**The American Gold Rush of 1849**

Honors U.S. History

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Gold, one of the most precious metals on Earth, has been culturally defined as a luxurious metal. In America, gold was discovered by Mexicans in the 1830’s in lower parts of modern day California.[[1]](#footnote-2) They had no idea how many more deposits were waiting to be mined in present-day California and Oregon. As the lure of westernization caught the attention of east coast colonists, Americans started emigrating west for new farm land, trade, and the opportunity for a better life.[[2]](#footnote-3) James Marshall, an entrepreneur, was attracted by these new possibilities and hired a contractor, John Sutter, to mill lumber out west. When Sutter found a gold nugget in a nearby river, the discovery of gold sparked national and global attention. Immigrants came from eastern Asia, Australia, and England, all in search of the idea of a never-ending gold supply. The American West soon developed as a culturally diverse part of the continent of North America.[[3]](#footnote-4) With this new popular movement, the positives and negatives ranged widely. Economic growth brought wealth and money to the nation, new businesses emerged, and the mingling of diverse cultures brought new lifestyles. However, crime, such as robbery, and high mortality rates defined the Wet in a negative way.

Nearly 10,000 BCE, the first evidence of human life in California thrived in parts of present-day San Diego.[[4]](#footnote-5) As European nations expanded their exploration efforts, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo led the first Spanish expedition to the western coast of the new world in 1542. Spain sent Cabrillo in search of gold and a more accessible water passage between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. His expedition proved to be a failure, however, since he did not find gold and

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found no easier route Spain.[[5]](#footnote-6) This caused Spain to lose interest in California. Only after the Russians and British were exploring islands in the Pacific Ocean in the early eighteenth century, did the Spanish regain interest in North America’s western coast.[[6]](#footnote-7) Spain sent a small military force to occupy lower parts of California and established the first settlement in present-day San Diego. When Mexico declared independence from Spain, the settled colonists of San Diego slowly started moving and focused their efforts to contain Mexico.[[7]](#footnote-8) Up until 1848, California was minimally heard from until James Marshall found gold in his employers’ wood-logging mill. When Marshall first discovered the precious nugget of gold, he knew he had to keep it secret or else the land would be ransacked and an immediate rush of people would swarm the west. Marshall notified Sutter of his discovery and upon doing so, immediately began to mine gold with Marshall and his crew. For Marshall’s crew, keeping this discovery private was next to impossible. Within two weeks, the crew disbanded and went off to the small town of San Francisco and the Great Salt Lake to deposit their findings and make a fortune.[[8]](#footnote-9) People from other areas noticed the amount of gold being cashed in. People left their jobs, families, and cities for a direct route to the golden hills. The Californian hills begun to be referred to as Eldorado, the ancient fictional city of perfection and wealth.[[9]](#footnote-10) In John Sutter’s journal, he stated how his factories and mills were “left abandoned and fortune plummeting.”[[10]](#footnote-11) He scrambled together one hundred Indians and several wagons and joined the never ending trail of people who came from

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his community and those who traveled the treacherous path from the east coast from the Oregon Trail.[[11]](#footnote-12)

The expansion of the United States was rather easy with the creation of the Oregon Trail coupled with the idea of Manifest Destiny. Beginning in 1811, the Oregon Trail was travelled by foot or horseback. However, little supplies could be carried to establish new land. By 1836, the first wagon train was established and was able to accommodate more supplies and people.[[12]](#footnote-13) The gold miners in 1849 used the same trail, but experienced more life or death encounters. Many Indians were fleeing the area, due to the increase of white settlement. They attacked white travelers and wildlife attacked the newcomers since their food and water supplies were threatened. Weather conditions in the mountains left some travelers stranded and some starved to death.[[13]](#footnote-14) Just one later in 1850, California was admitted as a free state, expanding America to a new coast.[[14]](#footnote-15) As more and more people traveled west, miners came and went which had negative environmental effects; there was mass land erosion and dangerous landslides. The original gold country land turned into a wasteland of mud, dirt, and debris. With minimal land to mine in, miners abandoned their barren land and migrated to the forming coastal cities and ports,[[15]](#footnote-16) ultimately expanding the United States to more industrial cities. This effect led to a more diverse culture and an even bigger boom of immigrants from around the world.

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As California gained more people from all over the world, a common sea port city emerged. San Francisco started as a small Spanish town but developed a large network of business and industry.[[16]](#footnote-17) Bayard Taylor, an American poet described the city as:

“hundreds of tents and houses . . . scattered all over the heights, and along the shore for more than a mile. On every side stood buildings of all kinds, begun or half-finished, and the greater part of them mere canvas sheds, open in front, and covered with all kinds of signs, in all languages. . . . The streets were full of people, hurrying to and fro, and of as diverse and bizarre a character as the houses: Yankees of every possible variety, native Californians in serapes and sombreros, Chileans, Sonorians, Chinese with long tails, Malays armed with their everlasting creeses [swords/daggers] . . . it was impossible to describe any special nationality”[[17]](#footnote-18).

San Francisco never lost this international flare. Similar to what African Americans experienced during the mid-1800s, minorities underwent abuse, and discrimination. Property was commandeered and minorities were taken as slaves for mines operated by white men.

When California entered the Union, it was the only organized state on the western half of the country. With many unorganized territories between the Union and California, the act of keeping up to date with government actions and more importantly, law enforcement lacked greatly. California did not have an official military and no police officers to enforce the law. Under these circumstances, criminal activity flourished through the thriving mines and cities.[[18]](#footnote-19) Since every family owned a weapon, people regularly took matters into their own hands and played the role of executioner. The streets of San Francisco were covered with an anonymous handbill that read: “Are we to be robbed and assassinated in our domiciles [homeland], and the

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law to let our aggressors [walk] the streets merely because they have furnished a straw bill? If so, let ‘each man be his own executioner. Fie upon your laws; they have no force’”[[19]](#footnote-20). San Francisco stood close to becoming a “mob ruled city.”[[20]](#footnote-21) A new law known as Lynch Law was passed and was an effective scare tactic to minimize the crime rate of the state.[[21]](#footnote-22) The law stated that any crime greater than pickpocketing was considered a capital crime and the accused faced the gallows.[[22]](#footnote-23) Pickpocketing criminals were sentenced to a long whipping. The fear of punishment of death soon became the most effective plan to prevent crime. An accused person had to appear before a tribunal of men who would try him, not to the law, but by common sense.[[23]](#footnote-24) A “Committee of Vigilance”[[24]](#footnote-25) was also formed. Their goal was to “purge the city of its malefactors and deport them from the country.”[[25]](#footnote-26) The committee was abolished in 1851 and a proper police force emerged under constitutional law.

Many businesses emerged from the 1849 Gold Rush which provided economic growth and activity in the West. At the beginning of the Gold Rush, as the demand to buy needed mining equipment rose, merchants increased the price amount of axes, pickaxes, and anything required to mine gold, to earn more of a profit.[[26]](#footnote-27) The History Channel Staff noted, “Most of the richest people who emerged from the Gold Rush were the merchants who knew how supply and demand worked.”[[27]](#footnote-28) As many forty-niners returned back home to the east coast, traveling

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with their loot was too dangerous. Bandits were known for stealing everything that miners earned, leaving them with nothing. Henry Wells and William Fargo stood behind these innocent people to start the company Wells Fargo.[[28]](#footnote-29) Their mission was “to provide a new banking system to deposit and withdraw money from the West and East and to provide express protected delivery between both coasts.”[[29]](#footnote-30) They earned the trust of their customers which gained the company fame and recognition even to today.

Although the Gold Rush of 1849 was not the first gold rush in American history, it was one of the largest and most decisive events in the development of the American West. The discovery of gold by John Marshall brought economic growth as well as a new state. The Gold Rush attracted the most amounts of immigrants to America which led to the diversification of the white dominant society. However, crime and the high mortality rate of miners and citizens necessitated a strict moral code for people to abide by. Never in American history would such an event like the Gold Rush help define a geographical area for the future of the United States.

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2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ryan Reed, *California: In American History* (ABC-CLIO, 2000), http://americanhistory.abc-clio.com/ (accessed October 9, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. General John A. Sutter, *The Discovery Of Gold In California* (1857), in *Hutchings’ California Magazine*, 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Sutter, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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13. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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16. Martin Kelly, “Going to California: 49ers and the Gold Rush,” *American History*, http://americanhistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa090901a.htm. (accessed September 17, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Linda Jacobs Altman, *The California Gold Rush In American History* (Springfield: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 2000), 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Kelly, *Going to California: 49ers and the Gold Rush*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Altman, *The California Gold Rush In American History*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ibid., 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. J.D. Lloyd, The Gold Rush (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2002), 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid., 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid., 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Ibid. 190 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid., 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. History.com Staff, “The Gold Rush Of 1849”. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)