

# **The California Gold Rush**

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The discovery of gold in California in 1848 acted as a catalyst to the westward movement in America.<sup>1</sup> The migration to the west coincided with the manifest destiny theory the country had recently adopted. The phrase was coined by John Louis O’Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1845, and is used to describe the belief that the people had the right and duty to expand throughout North America.<sup>2</sup> The event dramatically altered the country and affected the lives of countless people. Newspapers played an important role in what has been called “one of the most effective promotional campaigns in history.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1848, the Mexican War, which began in 1846, was coming to an end, and westward expansion was slowly increasing the population in the western lands of the United States. During this time, the economic problems in inner cities forced people to look elsewhere to fulfill their dreams. *The New York Tribune* publisher Horace Greeley frequently promoted western settlement as a “safety valve” to release urban dwellers from the “pressure cooker of the inner city.” “Go West, young man, and grow up with the Country,” was the advice Greeley offered in 1837. “If he go prepared to throw off his coat, fare rudely, work heartily, sleep soundly, and rise reasonably, he will likely thrive there,” Greeley later wrote continuing to encourage western expansion. Little did he know the events of 1848 would dramatically increase the exodus from the east coast to the west coast of America.<sup>4</sup>

“Hey, boys, by God I believe I’ve found a gold mine,” James Marshall said. These simple words spoken on January 24, 1848, forever changed the history of the- country. Marshall discovered a nugget of gold while working on John Sutter’s saw mill in the city of Coloma, California, along the American River.<sup>5</sup> Word slowly spread throughout the country. In March 1848, both of San Francisco’s weekly newspapers, the *Californian* and *the California Star* ran reports of the discovery. On March 15, the *Californian* ran the following short article:

In the newly made raceway of the Saw Mill recently erected by Captain Sutter, on the American Fork, gold had been found in considerable quantities. One person bought thirty dollars worth to New Helvetia, gathered there in a short time. California, no doubt is rich in mineral wealth, great chances here for scientific capital-

ists. Gold has been found in almost every part of the country.<sup>6</sup>

The *California Star* ran a piece about the discovery on March 25, but the news was still not thoroughly believed by many. In April, Dr. Victor John Fourceaud wrote an article entitled the “Prospects of California” in the *California Star*. It was a special edition that was distributed along the eastern portion of the country as well.<sup>7</sup>

While word slowly spread toward the east coast via newspapers and letters written to friends and family, a large portion of the population was still skeptical. President James K. Polk cleared up any remaining doubt on December 5, 1848, in a message to Congress.<sup>8</sup> “The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service,” he said.<sup>9</sup>

The officer Polk referred to was Colonel Richard B. Mason. Along with his report he sent a tea caddy filled with gold. After Polk’s message to Congress, “Mason’s report was carried in newspapers throughout the Country and in almost every edition of every newspaper there was a gold rush story.”<sup>10</sup>

The immense coverage of the discovery of gold and the people involved left a lasting impact on California, the United States, and the world. The most noticeable change was geographical as more people migrated west in search of fortune. “Forces were unleashed, for good and ill, that would transform California forever into a Golden State.”<sup>11</sup> The population increase transformed into hundreds of boom towns in California resulting in mining camps and fly-by-night homesteads. San Francisco experienced the greatest population boom. Its population of 1,600 in 1848 swelled to 25,000 in just one year.<sup>12</sup>

Economic implications also resulted from the westward expansion. When the San Francisco-based *Californian* ceased publication on May 29, it complained that “The whole country, from San Francisco to Los Angeles and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevada, resounds with the sordid cry of ‘Gold! Gold! Gold!’ while the field is left half planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes.” When

people went in search of gold they dropped everything, leaving businesses, property, and families behind. The *Californian* itself was forced to suspend publication when its staff joined the hunt for gold. Crewmen on San Francisco ships deserted their posts and traded anchors for pickaxes when they joined the quest for gold.<sup>13</sup>

The implications of the gold rush extended globally, as well as locally. “Like ripples in a pond pulsing outward from a skipping stone, news of the California gold discovery circled the globe.” In addition to traveling from the east coast, prospectors from Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, Mexico, Peru, and Chile came to California to mine for gold.<sup>14</sup>

“Working within a national tradition that had promoted western expansion and development, the press played a significant role in the settlement of the American west.” In order for newspapers to survive, they depended on subscriptions and advertisements, thus they were tied to the prosperity of their communities. In order to maintain the prosperity, “they depended on exaggerations to attract new settlers and on optimism to assure stability of their towns.”<sup>15</sup>

As people moved westward, newspapers were established. The editors of these papers were trained by editors in the east before their journeys to the west. In the process, “editors learned to live on a shoestring, content with unreliable mail and transportation, promote their hometowns, batter political opponents, face violence, and through exchange papers, cooperate with their counterparts in other cities.”<sup>16</sup>

When word of the gold rush hit, “newspapers abandoned all caution.” The reports included the following statements: “It exceeds calculation, and almost reminds us of the treasures of Aladdin.”<sup>17</sup> “We are told that the new region that has just become a part of our possessions, is El Dorado after all...By a sudden and accidental discover, the ground is represented to be one vast gold mine. – Gold is picked up in pure lumps, twenty-four carats fine.” “All creation is going out there to fill their pockets with the great condiment of their diseased minds.”<sup>18</sup>

Newspapers during this period tended to focus on stories of those who struck it rich, and they did not cover those who were left empty handed. As a result, armed with the information from the newspapers, the thought of the “potential material rewards injected the nation with gold

fever” and thus a national movement began.<sup>19</sup>

The gold rush left a lasting impression on American civilization and the country’s newspapers. When the rush ceased, California and most of the western states had experienced a tremendous population boom. The change in the American people was not only geographical. There was an intrinsic desire now for wealth. The nation watched paupers turn to princes during the gold rush, and they ached for that same type of get rich quick scheme. Today’s society has the lottery and gambling to supplement that need. The nation’s newspapers left the gold rush era with a new approach to news writing. Publishers recognized that people like to read about other people. Readers enjoyed reading about people like themselves who traveled out west with a shovel and a dream and returned with gold and immense wealth. Newspapers began to incorporate features into their pages and telling stories. Editors began to place emphasis on the reader and what stories the audience desired. The impact of the nation’s newspapers on the western movement also showed the nation that newspapers hold power and set the agenda for the country.

- <sup>1</sup> William E. Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," WM. David Sloan, "The Media in America a History." Vision Press, 2002, 185.
- <sup>2</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 175
- <sup>3</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 185.
- <sup>4</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 185.
- <sup>5</sup> "Mike Reisbord's History Lesson: The California Gold Rush," [http:// www.reisbord.com/goldrush.htm](http://www.reisbord.com/goldrush.htm), 2001
- <sup>6</sup> B. R. Buckelew, "GOLD MINE FOUND," *The Californian* (San Francisco), March 15, 1848.
- <sup>7</sup> "Gold Rush Chronology 1846-1849." <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/chron1.html>, 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> Gold Rush Chronology 1846-1849. <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/chron1.html>, 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 185.
- <sup>10</sup> Mike Reisbord's History Lesson: The California Gold Rush [http. http:// www.reisbord.com/goldrush.htm](http://www.reisbord.com/goldrush.htm), 2001
- <sup>11</sup> California History, "The World Rushed In." [http://www.californiahistory.net/text\\_only/6\\_1.htm](http://www.californiahistory.net/text_only/6_1.htm), 2002.
- <sup>12</sup> California History, "Gold Fever." [http://www.californiahistory.net/text\\_only/6\\_1\\_1.htm](http://www.californiahistory.net/text_only/6_1_1.htm), 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> Gold Rush Chronology 1846-1849. <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/chron1.html>, 2001.
- <sup>14</sup> California History, "Gold Fever." [http://www.californiahistory.net/text\\_only/6\\_1\\_1.htm](http://www.californiahistory.net/text_only/6_1_1.htm), 2002.
- <sup>15</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 180.
- <sup>16</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 184.
- <sup>17</sup> Anonymous, "California Gold," *Daily Tribune* (New York). 30 November 1848.
- <sup>18</sup> Anonymous, "The Gold Fever." *Hartford (Connecticut) Courant*. 6 December 1848.
- <sup>19</sup> Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800-1900," 185.