

The Gold Rush and Westward Expansion

In order to understand the significance of the Gold Rush, it is important to look back at the events that led to the discovery of gold in California. One of the most important events was the Mexican-American War (1846-48). The Mexican-American War was a war of national aggression to gain territory. It followed the **1845 annexation of Texas**, which Mexico regarded as its territory. In 1836 the Texian Army won the Battle of San Jacinto against Mexican forces, led by famed general **Santa Anna**, and the Republic of Texas declared its independence from Mexico. But Mexico had refused to acknowledge this action and warned the U.S. that if it tried to make Texas part of the U.S., Mexico would declare war. In 1845 Texas voluntarily asked to join the U.S., and became the 28th state. This action led to Mexico to declare war on the United States, starting the Mexican-American War.

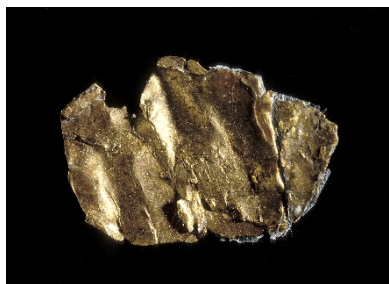
After a series of conflicts spanning two years, the United States won the war. When the dust settled, the U.S. had gained a significant amount of new territory. The region collectively known as the **Mexican Cession** included all of present-day California, Texas, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Utah. The signing of the **Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo** officially ended the war on February 2, 1848. In addition to the ceded territory, Mexico gave up its claims on Texas and recognized the Rio Grande River as America's southern border.



U.S. Territorial Acquisition map, www.nationalatlas.gov

At the time, the war was regarded as a major American victory over a hostile foe, but in the wake of the sectional strife of the Civil War the Mexican-American War was all but forgotten by history. But the war was pivotal in shaping our nation's future. It cemented the idea of the United States as an expansionist, transcontinental empire. It fulfilled the nation's vision of **Manifest Destiny** – creating one nation from Atlantic to Pacific. It shaped the land on which many Americans live today. And it led directly to the California Gold Rush.

The Discovery of Gold



Gold nugget. This small piece of yellow metal is believed to be the first piece of gold discovered in 1848 at Sutter's. Smithsonian Museum of American History

Unbeknownst to both the United States and Mexico at the time, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo would serve to further America's growing wealth and prestige. For just six days before the treaty was signed, gold was discovered in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. None of the delegates at the signing of the treaty could have imagined that the rivers and

streams in California were soon to yield a fortune in gold. In reality, neither the United States nor Mexico thought much of California. The land in California was a dangerous, semi-arid wilderness, inhabited with native tribes. The war had simply been about borders and territory – not what the territory actually held. Pioneers and migrants were more likely to choose the fertile territory of Oregon than they were California.

Gold was discovered on January 24, 1848 by John W. Marshall, a carpenter and sawmill operator who worked at **Sutter's Mill**, owned by pioneer and German-born immigrant **John Sutter**. During his early morning routine check of the water-powered sawmill, Marshall spotted a glint of gold beneath the surface of the South Fork American River. Marshall plucked the pea-sized particle from the water and recalled, "I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold." Marshall took his discovery to Sutter, who used an encyclopedia to confirm the find. Sutter recalled the event years later in a magazine:

It was a rainy afternoon when Mr. Marshall arrived at my office in the Fort, very wet. . . . He told me then that he had some important and interesting news which he wished to communicate secretly to me, and wished me to go with him to a place where we should not be disturbed, and where no listeners could come and hear what we had to say. I went with him to my private rooms . . . I forgot to lock the doors, and it happened that the door was opened by the clerk just at the moment when Marshall took a rag from his pocket, showing me the yellow metal; he had about two ounces of it. . . . After [reading] the long article "gold" in the Encyclopedia Americana, I declared this to be gold of the finest quality, of at least 23 carats.

Sutter swore his workers to secrecy, but within months the secret was out, and the Gold Rush was on. Newspaper reports on the discovery were initially met with disbelief, but once evidence of gold was brought into San Francisco the frenzy began. The San Francisco-based journal, *The Californian*, published the following on May 29, 1848:

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.

By mid-June 1848, three-quarters of San Francisco's male population had left the city for the foothills of the Sierra Nevada in search of gold. All of Sutter's workmen abandoned him to seek their fortunes in the rivers and streams, gripped with "gold fever Sutter complained that "even my cook has left me." The Gold Rush turned life upside down." When the news of gold reached the East coast, many men who had trained as bankers, lawyers, and doctors in the East now migrated westward, spending their days knee-deep in freezing water, moving rocks and stones until their hands were numb searching for gold.

One man likened the "gold fever" to a highly contagious disease. Writing to his friends on the East coast he said, "The whole population are going crazy . . . Old as well as young are daily falling victim to the gold fever." Wives and families were abandoned, left behind to figure out ways to support themselves. Shops were boarded up. Schools were closed. Soldiers abandoned their posts. Benjamin Kloozer, a soldier stationed in California, was torn between duty to his country and the lure of gold. As a soldier his wages were six dollars a month, but mining for gold he stood to make as much as \$150 per day. Writing to his brother in Boston, he detailed his predicament, "I hate to desert . . . I am almost crazy. . . . Excuse this letter, as I have the 'gold fever' shockingly bad."

Not all Americans viewed the Gold Rush as a positive occurrence for the country. Literary greats **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** spoke out on the detrimental effects of the event. Emerson wrote, "It was a rush and a scramble or needy adventurers, and, in the western country, a general jail-delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers." Thoreau went further in his denunciation of the gold seekers, writing:

The recent rush to California and the attitude of the world, even or its philosophers and prophets, in relation to it appears to me to reflect the greatest disgrace on mankind. That so many are ready to get their living by the lottery of gold-digging without contributing any value to society, and that the great majority who stay at home justify them in this both by precept and example! . . . Going to California. It is only three thousand miles nearer to hell. . . . Did God direct us so to get our living, digging where we never planted, and He would perchance reward us with lumps of gold? It is a text, oh! for the Jonahs of this generation, and yet the pulpits are as silent as immortal Greece, silent, some of them, because the preacher is gone to California himself. The gold of

California is a touchstone which has betrayed the rottenness, the baseness, of mankind. Satan, from one of his elevations, showed mankind the kingdom of California, and they entered into a compact with him at once. (Thoreau journal February 1, 1852)

Arrival of the Forty-niners

The discovery of gold in 1848 by James Marshall sparked a massive wave of westward migration. The largest influx occurred in 1849, and those prospectors who sought their fortunes became known collectively as **forty-niners**, in reference to the year they arrived. Fortune seekers came by land and sea, from every corner of the world. There were three ways to journey to California in the days of the Gold Rush. By far the easiest and most popular route was the “Panama shortcut.” This journey was 7,000 miles and took approximately two to three months. Gold seekers would sail down the eastern coast of the United States to Panama. There they faced a thirty-five mile overland journey through the jungle, cutting across the Isthmus of Panama to reach the waters of the Pacific Ocean. They then boarded another ship which took them north along the western coast of Mexico to San Francisco. As California’s major port city, San Francisco became the gateway to gold.



“Forty-niner” Street Advertiser in Studio, San Francisco, 1890, Unidentified artist, Smithsonian American Art Museum

The second route was also by sea. Although it was the longest in terms of distance, nearly 15,000 miles, it was also the safest route, despite the risk of high waves, frigid temperatures, and a lack of fresh food. Travelers would sail south from the U.S. east coast past South America, down around the tip of Cape Horn, and back north through the Pacific Ocean to California. This route took approximately four to eight months.

The third and most treacherous route was by land – cutting across the continental United States by wagon train. The shortest in terms of distance – only 3,000 miles – the overland journey could take three to seven months. Traveling by ship was costly, so for many this was the only viable option. Travelers feared attacks from American Indians and wildlife, but the biggest threat actually came from diseases and sicknesses such as cholera, diphtheria, “mountain fever” (similar to typhoid), and pneumonia. The hardships that were encountered were numerous; belongings were lost crossing rivers, wagons broke down after encountering barely cleared trails, pack animals dropped dead from exhaustion, and weather ranging from

violent thunderstorms and torrential rain to dust storms and scorching heat plagued gold seekers.

In 1849, San Francisco's population skyrocketed from 812 to 20,000 people. The cost of land soared – the same plot of land which had cost \$16 in 1847, sold for \$45,000 just eighteen months later. Prices of goods and commodities also rose. Fresh produce was in high demand, with apples selling for \$5 each and a dozen eggs for \$50.



Miners in the Sierras (detail), 1851-1852, Charles Christian Nahl and August Wenderoth

The reality of the Gold Rush was that people were likely to find greater financial success in selling goods and services to miners than they actually were in mining for gold. Enterprising individuals in the many mining towns that sprang up often made more money than those who mined for gold. Domestic workers could command \$200 per month – matching what members of Congress earned. Women, more so than men, profited enormously from the opportunities the Gold Rush provided. The female population was significantly smaller than the male population, and so jobs that were traditionally assigned to women –

clothes washing, ironing, and cooking – became in demand and highly paid professions. Artist Charles Christian Nahl's mother Henriette supported the family by washing miners' laundry. It has been suggested that the laundry hanging outside the cabin in the background of *Miners in the Sierras* is a nod to Henriette.

Outcome

There were other gold rushes in North America, most notably the 1896 **Klondike Gold Rush** in Canada's Yukon Territory, but none was as historically and culturally significant as the California Gold Rush. The rush produced on average seventy-six tons of gold per year. By the end of the 1850s, it was estimated that \$550 million worth of gold had been mined – approximately \$187 billion in today's dollars. The gold rush propelled the expansion and settlement of the western United States on a massive scale. In the years prior to the Gold Rush, a paltry 2,700 settlers had arrived in California. By 1854, more than 300,000 pioneers had settled there, including many settlers from other countries, some from as far as Australia and China.

Glossary

1845 annexation of Texas: the incorporation of the Republic of Texas into the United States of America. In 1836 the Texian Army won the Battle of San Jacinto against Mexican forces, led by famed general Santa Anna, and the Republic of Texas declared its independence from Mexico. But Mexico had refused to acknowledge this action and warned the U.S. that if it tried to make Texas part of the U.S., Mexico would declare war. In 1845 Texas voluntarily asked to join the U.S., and became the 28th state. This action led to Mexico to declare war on the United States, starting the Mexican-American War.

forty-niners: people, especially prospectors, who went to California in 1849 during the gold rush.

Henry David Thoreau: (1817-1862) American author and poet, best known for his work *Walden* (1854), a novel that is both memoir, social experiment, and a voyage of spiritual discovery. It is a reflection of a man's experience living simply in nature, outside "civilized" society.

John Sutter: (1803-1880) German-born Swiss settler and colonizer of California. The discovery of gold on his land at Sutter's Mill precipitated the California Gold Rush.

Klondike Gold Rush: (1896-1899) a migration by approximately 100,000 prospectors to the Klondike region of the Yukon in north-western Canada. Similar to the California Gold Rush, while the very first prospectors did find gold, most found their search in vain.

Manifest Destiny: the nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.

Mexican Cession: the historical name for the region of the United States that Mexico ceded to the U.S. in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: (1803-1882) American poet, essayist, and philosopher; founder of the Transcendentalist philosophical movement.

Santa Anna: (Antonio López de Santa Anna) (1794-1876) influential Mexican military and political leader, best known for his victory at the Battle of the Alamo in 1836.

Sutter's Mill: the water-powered saw mill owned by John Sutter, where gold was discovered in 1848, setting off the California Gold Rush. It was located in present-day Coloma, California on the bank of the South Fork American River.



Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo: (February 2, 1848) the agreement between the United States and Mexico which ended the Mexican-American War.