



Sutter's Mill on the South Fork of the American River in the town now known as Coloma, California. James Marshall made his discovery on January 24, 1848, an event that changed the course of history. Early pioneers who were already in California started mining immediately, but with the long delays in getting word back to the "States," it was 1849 before the "rush" really got its momentum. Thousands left families behind in the States determined to make their "pile" in the gold mines of California.

Chapter 2: The Discovery of Gold

From the first discovery of California by the Spaniards, the impression prevailed that the country was rich in silver, gold and precious stones. When setting out on his northern expedition, the object of Cortez was to find another country like Mexico, inhabited by a semi-civilized people, whose rich treasures he might appropriate; and afterwards there existed among the inhabitants of New Spain a strong belief in the great riches of the new province, both in gold and precious stones. The first published report of gold in California is found in Hakluyt's account of Sir Francis Drake's expedition to this coast in 1579. The historian of the voyage says: "There is no part of the earth here to be taken up wherein there is not a reasonable quantity of gold or silver." It is not related that any of Drake's men penetrated into the interior of the country, or made any search

We were informed a few days since that a very valuable silver mine is situated in the vicinity of this place, and again, that its locality was known. Mines of quicksilver are being found all over the country. Gold has been discovered in the northern Sacramento district, about forty miles above Sutter's Fort. Rich mines of copper are said to exist north of these bays.

The *Star*,
March 18, 1848



The early foreign residents of California were largely runaway sailors. Many, if not most, would change their names. For instance, Gilroy's ranch, where the town of Gilroy is now located, was owned by an old resident under the assumed appellation of Gilroy. Of course, vessels touching upon this coast were liable, as they were everywhere, to lose men by desertion, especially if the men were maltreated. To be known as a runaway sailor was no stain upon a man's character. It was no uncommon thing after my arrival here for sailors to be skulking and hiding about from ranch to ranch until the vessel they had left should leave the coast. At Amador's ranch, I met a sailor boy named Harrison Pierce, who was concealing himself until his vessel should go to sea. Californians would catch and return sailors to get the reward captains of vessels invariably offered.

John Bidwell, 1840s



Courtesy Folsom History Museum

Piles of tailings, or leftovers from dredging operations, line the American river. This dredge, belonging to the Natomas Company operated in the Folsom area in 1892. Although gold dredging yielded over \$100 million in gold in this area, it wreaked havoc on the environment. The practice of dredging was discontinued in 1962.

for these metals; and, since neither gold nor silver is found in the neighborhood of Drake's or San Francisco Bay, it is to be inferred that this statement was a falsehood, uttered for the purpose of giving importance to Drake's supposed discovery.

It was reserved for James W. Marshall to make the great discovery, on the 19th of January [actually January 24], 1848, at Sutter's Mill, or the South Fork of the American River, near the present town of Coloma, in El Dorado County.

No account of the memorable event can be so interesting as that of, Mr. Marshall himself, who, in a letter of January 28, 1856, says:

"Towards the end of August, 1847, Captain Sutter and I formed a copartnership to build and run a saw-mill upon a site selected by myself (since known as Coloma). We employed P. L. Weimer and family to remove from the Fort (Sutter's Fort) to the mill-site to cook and labor for us. Nearly the first work done was the building of a double log cabin, about half a mile from the mill-site. We commenced the mill about Christmas. Some of the mill hands wanted a cabin near the mill. This was built, and I went to the Fort to superintend the construction of the mill irons, leaving orders

to cut a narrow ditch where the race was to be made. Upon my return, in January, 1848, I found the ditch cut as directed, and those who were working on the same were doing so at a great disadvantage, expending their labor upon the head of the race instead of the foot.

“I immediately changed the course of things, and upon the nineteenth [actually the twenty-fourth] of the same month, January, discovered the gold near the lower end of the race, about two hundred yards below the mill. William Scott was the second man to see the metal. He was at work at a carpenter’s bench near the mill. I showed the gold to him. Alexander Stephens, James Brown, Henry Bigler and William Johnston were likewise working in front of the mill, framing the upper story. They were called up next, and, of course, saw the precious metal. P. L. Weimer and Charles Bennett were at the old double log cabin (where Hastings & Co. afterwards kept a store) and, in my opinion, at least half a mile distant.

In the meantime we put in some wheat and peas, nearly five acres, across the river. In February the Captain (Captain Sutter) came to the mountains for the first time. Then we consummated a treaty with the Indians, which had been previously negotiated. The tenor of this was that we were to pay them \$200 yearly in goods, at Yerba Buena prices, for the joint possession and occupation of the land with them; they agreeing not to kill our stock, viz: horses, cattle, hogs or sheep, nor burn the grass within the limits fixed by the treaty. At the same time Captain Sutter, myself and Isaac Humphrey entered into a copartnership to dig gold. A short time

Phoenix Milling Co., 1901, at the S.E. corner of 13th and J Street.



Courtesy Sacramento Area Museums Collection Center (SAMICC)

Sacramento is not only at the head of ship-navigation, but it is the natural metropolis for the rich and extensive mines of the north, south and middle forks, Yuba, Feather and Bear Rivers, Deer Creek, Cosumne, Dry Creek and the Upper Sacramento, together with all the dry-diggings contiguous. From this extensive section of the mining country, excellent roads, in the dry season, converge to Sacramento City as the nearest and by far the greatest entrepot and depot. Along these roads hundreds of teams toil daily, supplying this vast mining region with provisions, clothing and other necessary articles of consumption. To supply the Sacramento market, which is thus continually drained, steamers and vessels of heavy burden arrive daily from San Francisco.

Samuel Curtis Upham, 1849

