



California State Parks

Video Transcript



The Streets of Columbia at Columbia State Historic Park

Welcome. My name is Michelle Hofmann, and I'm the park interpreter here at Columbia State Historic Park. The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, education, and inspiration of the people of California by helping to protect the states' most valued biological and cultural resources while providing high quality outdoor recreation. Columbia is part of the State Park System because it tells the story of the importance of water and the rise of a merchant economy in Gold Rush California.

Imagine what California would be like today if the Gold Rush had not brought tens of thousands of immigrants from around the world and vast amounts of wealth to the west coast. The California Gold Rush did in fact change the landscape, the economy, and the culture of California. None of this would have been possible without the water from Sierra streams and rivers. In Gold Rush Columbia water flowed towards money. So let's move on to the place where it all began here in Columbia when the only water was runoff from seasonal rains.

There is no doubt that the Miwok, the Native Americans that lived in this area, knew about the gold that could be found here. And it's highly likely that there were Mexican miners working this area prior to the official recorded discovery of gold by the Hildreth party. We do have a plaque here that was put as a dedication to that group of American miners who were the first ones to actually record the discovery of gold here in Columbia on March 27, 1850.

They discovered the gold in Columbia entirely by accident. They were actually only passing through this area on their way back to their previous mining camp. It rained overnight so they stopped to dry out their gear. Well, since they had nothing else going on while their stuff was drying, one of the miners, a man named John Walker, decided to go try his luck panning out some gold at the runoff that was coming through this area from the seasonal rains. Remember this was spring of 1850 when this happened. Well, he pulled out quite a bit of gold in those first few hours, and the rest of the men did as well. So they decided immediately to go back to their camp, pick up their supplies, and make Columbia their new "diggin's."

A few weeks later over 4,000 miners followed them into this area. So Columbia had gone from a population of practically zero, since the Native Americans did not actually live here without a year-round water supply, to about 4,000 miners just a few weeks later. By the summer of that same year in 1850, the town almost became deserted. There were only about nine or ten miners who were actually working their claims, and this was because the water had been gone. Water is required for the different types of placer mining which we'll discuss a little bit

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later, but without the water there was nothing really that could be done outside of carrying the dirt to a water supply or carrying the water to the dirt.

By the next rainy season of course everyone had returned again and tried their luck at panning, and then once again they did quite well. This was a very rich dry diggin's. But by the summer of 1851, as the dry season was approaching again, the miners decided to get together and discuss the possibility of importing water from the Sierra streams. At our next stop we'll see what they came up with.

By the summer of 1851 the Tuolumne County Water Company had been formed, with the daunting task of building a ditch and flume system that would reach first Five Mile Creek. Later on they would tap into the south fork of the Stanislaus River and eventually all the way up to the middle fork. After all was said and done, over 60 miles of ditches and flumes had been constructed—an astronomical engineering feat for the time. They had crossed several steep canyons and even tunneled through the ridge that separated the two forks in the river.

By May of 1852 the first water had arrived here in Columbia. A local newspaper reported that with the coming of water, Columbia grew as if by magic from just a few log huts into a prosperous mining town. This water did come with a price; the Tuolumne County Water Company wasn't just going to give their water away for free. In fact, they charged whatever they wanted because they were the only water company in town, so they did have a monopoly. Your average miner would pan out about eight dollars a day on the average working a 12-hour day. This was back-breaking labor. Of that eight dollars, about six dollars of it would be going to the water company. So they were really only left with about two dollars on the average to spend in the town.

This upset the miners greatly, and this also launched one of the first wars over water use that this new young state had ever seen. The miners were upset with the water company. The water company wanted to make back their money, and also they wanted very high returns on their investments. So the miners tried several things, from boycotting the water company to blowing up the flumes and ditches, to trying to establish a rival water company. None of these efforts actually worked. That rival water company was eventually bought out by the original owners of Tuolumne County Water Company, and the miners just sort of dealt with paying those high prices. Despite all of this fighting between the water company and the miners, once huge amounts of water were available in the area, they went to work digging up the land and retrieving large amounts of gold. We're going to see how they did that at our next stop.

This area that we're walking through right now is a reconstruction of Columbia Diggin's in 1852. All of these buildings were built by Columbia docents and are part of our annual living history event that shows people what the town looked like before it had become more permanent with the brick and iron buildings that we see as we move up into the main part of town.

The largest gold nugget reported to have been found here in Columbia weighed 134 pounds. Of course, most of the miners were not that fortunate. They were involved in the back-breaking labor of placer mining, where you separate the finer particles of gold from the dirt. We're all familiar with the gold pan. It's sort of become a symbol of the California Gold Rush. However, the gold pan is about as old as the quest for gold itself and has been used in many

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different gold rushes throughout the world. Later inventions from other gold rushes would be the sluice box, the long tom, and the rocker box. Those were all employed in the quest for gold here in California, but they weren't created here.

The one invention that came out of the California Gold Rush was the use of the large monitor nozzles for hydraulic mining. Hydraulic mining did a great amount of damage to the environment but was a very successful way for getting the gold. We'll talk more about the impacts that the hydraulic mining had in this area when we can actually go look at the remains of one of those monitor nozzles.

This nozzle that you see here is actually a relic from California's Gold Rush. It's a monitor nozzle that was used for hydraulic mining. What they would do is they would feed water down through tubes until it got to this point, at which time the pressure was extremely high. By the time it came out of the tip here, that pressure was so strong that if you were to stand in front of it, you would be instantly killed. This was the way they washed huge amounts of dirt from the ground or loosened it up so that they could get those gold deposits. If you look at the limestone rocks behind me, you see these throughout Columbia. These were all exposed from the hydraulic mining. Before this happened, all of these rocks were underground. So you can see the kind of damage that occurred from this type of mining.

The equipment that you see here is typical of what would have been used during the Gold Rush era throughout California. By the 1880s, legislation was passed to make it more and more difficult to do hydraulic mining because of the damage it was causing to the farmers downstream, as it caused siltation in the rivers, which resulted in flooding and killing their crops. So hydraulic mining was not made illegal, but this new law stated that any operator of a hydraulic mine was responsible for collecting the debris that they removed, so it sort of put an end to it.

The thinking at the time was sort of a "get rich and go home" mentality, as is evident in a song that some of the miners created while coming around the Horn of South America to get here. They sang a song to the tune of "Oh Susanna" and one of the lyrics goes "I'll scrape the mountains clean my boys; I'll drain the rivers dry; A pocketful of rocks bring home; So brothers don't you cry." So the whole idea was to go to California to get rich, and then to go home.

Once that water supply was here in Columbia the town began to grow. Families of women moved in and it gained some sort of permanence at that point. So we're going to walk up to the main part of town now and talk about the development of that merchant economy here in Columbia.

Columbia was called the "Gem of the Southern Mines." It was estimated that about 87 million dollars worth of gold was removed from these dry diggin's, and if you go into the express office, right here you can see the original set of scales that weighed out about 1-1/2 million dollars of that gold. This block also houses the assay office in the back where the gold, as well as pay dirt, was valued. We have the bank on the corner here and then in the back behind the bank were the offices of the infamous Tuolumne County Water Company.

The miners, pockets heavy with gold, were eager to start spending this money, and the merchants were eager to start selling goods to them. Many of the businesses that you see

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here in town are representative of those types of business that would have been here in Columbia in the 1850s and '60s. However, Columbia has only three saloons today, while at one point in the history of the town, out of 150 businesses almost 40 of those were saloons. So let's go look at some of the other businesses that this town experienced and some of the ways that those miners spent that money.

There were lots of places for the miners to spend their money in the newly formed town—from the carpentry shop, a candy kitchen, even a barber shop, and a dry goods store. But the most important thing that the Gold Rush did for Columbia was it created a new merchant economy, whereas the rest of the United States was still pretty much functioning off an agrarian economy. Here money was exchanged, people were starting to spend, and all of this was made possible because of the water that was brought in from those Sierra streams. Remember, in Gold Rush Columbia water flowed towards money. Water was also valuable not just for getting the gold and for helping this new town to grow, but to protect the resulting wealth from the devastating effects of fire, which we're going to talk about at our next stop.

Many of the wood buildings that you see here in town are reproductions. In fact the livery stable right there was used as a movie set and then was left behind here to fill in with the town. The wood buildings that were here prior to 1854 would not have survived the catastrophic fire that broke out that year. That fire caused an estimated \$500,000 worth of damage, which was a huge amount at the time. It didn't dissuade the merchants. They immediately began rebuilding before the embers had even burned out, and eventually they put up the brick and iron buildings that you see today that are a little more fireproof.

This building right here is called the Knapp building, and it survived the next fire, which was in 1857. However, many of the brick buildings in town that were supposedly fireproof seemed to disintegrate from the flames of that fire. Knapp, upon learning that the fire company was running out of water, decided that he would do his own protection for his building, so the story goes. He climbed to the top of the building and he dumped out two big barrels of vinegar to try and stop the flames. If you go inside the museum today you can actually see the beam overhead is burned from that fire, but the building was in fact saved. And some say on a very hot day if you stand up against the side of the building, you can actually smell the vinegar from that fire.

That fire of 1857 was running wild until finally, after much of town had already been destroyed, the Tuolumne Water Company decided to open the flumes and flood the town, and that's how that fire was eventually put out. Before that happened, however, \$700,000 worth of damage had been done and five lives had been lost when one of the buildings that had stored black powder exploded. From that point on black powder was no longer stored in the main part of town. They also rebuilt the town using double wall thickness between each brick building to help insulate goods from one store from being caught on fire by goods that might be burning in another store, and they re-roofed all of the buildings with fireproof roofing. However, it was still quite apparent that there was a need for both better water storage for fighting fires as well as better firefighting equipment. So we'll look at what the town did to help improve these firefighting efforts at our next stop.

One of the first steps for fire protection was to ensure an ample water supply, and after the 1857 fire they realized the importance of having that water. So what the fire department did

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was they built cisterns, or underground water storage, placed in strategic areas throughout town. The cistern that you see right here holds about 15,000 gallons of water. That's equivalent to a small swimming pool in someone's back yard. Once this happened, though, all they had to do was get their hose carts wheeled out to this location, drop the hose down in there and then they had the water that they needed to fight the fire in whatever location they were doing that. Once they had these cisterns in place, they now had a steady water supply for their hand pumper, Papeete, which they had purchased about a year or two before these were actually installed. So we're going to go look at Papeete next and talk about some of the features on Columbia's very first hand pumper.

This hand pumper is called the Papeete, and it was purchased shortly after the 1857 fire out of fundraising efforts on part of the women of Columbia. It was actually manufactured in Boston in 1852, came around the Horn of South America, and when it docked in San Francisco, the people from Columbia quickly snatched it up and brought it here to use at our town. It's entirely man-powered, with the firefighters pulling up here in the front when the fire alarm went off. And other firefighters would run along and push along the sides right here. Once they got to where the fire was, they would remove the hose cart, drop it down into the closest cistern that we had talked about previously, and then they would attach the hose to this nozzle right here. These bars would swing around, and the firefighters would pump on either side to create that pressure that would then shoot out of one of these nozzles. You'll notice the nozzles each have a different diameter, and they were each used for a specific purpose. With these nozzles they could shoot a stream of water 200 feet. After the purchase of Papeete the town never experienced a fire so devastating as the ones that happened in 1854 and 1857.

By this time it was the 1860s, and the town was to experience a boom for about another ten years before the gold eventually started to run out, although there is still mining done to this day down on the south fork of the Stanislaus River. Columbia never became a ghost town, and in 1945 it was established as a state park with the help of a woman by the name of Geraldine McConnell, whose house is the last private residence here on Main Street. So let's go take a look at Mrs. McConnell's house.

This is our last stop of the tour here at the McConnell House where Mrs. McConnell lived until she passed away at the age of 99 in early 2003. Mrs. McConnell realized the importance of Columbia as part of our state's heritage. Columbia teaches us about the importance of water use and the rise of a new merchant economy in California. None of this would have been possible without those Sierra streams. In Gold Rush Columbia water flowed towards money. That water was not only valuable for the mining activities here in town, but it was also the reason why the town was able to grow into this new merchant economy, and it was a way to protect that new found wealth from the effects of fire. In California today, water still flows towards money, and as Californians we should be mindful not only of the history of water use in our state, but also where that water use will take us into the future. So I'd like to thank you for touring history with me today here at Columbia State Historic Park.

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