

# Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park



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### Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park

Hwy. 49/Coloma Road at Bridge Street

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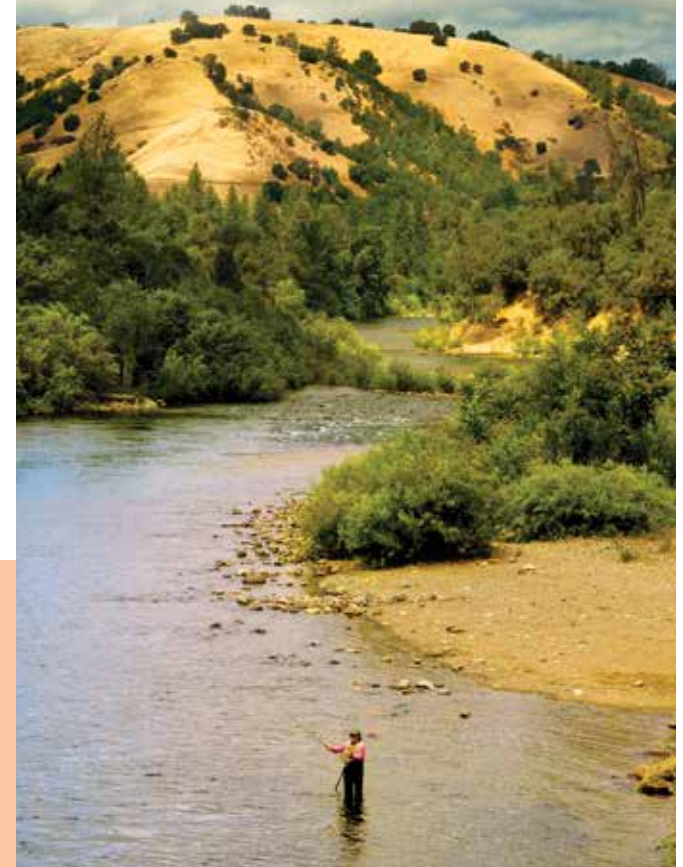
[www.parks.ca.gov/marshallgold](http://www.parks.ca.gov/marshallgold)

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*Monday 24th.*

*This day some kind of mettle  
was found in the tail race  
that looks like goald, first  
discovered by James Martial,  
the Boss of the Mill."*

—from Henry Bigler's Diary,  
January 1848



**A**long California's historic Highway 49, tucked neatly into a beautifully forested valley in the Sierra foothills, Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park straddles the South Fork of the American River. Here, on January 24, 1848, James Marshall found gold flakes in the tailrace and sparked one of history's largest human migrations.



*Sutter's Mill replica*

their home along the American River “Cullumah,” now known as Coloma.

As “river people,” they enjoyed an abundance of freshwater fish as well as waterfowl, elk, deer, and small game and lived on a staple diet of acorns, seeds, and fruits. The hollowed-out holes in a large bedrock in the park—the last remaining evidence of the native people’s original presence here—show how they processed the acorns that formed their main diet.

Until they met fur trappers in the late 1820s, the native people had little contact with the outside world. By the late 1830s, however, diseases introduced by the newcomers had nearly decimated the native people. When gold was discovered along the American River in the Coloma Valley, hordes of gold-seekers seized control of the California Indians’ fishing and gathering sites. By 1849, the remaining native people who had survived the combined hardships of disease and conflicts with settlers had dispersed to more remote foothills and valleys. A few turned to mining, and some went to work for John Sutter.

### **January 24, 1848—GOLD DISCOVERY**

John Sutter was founder of “New Helvetia”—later named Sacramento—and a vast agricultural empire in the Sacramento Valley. He partnered with James W. Marshall to go into the

lumber business. They selected Coloma Valley, 45 miles east of Sutter's fort, as a mill site because it had a river for power and stands of large ponderosa pine trees for lumber. As equal partners, Sutter would furnish the capital and Marshall would oversee the mill's construction and daily operation.

In the fall of 1847, Marshall began construction of the mill with a labor force that included local Indians and members of the U.S. Army Mormon Battalion. A low dam was built across the river to direct part of the stream into the diversion channel that would carry it through the

mill. By January of the next year, the mill was ready to be tested. However, the tailrace, which carried water away from the mill, was too shallow, backing up water and preventing the mill wheel from turning properly. To deepen the tailrace, each day

the Indian laborers loosened the rock. At night, water was allowed to run through the ditch to wash away the loose debris from that day's diggings.

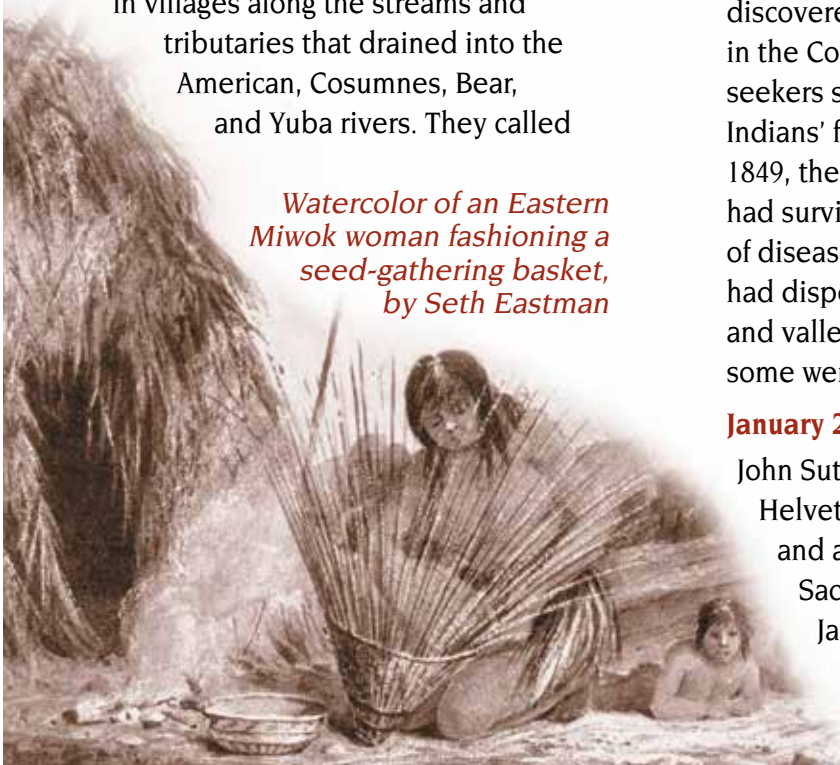
On the morning of January 24, 1848, while inspecting the millrace, Marshall spotted some shiny flecks in the tailrace.

## **PARK HISTORY**

### **Native People**

For thousands of years, the Nisenan and foothill Miwok people built their dome-shaped houses and cedar bark structures in villages along the streams and tributaries that drained into the American, Cosumnes, Bear, and Yuba rivers. They called

*Watercolor of an Eastern Miwok woman fashioning a seed-gathering basket, by Seth Eastman*



*Photo courtesy of California State Library, Sacramento, California*



*John A. Sutter*

He scooped them up and pounded them with a rock; he then placed them in the crown of his hat and hurried to announce his find to the others.

Marshall told the mill workers, "Boys, by God, I believe I've found a gold mine." When Mr. Scott—a carpenter working on the mill wheel—disputed his claim, Marshall replied positively, "I know it to be nothing else."

Marshall again pounded it on a rock, and the cook, Jenny Wimmer, boiled it in lye soap. It passed all their tests—it was pure gold.

Four days later Marshall rode to the fort with samples of the gold. Sutter consulted his encyclopedia, tried various tests, and confirmed Marshall's conclusion. Mindful of their investment in the mill, they agreed to keep the news secret until the mill was in operation. After all, this was not the first time gold had been discovered in California, and no one assumed that this find was particularly important.

But it was a secret that could not be kept. In a letter to General Mariano Vallejo, Sutter bragged about the discovery. Mormon elder Sam Brannan, who operated a general store at the fort, went to the mill to see for himself. Several Mormon mill



*Early drawing of Sutter's Mill, ca. 1849*

workers readily gave him a tithe of the gold they had found. When Brannan visited San Francisco in May, he paraded the streets waving a quinine bottle full of gold, shouting, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" By the end of May, San Francisco was reported to be "half empty" as its able-bodied men departed for the mines. The excitement grew when an army officer carried a tea caddy full of gold to Washington, D.C. Shortly after President James K. Polk confirmed the

rumors, thousands joined the trek to the Gold Country.

### **JAMES MARSHALL'S STORY**

In the late 1830s, New Jersey native James Marshall traveled west to Missouri, where he worked as a carpenter and farmer along the Missouri River. When his doctor advised him to seek a healthier climate, Marshall joined a wagon train bound for Oregon in 1844. In June 1845, he headed for California with a small party of settlers.

He arrived at Sutter's fort in July and was immediately hired as a wheelwright and carpenter. Craftsmen with his experience were scarce in California. Marshall purchased a ranch on Butte Creek, but after



*James Wilson Marshall as drawn in 1849*

fighting alongside the Americans during their conquest of California in 1846, he returned home to discover his cattle strayed or stolen. He met again with John Sutter, who gave him the task of finding a site to build their new sawmill.

With Marshall's gold discovery, the sawmill at Coloma quickly lost its sleepy, peaceful aspect. In July 1848, the area's population had jumped to 1,000. That December, flooding caused Sutter to sell his interest in the mill, and Marshall took on two new partners. Later, management problems entangled the mill in legal difficulties, and after 1850 it was abandoned. Marshall spent the next few years searching for more gold, with little success. In 1857 he bought fifteen acres of land in Coloma for \$15 and built a cabin near the Catholic church. Investing in new and exotic varieties of grapevines, he planted a vineyard on the hillside above the cemetery, dug a cellar, and began to make wine

for sale. By 1860 his vines were doing so well that his entry in the county fair received an award, but in the late 1860s, a series of setbacks sent him prospecting again. During this time, Marshall became part owner of a quartz mine near Kelsey. Hoping to raise funds to develop the mine, he went on a lecture tour, only to find himself stranded, penniless, in Kansas City. In a philanthropic gesture, Leland Stanford paid Marshall's fare to New Jersey, where

he visited his mother and sister. After a few months, he returned to Kelsey and moved into the Union Hotel.

For his role in the Gold Rush, in 1872 the State Legislature awarded Marshall a \$200 monthly pension for two years. He paid some debts and equipped a blacksmith shop in Kelsey. The pension was halved for the next four years; it ended in 1878 amid criticism of Marshall's personal habits—namely his weakness for liquor.

Marshall continued to work in his blacksmith shop and in the small gold mines he owned near Kelsey. He died at age 75 on August 10, 1885; his grave sits on the hillside above the town. In 1890 a monumental statue—California's first State Historic Monument—was commissioned and placed on the hill overlooking the gold discovery site to mark the location of Marshall's grave.

### CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

News of Marshall's gold discovery spread throughout the world. In China, California



*The Monroe family: William, Grant, Pearley, Andrew Jr. (top); Cordelia, James, Andrew Sr., Sarah (middle); Garfield (bottom)*

was called *Gum San*—"Gold Mountain." Chinese workers, lured to California by a promised golden mountain from which they could literally carve out their fortune, were fleeing years of war and poverty. Chinese miners at

Coloma—thought to have numbered about 50—were so efficient at finding gold that other miners complained of a "Chinese invasion." Hostilities among the miners helped spark discriminatory taxes and laws that were enforced only against "foreign" immigrant miners.

The easy-to-find placer gold at Coloma played out

early. By 1857 many miners had left, but a few Chinese miners remained to work the placer sites. Two structures used by the Chinese remain in the park today—the Man Lee building, which housed a Chinese trading and banking company as well as a hardware store, and the Wah Hop Store, once leased to a Chinese merchant of that name. They currently house exhibits of gold mining techniques and the mercantile goods needed by the Chinese miners.

### AFRICAN AMERICAN SETTLERS

According to the Gooch-Monroe oral history, Peter and Nancy Gooch came to Coloma as slaves in 1849. In 1850 California was admitted to the union as a free state, so Peter and Nancy gained their freedom. Peter Gooch worked in construction and at odd jobs, and Nancy did domestic chores for the miners. By 1861 Nancy had saved enough money to buy freedom for her son, Andrew Monroe,



*Living history participant at Gold Rush Live*

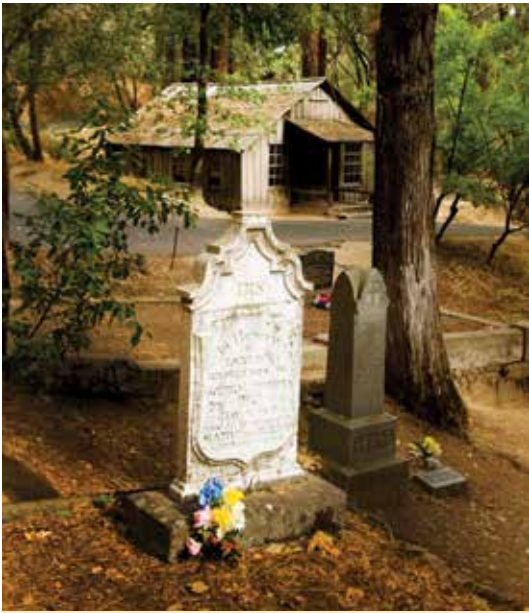


*The Wah Hop building—a Gold Rush-era Chinese store*

*"A frenzy had seized my soul... piles of gold rose up before me at every step; castles of marble... thousands of slaves... myriads of fair virgins... the Rothschilds, Girards, and Astors appeared to me but poor people."*

*Diary of J.H. Carson, 1852*





*Cemetery and James Marshall's cabin*

who was still a slave in Missouri. Andrew brought his wife, Sarah, and their three children to Coloma, where they became respected farmers. In the 1940s, the State purchased some of the Monroe landholdings from Andrew Monroe's son, Pearley, which included the original site of Sutter's Mill and the site of Marshall's gold discovery—the foundation of today's park. The entire Gooch-Monroe family is buried in the park's Pioneer Cemetery.

### **COLOMA, QUEEN OF THE MINES**

In the wake of the hopeful gold seekers came merchants, doctors, lawyers, gamblers, ministers—purveyors of all services required to supply a miner and relieve him of his burdensome gold dust. From Coloma, the miners moved up the canyons and into the mountains. With each new strike, and as the placer gold gave out, Coloma declined in population. By 1857 the El Dorado County seat

had been transferred to nearby Placerville. By then, the Chinese were almost the only miners working the gravel bars near the discovery site; Coloma again became a peaceful community with an economic base of agriculture and transportation.

### **HAD GOLD NOT BEEN DISCOVERED**

California had been a pastoral backwater and wilderness in 1848. Nine days after Marshall's fateful discovery—at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War—the United States had been granted this land as part of a treaty. Its non-Indian population was about 14,000. At the time, only a few hundred overland pioneers had found ways to bring their wagon trains across the deserts and mountains to California. But that all changed with the discovery of gold.

Between 1848 and 1852, the world's fascination with California caused its population to grow to more than 200,000. Few "Forty-Niners" intended to remain in California permanently—most had come to seek their fortune and then return home. But many sent for their families and stayed, while others returned later to become permanent residents.

Over the next 50 years, roughly 125 million ounces of gold taken from the hills had a critical effect on California's early development. Had gold not been discovered, California's climate, resources, and location might have been ignored for a much longer time. There would have been little interest in building a transcontinental railroad to bind the nation together.

However, when James Marshall spotted shiny metal in the mill's tailrace, he gave rise to California's current culturally diverse and technologically advanced population.

### **THE PARK**

Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, created in 1942, encompasses most of the historic town of Coloma. With about 300 year-round residents in the Coloma area, the tree-lined streets of the park are usually quiet, shady, and serene. Most visitors and students come during spring, summer, and fall or for special events year-round, including the annual January 24 celebration of Marshall's gold discovery.

A number of historic buildings and sites—including the working blacksmith shop, the Price-Thomas and Papini homes, the Mormon, James Marshall and Miner's cabins, and the Indian bedrock mortar—remain to remind us of that tumultuous period. One outstanding attraction of the park is the full-sized replica of Sutter's sawmill. The original, abandoned and torn down for its

lumber, disappeared in the flood of 1862. The replica, looking much like the original, was recently rebuilt near the discovery site. Some of the original mill's timbers, reclaimed from the river, are displayed nearby. Gold panning activities take place year-round.

### **THE GOLD DISCOVERY MUSEUM AND OTHER EXHIBITS**

Exhibits in the Gold Discovery Museum tell the story of John Sutter and James Marshall, and how



*Cooking demonstration*



*St. John's church, built in 1856*

drastically the simple act of noticing a small fleck of gold would alter the lives of hundreds of thousands of people from that day to the present. The museum also has Indian and Gold Rush-era exhibits, including mining equipment, horse-drawn vehicles, household implements and other memorabilia, as well as films about the gold discovery and early mining techniques. Next door to the museum are an outdoor mining exhibit and two original buildings used by the Chinese. Throughout the park, the exhibits show the various standards of living as Coloma developed through time. The Gold Discovery Loop Trail makes it easy to visit the site of Marshall's

momentous discovery, his original mill site, and points of interest.

Visitors can walk under native California trees, as well as the Chinese tree of heaven, black locust, Texas mesquite, southern pecan, Osage orange, persimmon, and others planted by homesick miners as reminders of their former dwellings.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

**Trails**—The Levee Trail is generally accessible. The Gold Discovery Loop Trail is mostly level on hard-packed soil; some slopes may require assistance.

**Picnicking**—The North Beach group picnic area has accessible tables, with accessible restrooms and parking nearby. The picnic tables near the Wah Hop Store and Man Lee exhibits may require assistance.

**Exhibits**—The accessible Gold Discovery Museum has restrooms, self-guided exhibits, and an audio-visual theater. Video captioning is also available. Parking and restrooms are accessible throughout the park.

Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.



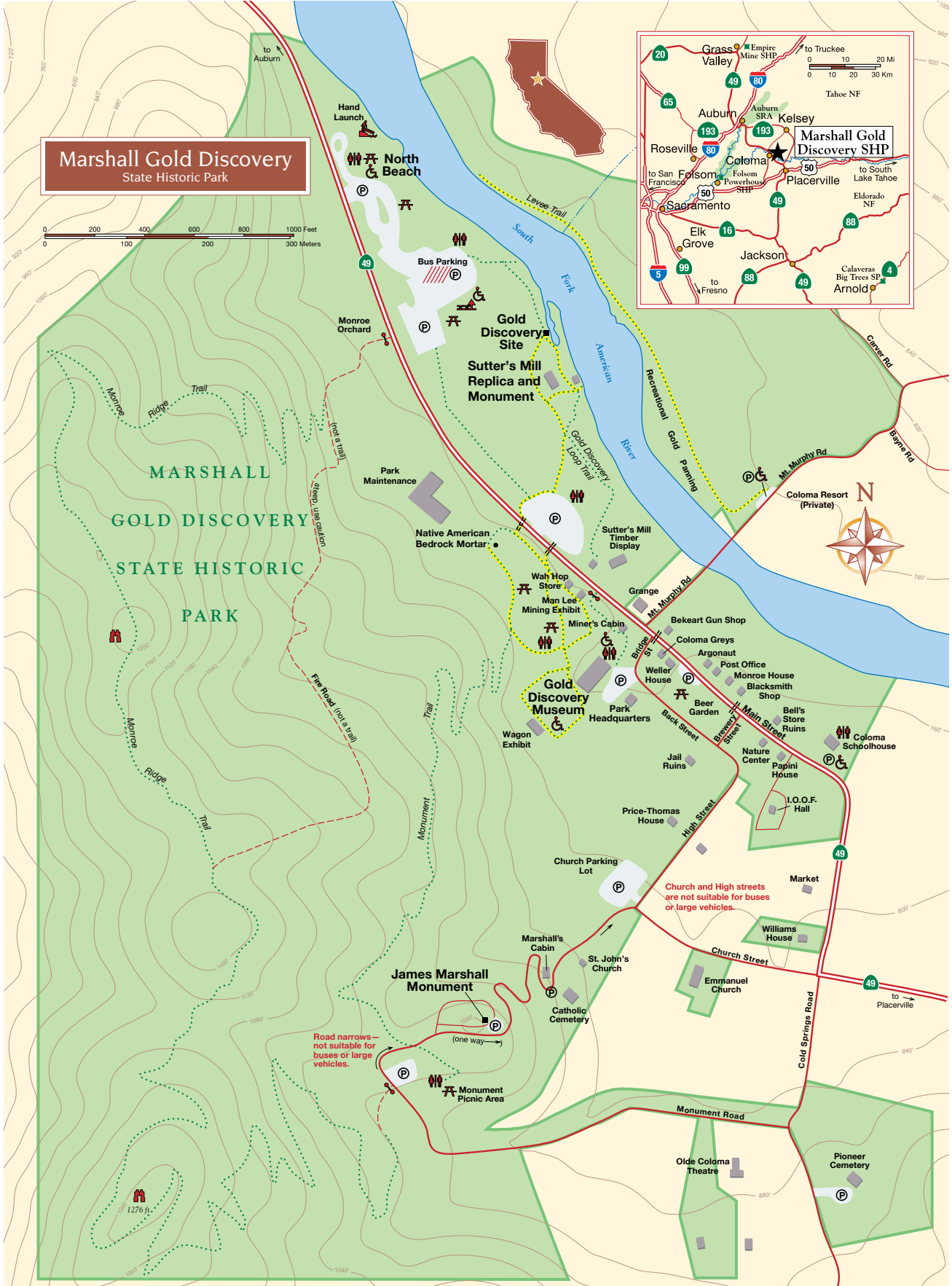
### PLEASE REMEMBER

- Park, museum, and historic building hours and interpretive programs vary by season. Please check the current schedule at the museum/visitor center or visit the park's website.
- Call the park to arrange to have your wedding in either of the park's historic churches or on the park's grounds.
- There is no camping in the park, but the Coloma and Lotus communities have several private campgrounds and stores.
- Recreational gold panning (with hands and pan only), is allowed in designated areas.
- Help keep the park clean. The park has limited trash facilities. Whatever you bring in, please take out with you.
- Stay on the trails—shortcuts destroy ground cover and speed erosion. The river shoreline has submerged obstacles and an uneven bottom, and the water level and flow change quickly and often. Diving and jumping from rocks is not permitted.
- Dogs must be on a leash and, except for service animals, are not permitted in historic buildings, outside of developed areas, or on beaches.
- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- To guarantee access to the park, groups of ten or more must make advance reservations. For more information call (866) 240-4655 or visit the website at [www.parks.ca.gov/marshallgold](http://www.parks.ca.gov/marshallgold).



# Marshall Gold Discovery

State Historic Park



This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact:  
**Gold Discovery Park Association**  
 P.O. Box 461, Coloma, CA 95613  
 (530) 622-6198 • [www.marshallgold.com](http://www.marshallgold.com)

### Legend

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