



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Coloma Gold ***(Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park)***

Here at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, you are surrounded by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Throughout history they have provided for all who came in search of food, of homes, and of gold.

Long before man, the mountain lion, bear, and fox lived in these hills. In a far distant past, Native Americans discovered in the foothills an abundant supply of food and fresh water, and settled. They called themselves the Nisenan, related by language to the Maidu people. Coloma is the Native American word for this valley.

Other people would also make the journey here, but for different reasons. In 1839 a Swiss immigrant named John Sutter built a fort and trading post in what is today the City of Sacramento.

Needing material for new buildings, John Sutter looked east to the Sierra foothills and recognized a plentiful source of lumber. Sutter hired a man named James Marshall, a carpenter by training, and a small group of Mormon workers to build a sawmill on the banks of the American River.

Early on the morning of January 24, 1848, Marshall was routinely inspecting the nearly completed mill, when something in the tailrace caught his eye. He wasn't quite sure what the small object was, so he hammered it between two rocks. It didn't crumble like pyrite, a mineral that's often found in this area; it was soft. Now he knew for sure. "Hey boys, by God, I believe I've found a gold mine!"

News of the discovery at Sutter's Mill spread, and soon Sutter's Fort was nearly abandoned as people dropped everything to head for Coloma. Five months later merchant Sam Brannan shouted of the discovery through the streets of the small port town of San Francisco. In a short time, San Francisco was nearly abandoned; gold fever spread quickly.

The population around Sutter's Mill exploded. Soon the banks of the American River were covered with miners, washing and sifting the sand and gravel searching for gold. The town of Coloma was born.

Many of these early miners came with nothing more than knives and spoons to search for the precious metal, but soon everyone owned the familiar tools of early gold mining--the pan, the pick, and the shovel. Gold seekers put up crude shelters, some made of brush and branches;

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many were canvas tents made from the sails of ships abandoned by sailors in San Francisco Bay.

But Coloma's most dramatic changes occurred during the great rush of the summer of 1849. More permanent wooden structures appeared among the hundreds of white tents that dotted the valley. By July, the permanent population around the mill had grown to 400, with more businesses appearing weekly. The town was beginning to take shape.

Even though Coloma now had restaurants, saloons, and hotels, it was still a difficult life for the miners--blistering heat and bitter cold. As rich gold strikes were made throughout the foothills, Coloma was transformed from a booming mining camp to an important trading and recreation center for many mining camps in the area. Merchants, skilled tradesman, and hotelkeepers were replacing the miners.

In 1850, the year California became a state, the residents of Coloma began organizing the town officially. A survey was made, streets were planned, and lots were parceled out. The center of the town was near the sawmill but its economy was firmly based on the booming mining industry and its growing appetite for a variety of goods and services. Because of its importance, Coloma became the first seat of the newly created El Dorado County in 1850.

A dam on the American River, built for a mining project, caused a flood that seriously damaged the commercial north end of the town. To avoid another flood the dam was removed and many of Coloma businesses and homes were moved to higher ground at the south end of town. By the late 1850s, the north end became Coloma's Chinatown.

With its streets alive with people from around the world, Coloma continued to grow quickly. Main Street was crowded with stores, . . . saloons, . . . and gambling halls.

By the mid-1850s, a cloud began to form over Coloma's future. Remember how gold was first found, in the rivers, by sifting gravel and sand? Such placer mining was the method used most often in the early years of the gold rush; but in time placer mining "played out." Gold was getting more difficult to find.

Newer, more complex methods were needed to tap the rich veins of gold locked in the hills. Hard rock miners began to dig deep in the Sierra. Hydraulic mining operations washed tons of gravel from the foothills. Many of the towns that sprang up around these mines slowly began drawing people and business away from Coloma.

Coloma's fate was sealed when, in 1857, the county seat was moved to Placerville. Once prosperous businesses began to decline, and many buildings on Main Street were either torn down or destroyed by fire.

But Coloma found new sources of prosperity. The saloons, gambling halls, and restaurants of the hectic mining town made way for blacksmiths and general stores. Vineyards and orchards planted in the 1850s helped keep the local economy alive into the twentieth century. One of Coloma's many fruit ranches belonged to James Marshall, who had turned to raising grapes and apples in the early 1860s.

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The man who touched off the world's greatest Gold Rush was never to share its prosperity. During the Gold Rush, Marshall was hounded by miners who believed he possessed a special power to find gold. He was even threatened with hanging for not using a power he never had. Marshall spent most of the rest of his life in poverty. He had a weakness for liquor; many thought him mad. On August 10, 1885, Marshall, then seventy-four years old, died. But what he began lives on today.

Here at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park, the birthplace of the Gold Rush is preserved for you. Throughout the park are many historic artifacts that will give you a first-hand look and feel of the Gold Rush. Though much of the original town of Coloma has disappeared, many historic buildings still remain.

Before you start your exploration, be sure to pick up a trail guide at the museum. Then, why not visit . . . 100-year-old Chinese store, . . . a working replica of the mill that Marshall built for Sutter, . . . or the hilltop monument where James Marshall's statue points to the spot where, on that cold morning in 1848, gold was discovered in the sands of the American River? And be ready to make your own discoveries. Because all around you lives the spirit of adventure . . . the spirit of the Gold Rush.

Running Time: 12 minutes
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