



California State Parks

Video Transcript



More Precious Than Gold ***(Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park)***

These giant firs stand sentinel over the final resting place of three men, murdered by unknown assailants, buried in a common grave. Who they were and how they came to be buried here, has much to do with the early history of California, the discovery of gold, and the blazing of the trail that opened California to the Gold Rush of '49. The story has an unlikely beginning.

From 1830 to 1846, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, nicknamed Mormons, experienced almost constant persecution. Time and again, they were driven from their homes, deprived of their rights and property. Among them were Ezra and Sarah Allen. Their quest for religious freedom took them from New York to Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois. In the winter of 1846 they were forced once again from their homes, leaving behind almost everything they possessed.

By spring, almost twenty-thousand members of the Church were scattered across the Iowa prairie. Their appeals to the government for redress had been ignored. June 26th, the irony came full circle; five men in uniform rode into the camp.

ACTOR PORTRAYING ARMY CAPTAIN: At the request of the President of the United States,
...

NARRATOR: The officer in charge, Captain Allen, announced that he had orders to enlist five-hundred Mormons in the war with Mexico. The enlistments came in response to a request by the leaders of the Church for a way to help finance the immigration west. Still, it came as a shock to the families who first heard about it there on the prairie.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A MORMON RECRUIT: It is quite a hard pill to swallow, to leave wives and children destitute and almost helpless, and go fight the battles of a government that had allowed some of its citizens to drive us from our homes.

NARRATOR: Brigham Young encouraged the men to meet this challenge of faith, and four-hundred-ninety-six volunteers mustered in, forming what became known as the Mormon Battalion, among them Ezra Allen, Daniel Browett, and Henderson Cox, just seventeen years old. The Battalion was about to begin the longest infantry march in U.S. military history. It must have been difficult for Ezra and the others to say good-bye to their families and leave them in such conditions, wondering if they would ever see them again.

The Battalion took its march to Fort Leavenworth, where the men were outfitted with a few supplies, and then continued on to Santa Fe. Enroute they suffered many hardships, hostile

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terrain, bad weather, sickness, and dwindling rations. At Santa Fe they were ordered to forge a wagon road to the Pacific. The war with Mexico was at an end by the time the Battalion reached San Diego in January 1847.

San Diego was just a village. While they awaited discharge, the company set to work assisting the villagers of San Diego. Carpenters finished houses, fences and buildings were whitewashed, a courthouse was constructed, the first brick building in the town. Perhaps most helpful were the twenty wells they dug and lined with bricks, making fresh water readily available.

ACTOR PORTRAYING ARMY OFFICIAL: Gentlemen, you are discharged.

NARRATOR: One year after bidding good-bye to their families, the Mormon Battalion was discharged. They didn't know where Brigham Young and the rest of the Church were, but they were on their way to find them.

A year earlier, in July of 1846, two-hundred-and-thirty-eight Latter Day Saints under the leadership of Sam Brannan, had arrived in California on the ship *Brooklyn*. They had traveled twenty-four-thousand miles around Cape Horn, and arrived in Yerba Buena, later San Francisco, just two weeks after the U.S. Navy had secured the village and raised the American flag. They became the first colonists in California under American rule. The old Californians were amazed at what they had brought with them: dry goods, tools, vegetable seeds, school supplies, and a library of one-hundred-seventy-nine books. They'd also brought a printing press and a supply of newsprint; everything needed to begin a newspaper.

Following their discharge, many members of the Battalion headed directly east to rejoin their families. But with speculation that Brigham Young and the rest of the church might continue on to California, some headed north, among them Ezra Allen.

ACTOR PORTRAYING EARLY SAN FRANCISCO SETTLER: San Francisco is a beautiful place, a fine ship harbor; things are improving rapidly.

NARRATOR: Under Brannan's leadership, the Latter Day Saints had started San Francisco's first school, its first bank, and first post office. The printing press had been put to good use; the first edition of *The California Star* reached the streets of San Francisco January 7, 1847. It was the city's first newspaper.

Meanwhile about eighty members of the discharged Battalion stopped at Sutter's Fort and accepted temporary work in order to purchase needed supplies.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: Captain John A. Sutter, being desirous of building a flouring mill some six miles from the fort and a sawmill about forty-five miles away proposed to hire all the men.

NARRATOR: Sutter had wanted to build the mills for some time, but lacked skilled labor to do it. The Battalion members, many experienced craftsmen from the East, provided the solution. They worked on a variety of projects. Six were hired to build a sawmill in the mountains.

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ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: We arrived on the 29th of September. The surrounding country looked wild and lonesome, infested with wolves and grizzly bears.

NARRATOR: Things progressed well until December. Then winter rains brought high, swift water, which slowed the work. In their down time, the men built a log cabin so they could move out of the one they had been sharing with the Wimmer family. They moved in on January 23rd.

The next morning, as they were digging the tailrace deeper, the first gold flakes were spotted. Thanks to the journal entries of two of the men, the date of the find was recorded.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: Monday, January 24th, 1848. This day some kind of metal was found in the tail of the race that looks like gold. It was first found by James W. Marshall, the boss of the mill.

NARRATOR: The metal passed every test, including the harsh lye of Mrs. Wimmer's soap kettle. The only thing left to do was convince John Sutter. He was skeptical at first, but when he paid a visit to the mill, Marshall and the others determined to help convince him by salting the race. The plan almost backfired when the Wimmer boys found the gold before Sutter did, but he had seen enough to be convinced.

It wasn't long until word of the find spread, and curious comrades visited their friends in Coloma. On one such trip, Sidney Wills and Wilford Hudson found more gold particles on a sandbar in the American River. The strike became known as Mormon Island, and turned out to be the second major gold strike, one with very rich diggings.

Meanwhile, the merchants in San Francisco were concerned that the city wasn't growing fast enough. They suggested a special edition of *The California Star* extolling the virtues of the city and the state. The paper was ready to print except for a couple of empty inches on an inside page, when news of a gold discovery in Coloma reached San Francisco.

Several Battalion members were employed as express riders to carry copies of the *Star* east, and the few lines about gold which they carried cross-country to St. Louis, Baltimore, New York, and other major cities of the east, would trigger the Gold Rush of '49. Hordes of gold seekers flocked to Coloma from San Francisco and Monterey. Battalion members continued to work for Sutter, but in their spare time they, too, joined in the search.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: There was mining in a primitive way. We had no pans, no lumber to make rockers, and so we used Indian baskets to pan with. We would dump the gold onto flour sacks spread out upon the ground.

NARRATOR: At Mormon Island, Ezra Allen tried his hand at panning for gold as well.

ACTOR PORTRAYING JOHN SUTTER, SPEAKING WITH A SWISS ACCENT: After the discovery of gold, all my plans and projects came to naught. One after another my people disappeared in the directions of the gold fields; only the Mormons remained to finish their jobs.

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NARRATOR: The Coloma mill was in regular operation by the end of March, when the contract to finish the mill was fulfilled. No set of men was better situated to gain from the gold strike than the members of the Battalion. Had they remained just another year, they would have become rich. But they were concerned about another goal, getting back to their families.

A meeting was held at Sutter's Fort on April 9th to discuss plans for going. Sutter paid the soldiers in kind, with horses, oxen, wagons, and other items they would need. And ironically, while much of the country was heading west to California, the Mormon Battalion was turning its back on the gold and heading east.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: Our honor was at stake. With us it was God and His kingdom first.

NARRATOR: Yet even as they were leaving, the Mormon Battalion was to make one more contribution to the history of the West, blazing the trail across the Sierra Nevadas which thousands of gold seekers would follow. It was a daunting prospect. It would be the highest overland wagon route in the continental U.S., but they were determined to find a way.

June 17, 1848, Henry Bigler and two others set out to select a place of gathering. They found a spot they named Pleasant Valley, and the company gathered there to finish preparations. Daniel Browett was elected President of the company, and while the rest of the party was making preparations, he and Ezra Allen, along with Henderson Cox, went ahead to scout a trail along Iron Mountain Ridge to Carson Pass. They didn't return. Finally, the rest of the party headed off after them.

ACTORS PORTRAYING BATTALION MEMBERS: Forty-five men and one woman--Melissa Corey.

The country is rougher than first reports indicated. Brush and rocks give the wagons considerable difficulty in passing.

Most of our time is consumed in working the road.

Wednesday, July 19th. Discovered what looked like a shallow grave and dead campfire. We commenced to open it, and at the bottom, to our great horror, found the bodies of our three friends, divested of every article of clothing and exhibiting marks of terrible violence.

In the grass we found Ezra Allen's buckskin bag. As the murderers took off his clothing, the bag most likely slid into the grass. It was a time of mourning, to think that the man that was to be our leader to Salt Lake was now lying dead.

In all my journey with the Battalion, this was the worst night.

NARRATOR: The company laid over a full day to prepare the grave of their friends, and Wilford Hudson carved an epitaph on a nearby tree. They named the place Tragedy Spring.

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ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: Saturday, July 22nd, Rock Creek. The climb is even steeper now. Wagons continue to break down and need almost constant repair. Fifteen men work the road to the top of the mountain.

July 29th, Summer Camp. Two miles. Cliffs with sharp drops. Very hard going.

July 31st, Pass Canyon. Impossible to build a road through this canyon.

ACTOR PORTRAYING A BATTALION MEMBER: We had no hammers nor drill with which we could do anything with the stones. It seemed almost an impossibility to go farther. Finally, someone suggested that we build a fire on the rocks. When the fire had died down, we found that as far as the heat had penetrated, the rocks were all broken in small pieces, which were soon removed with pick and shovel. Another fire was built with the same result. After three or four fires, we found that the rocks were not much in our way, and we soon had a good wagon road right over them.

NARRATOR: It took seven days to cut a wagon road through the canyon, about seven miles at one mile a day. But in forty days, the party had blazed about 170 miles of wagon road across trackless terrain.

For the next sixteen years, thousands of gold and land seekers traveled this route. Thousands of people, wagons, and livestock would come into California over the Mormon Trail. The old Carson-Emigrant Trail might just as well be called The Mother Road of El Dorado County.

Later that fall, Sarah Allen waited for Ezra's return.

ACTRESS PORTRAYING SARAH ALLEN: I looked forward to the time when his strong arms would lift these burdens from my shoulders, waiting, and watching, listening to the sound of every footstep that approached my door.

NARRATOR: Word of Ezra's fate finally reached Sarah, along with the pouch containing the gold. She used the gold to buy a wagon and supplies, and to bring her family west, but she reserved enough to make a wedding ring, which she wore the remainder of her life.

The legacy of Ezra Allen and his comrades in the Mormon Battalion, contributions to the history and development of California, live on today. And the determination and faith of these early explorers have proved even more precious than gold.

Running Time: 17 minutes

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