or mutilation. "Their majesties the mob" also took justice into their own hands, as the events recorded by Dame Shirley testify. Nor did impromptu anti-Hispanic legislation abate when California gained admission to the Union.

### The Foreign Miners' Tax Law of 1850

Yankee miners appealed to the first state legislature to institutionalize their prejudices. Their principal advocate was Senator Thomas Jefferson Green of Sacramento, a Texan who attempted to introduce slavery into the Yuba River mines and whose hatred for Mexicans was notorious. The 1850 law that Green drafted and lawmakers approved imposed a \$20 monthly fee on all noncitizen miners. Support for the measure was not universal, but California's need for revenue convinced most legislators to vote for it.

Because the tax was too high for most "foreigners" to pay, and since it was selectively enforced, the law generated little revenue. Rarely were miners of European origins asked to pay, but one serious incident did occur

when agents in Sonora attempted to collect the tax. Frenchmen and Germans allied themselves with 4,000 unarmed Mexicans to protest the tax. In the "French Revolution" that followed, dissidents encountered hundreds of armed Americans assembled to support the district tax collector. One Mexican was stabbed. The Europeans who instigated the protest were arrested, fined \$5 each, and released, but Mexicans were ordered to pay the tax in full. For most of them, the point was made: they packed their belongings and departed.

In one sense, the tax law worked. It drove most Hispanics from the mines. Otherwise it was a failure. It produced neither the anticipated \$2.4 million in revenue nor the expected cheap, docile labor force. What was worse, it failed to eliminate the right "undesirables": Hispanic workers, restaurant, hotel, and store patrons left the area, much to the distress of local merchants and corporate mine owners. Tradesmen and would-be employers protested the law, citing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the U.S. Constitution, and traditional American ideals in appeals to the governor, legislature, and state supreme court to repeal or modify it. Late in 1850, the governor reduced the monthly fee. Early in 1851, agitation by citizens of Sonora, Stockton, and other towns forced the law's repeal. But the effort did not lure Hispanics back to the mines, nor did it halt the "decline of the Californios."

### "Diggers" in the Mines

The gold rush experience of California Indians paralleled that of the Californios, with even more devastating results. Argonauts stereotyped them as "diggers," assuming that theirs was a primitive culture based on gathering roots and trapping rodents for sustenance, but historian James J. Rawls has demonstrated that the term could have a different application. Indeed, Richard B. Mason's report to President Polk estimated that half of the 5,000 gold diggers during the summer of 1848 were Indians. Most worked for wages for individuals like Marshall, Sutter, or prominent Californios. Antonio Maria Suñol, for instance, took 20 from his Bay Area rancho to prospect on the American River. The Coronel-Sepulveda-Carrillo party included Indians as well.

Pre-1846 non-Hispanic settlers employed the greatest number of Indian miners. Charles M. Weber arrived in 1841 and established a rancho near Stockton. He had nearly 1,000 Native people working for him along Weber Creek near Placerville, and his Yokuts miners made the first major strike in the Calaveras-Stanislaus



region. John M. Murphy was married to the daughter of a Miwok chief, he employed 600 Indigenous people on the North Fork of the Stanislaus. Emigrant Pierson B. Reading employed Indians to prospect along Clear Creek in Shasta County and on the Trinity River, while John Bidwell's Native American crews at Bidwell's Bar on the Feather River helped him gather the riches that paid for his purchase of Rancho Chico.

Not all Indians mined for whites, however. At first, amused by effort wasted in search of something neither edible nor wearable, they soon learned that white men prized gold and that it could be traded. Coronel recorded a typical exchange in 1848. Several Miwoks entered his camp, each carrying a bag of dust and obviously interested in trading:

One . . . took [a saddle blanket] and pointed to the sack filled with gold; he pointed out a certain spot as the amount he was offering. . . . There was then in the area no way to replace the blanket so I refused the offer. . . . He increased it . . . lowering the place where he pressed the sack with his thumb; I refused again. He increased again and then one of my servants asked me why I did not give it to him—[saying] that he would make some saddle blankets of grass.

The California received seven ounces of gold (\$112) for a blanket that, when it was new, cost only two *pesetas* (less than 50 cents). Other trades included exchanging glass beads ounce-for-ounce for gold. Established trading posts systematically fleeced Native people, setting "Indian" prices for goods that were often double those charged to whites, and keeping lead weights—"digger ounces"—to weigh Indian gold dust. They rationalized their policies on grounds that, as one trader put it, "no Christian man is bound to give full value to those infernal redskins; . . . they got no religion, and therefore no conscience, so I deals with them accordin'."

### Solving the "Indian Problem"

Newcomers' journals written in 1848 refer frequently not only to Native Californians but also to Walla Walla, Chinooks, and an occasional Delaware in the mines. By late 1849, however, few are mentioned, and by the 1850s, almost none. During the early gold rush, Californios and others accustomed to local Indians dominated in the diggings, but that changed with arrival of hordes of gold seekers. Contact between these later arrivals and the Native peoples quickly devolved into violence.

### Free State Slavery California's Indian Act of 1850

In his colorful memoir of early Los Angeles, Horace Bell described a grim civic ritual performed each week by municipal law enforcement officers. At sundown on Sunday evenings, the town marshal and his deputies advanced through the streets arresting Indians for vagrancy and public intoxication. Then, on Monday mornings, their Indian prisoners "would be exposed for sale, as slaves for the week" and "bought up by the vineyard men and others at prices ranging from one to three dollars." As Bell acidly observed, "Los Angeles had its slave mart, as well as New Orleans and Constantinople."

In its harsh exploitation of involuntary Indian labor, Los Angeles was not at all unique in California during the Gold Rush and Civil War years. As state geologist William Brewer discovered during a visit to Crescent City in 1863, "It has for years been a regular business to steal Indian children and bring them down to the civilized parts of the state, even to San Francisco, and sell them." According to Brewer, "it is said that some of the kidnappers would often get the consent of the parents by shooting them to prevent opposition."

Like Bell, Brewer provided one of many frank eyewitness accounts that reveal an important truth consistently overlooked in traditional narratives of antebellum America: California was not truly a free state. Despite the fact that California banned African American slavery and voted to enter the Union in 1850 as free soil, the very first state legislature nevertheless proceeded to establish a racially based system of Native American servitude. Designed to satisfy gold rush California's heavy demand for cheap and reliable farm workers and household domestic servants, the notorious and ill-named Act for the Government and Protection of Indians legalized three forms of bound servitude that, in actual practice, amounted to a thinly disguised species of slavery.



Sections 14 and 20 of the Indian Act laid the foundation for the Los Angeles slave mart later recalled by Bell. Specifically, these two provisions authorized local authorities to lease destitute Indian prisoners convicted of vagrancy and other misdemeanors to any white employer willing to pay their fines. Sentenced to terms of up to four months in private custody, Indian convicts provided a convenient supply of temporary workers during peak periods of demand, such as the harvest seasons for wheat, wine grapes, and other commercial crops.

Meanwhile, the need for more permanent year-round workers was met by various provisions of the Indian Act that, in combination, effectively perpetuated the system of debt peonage that had previously sustained the *rancheros* under Mexican rule. Indian laborers whose purchases at the rancho *tienda* (store) outpaced their monthly wages lost their freedom to walk off the job. Until they managed to clear their accounts at the *tienda*, indebted workers were subject to arrest as runaways if they attempted to flee or seek employment elsewhere.

Indentured servitude offered yet another means of legally binding Indian hands to white masters. Section 3 of the Indian Act allowed employers to confine Indian children to white households until they reached the age of majority (18 for males, 15 for females). Obtaining custody of an Indian child did not require parental consent, only approval by a local justice of the peace.

In 1860, the state legislature dramatically amended Section 3 to permit white employers to retain Indian children as "apprentices" well past majority. In some instances, females and males could be held until they reached the respective ages of 25 and 30. The amendment also authorized ten-year terms of indenture for adult Indians captured in war or declared vagrants by county judges.

Not surprisingly, the widespread demand for unfree Indian labor quickly spawned the brutal and illegal slave trade depicted by Brewer. Serving as both cause and effect in California's numerous frontier Indian wars, the kidnapping and trafficking of Native Americans, especially women and children, proved remarkably lucrative, with individual captives fetching prices running anywhere from \$30 to \$250 each (\$915 to \$7,622 in 2018 dollars). Denounced by federal Indian Superintendent George M. Hanson as "this unholy traffic in human blood and souls," California's Indian slave trade, centered in Humboldt and Mendocino counties, flourished until 1863, when Hanson and other anti-slavery Republicans in Sacramento finally gained enough strength to repeal Section 3 in the wake of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. By that point, it is estimated that the grand total of Native Americans reduced to involuntary servitude since 1850 approached 20,000, of whom perhaps 4,000 were kidnapped children sold into bondage throughout the ostensibly "free state" of California. (MFM)

Among the first to appear in California's gold fields were Oregonians, fresh from the Whitman massacre at Walla Walla in 1847 and subsequent Cayuse wars. Those incidents, and the clashes Oregonians had on the trail to California, conditioned their attitudes. When they encountered Indians working productive mines, they were outraged. In March 1849, Oregon miners attacked a Maidu village on the American River. Indians retaliated by killing five Oregonians. The dead men's compatriots assembled in force, pillaged another village, slaughtered many inhabitants, and took a score prisoner. It is unlikely that the captives belonged to the tribe that killed the Oregonians, but seven were marched to Coloma and summarily executed. When James Marshall and others protested, the mob threatened their lives too. Indian-fighting subsequently degenerated into scalping, beheading, and other forms of mutilation and sadism. Californios were disgusted by Americans

violence, like the one who asked, "What courage is displayed by such warfare as this, what honor is to be gained in it, and why have so many of your Oregon men shot down scores of Indians like wolves?"

But "Oregon men" were not the only ones involved. Gold-seekers from around the United States brought their hostilities and prejudices with them. Some antagonisms resulted from stereotypes in the minds of individuals who, like Dame Shirley, had never before seen a "real" Indian. Imagination, too, produced fantasies of incredible proportions. In 1850, for example, Governor Peter Burnett reported to the president that 100,000 armed braves were awaiting a signal to wage a war of extermination against whites. At the time, the entire Indigenous population of the new state barely equaled that number. Indian resistance only exacerbated these fears. The Pomo near Clear Lake responded to the labor exploitation, physical beatings, thievery, and sexual





**A Fight with the Indians**  
An engraving from a Sacramento newspaper depicts a Trinity County incident in which residents reportedly avenged the murder of a local butcher by slaughtering more than 100 local Indians. It also illustrates the attitudes of most settlers in California during the gold rush era. Collection of Peter E. Palmquist.

violence of the Americans who had moved onto their land by killing two of the perpetrators, Andrew Kelsey and Charles Stone. In Napa, when an American named Preston shot and wounded Manuel Vera, Vera shot back.

Most such resistance was met with further violence. In response to the killing of Kelsey and Stone, the U.S. Army slaughtered over 500 Pomo men, women, and children living at Clear Lake and along the Russian River. In response to Vera's action, Americans in Napa blackened their faces, stormed the county jail, and lynched him. Determined to take revenge on real and imagined cattle thefts, white settlers rode into Wappo, Patwin, and Pomo villages and *rancherías* and, in some cases, killed entire communities of men, women, and children. Napa newspapers printed accounts of white men "hunting" Indigenous peoples.

In 1850, to solve the "Indian problem," state legislators enacted laws similar to the "black codes" adopted in the post-Civil War South. The notorious Act for the Government and Protection of Indians permitted the virtual enslavement of Indians as indentured servants, debt peons, or leased convicts. Meanwhile, Governors Peter Burnett and John McDougal encouraged outright extermination, while others leaned toward the

somewhat more humane policies of removal or confinement to federal reservations.

Private forces continued their sporadic forays against the Indians until state- and nationally-funded militia forces lent legitimacy to such campaigns. Militias killed perhaps as many as 12,000 Indians by the 1860s, although many more died of disease and starvation. Some of those involved in the attacks on Natives claimed that they did so to end Indian peonage, a labor system they equated with racial slavery. Others resented Indian competition with white labor for the state's gold. Many acted on the assumption that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," and a vicious few simply enjoyed the killing. Historian Hubert Howe Bancroft justly called the conquest of the California Natives "one of the last human hunts of civilization, and the basest and most brutal of them all."

Indeed, some more recent historians have come to portray the violent subjugation of Native California as "an American Genocide." While others strongly dispute the sweeping use of "genocide" to describe the fate of all California tribes during the Gold Rush and Civil War years, there is no denying that white miners and settlers intentionally waged genocidal campaigns of



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extermination against at least 18 tribal groups, including the Wiyot, Yana, and Yuki.

Federal officials considered annihilation repugnant and removal impractical. They sanctioned an alternate approach. In 1850 Congress appointed three commissioners to implement a segregation program. The trio negotiated agreements with a score of tribes that accepted relocation to reservations in areas remote from white settlement, but the solution was untenable. Californians protested that the 11,700 square miles allocated to Indians constituted 7.5 percent of the state's total area, and in 1852 the U.S. Senate rejected all of the treaties.

A year later, Congress approved a measure proposed by Edward F. Beale, U.S. Indian Superintendent for California, to establish several reservations of up to 30,000 acres each. Only Fort Tejon in the San Joaquin Valley near the Tehachapi Mountains attracted many Indians or functioned well even temporarily. By the early 1860s political manipulation and incompetence reduced California reservations to near ruin. Fort Tejon itself was abandoned in 1868.

Some California Natives resisted removal, as in the Modoc War of 1872–73. In northeastern California, 50 poorly armed warriors, led by Chief Kintpuash (Captain Jack) and accompanied by women and children, fortified themselves in the lava beds region and held off nearly 1,000 U.S. Army regulars. After months of fighting that cost the lives of 65 Americans and perhaps 30 Native men, women, and children, the Modocs were defeated and Captain Jack was executed. Other tribes, like the Mill Creeks during the 1850s and '60s, attacked whites

who raided villages, raped women, stole children, and invaded territories. But most—like the Yahi described in Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi* and the Yosemite who, during the retaliatory "Mariposa Wars" of the 1850s, followed Chief Tenaya into the Sierra wilderness and ultimately joined Mono Lake Paiutes—retreated before the inevitable. Against devastating numbers and debilitating disease, however, neither resistance nor retreat was effective. By 1870, only 30,000 Indians survived anywhere in California.

Whether directly attacked or not, Native Californians could not endure the cultural conflict ushered in by the gold rush. Miners—and later loggers and farmers—rendered streams and forests of their habitat virtually useless to them. In contrast to earlier Spaniards and Mexicans, new settlers penetrated into areas that were isolated Native habitats, even in remote portions of the state. With evident satisfaction, an editor of the *Humboldt Times* in 1857 observed:

Seven years ago, [this region] . . . was innocent of any knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon race. The Indian roamed over its wilds . . . until the bold and enterprising hand of the white came. Now the scene is changed. . . . Another cycle of years and the last vestiges of the race will be well nigh obliterated, . . . crushed out like other imbecilities, under the iron heel of progress and the steady and resistless march of civilization.

During the 1850s and '60s, most white Californians undoubtedly shared his view.

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