Special Issue
The 150th Anniversary of The California Gold Rush

"the days of old, the days of gold, the days of '49"

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All That Glitters:
An Argument in Support of Commemorating (and Lamenting)
the California Gold Rush

by

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With all the re-creations, reenactments, commemorations, museum exhibits, and ceremonies in California’s Gold Country scheduled this year and next, it is easy to be defensive and feel just a bit left out. My initial somewhat petulant response was to suggest putting up a bronze plaque proclaiming, “Gold Was Not Discovered Here in 1848,” and then have all the able-bodied people in the county dress up in old clothes and rush out of town. (The Gold Country promoters no doubt have that in mind, only this time they want folks to bring the gold back.)

A review of the index of the most recent and comprehensive study of the California Gold Rush by Malcolm J. Rohrbough finds no listing for Santa Cruz and only four for Monterey. Monterey was only on one of the book’s three state-wide maps, and Santa Cruz and Branciforte were not listed at all. <Source: Rohrbough>

All of this could lead to the conclusion that the Gold Rush was not about Santa Cruz County. Ah, but it was, and in ways which proved to be as profound as any of the changes wrought either in the Sierra foothills or in the cities which sprang up along the San Francisco-Stockton-Sacramento axis. To use a gold mining metaphor, previous historians have been seduced by the nuggets of the story in the main historical channel. And why not? Just reading the accounts of miners infected with gold fever drives up the pulse rate and sends dreams of sudden wealth dancing through our heads. Meanwhile, off in the historical side streams there are nuggets tucked up beneath the tree roots and a little more difficult to find, perhaps, but just as valuable.

So, as the dust continues to fly elsewhere, let us consider for a moment the implications and effects which the Gold Rush had on Santa Cruz County and the entire Monterey Bay Region. First, just as the miners turned the Sierra landscape upside down, the Gold Rush brought a complete revolution to the Monterey Bay Region, creating something entirely new out of the old, pre-1848 order. As Thotmas O. Larkin of Monterey noted in early June of 1849, “A complete revolution in the ordinary state of affairs is taking place” <Source: Larkin-Ten Eyck, p. 304>. In the blink of an eye the more “orderly course of human events” were accelerated to a speed never before seen in the history of the United States. One minute Monterey was the capital of a Mexican province called Alta California, and the next its lanes were deserted, the sounds of barking dogs echoing off the walls of empty adobe buildings. One minute the redwood forests up behind Santa Cruz were filled with the sounds of saws biting into redwood and the next the woods were quiet, trees left half-sawn and piles of bright pink redwood abandoned on the beaches. The attack of gold fever in the region was quite similar to that which eventually found its way to Illinois, Maine, or Paris, France. What is different is the enormity of the exodus. What happens to a place when every able-bodied human up and leaves?

But, it was the residual effects of what I call the Gold Rush mentality which the 49ers brought into Santa Cruz County that not only changed the course of history, but continue to reverberate to this day. The California mining district was the laboratory in which as polyglot a group of humans as ever assembled on the planet worked out new ways of seeing not only themselves and each other, but the world and resources around them. Some of those themes, such as the Anglo-Saxon xenophobia and its attendant racism, a disregard for private property, and a tendency toward quick-trigger law-and-order will have melancholy results for the region. Others, such as their tendency “take everything of value and move on,” will put an enormous strain on the region’s natural resources. For
good or ill, however, the 49ers will develop the industries and water sources to power the region’s economy well into the twentieth century.

The underlying rhythm which the Gold Rush provided for the region and all of California for the subsequent 150 years, was the repetitive half-notes of “boom” and “bust.” One droll observer in the 1850s described it as a tendency to “over do” things. And “over do” they did, through a century and a half of similar frenzies including a potato rush, a redwood rush, a limestone rush, a gold rush (minor), an abalone rush, an oil rush, a sardine rush, and most recently a strawberry rush. All the participants in these events exhibited the classic symptoms of what Professor Rohrbough classifies as gold fever: “uncontrollable deliriums, a high rate of infection, and no known remedy.”<Source: Rohrbough, p. 28>

The Fever Arrives, 1848

News traveled slowly in California, and it took seven weeks for word of the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill to reach the pages of the Monterey Bay region’s only newspaper, the tiny Californian, owned in part by the Monterey’s Alcalde, Walter Colton. And it was not until two more months passed that the idea of gold reached the town’s general population. In his diary entry for May 29, Colton noted the skepticism with which the Montereyans greeted the news: “The men wondered and talked, and the women too; but neither believed.”<Source: Colton, p. 135.

Whispers of gold had come down from Alta California’s mountains ever since the day that the Rumsen Indians told Sebastian Vizcaíno that there was gold in the interior, but they had been little more than rumors. One Monterey cynic suggested that this news of gold had been fabricated to create an artificial value for California and help make it more attractive to the United States.<Source: Colton, p. 135> Finally, in June, when a messenger returned from the Sierra with gold in his possession, the fever struck Monterey: “The excitement produced was intense. All were off for the mines, some on horses, some on carts, and some on crutches, and one went in a litter.”<Source: Colton, p. 133-134>

Meanwhile, the foreigners living up behind Santa Cruz were already in the mines. With no ties to family or ranch, and confronted with a daily life of hard work in the sawpits, the sawyers dropped their saws, grabbed whatever tools might prove useful in the diggings, and headed for the American River. Later, people who had been in the region in the summer and fall of 1848 remembered it as nothing but “ghost towns.”<Source: Burgess, p. 238>

The immediate effects of the exodus of the able-bodied were a steep rise in the price of labor and a sharp drop in the real estate market. Colton complained that he had to clean his own house and cook his own meals: “the master has become his own servants, and the servant his own lord.” Laborers who stayed behind could command wages of up to $15 per day, but gold fever often overtook them before they could complete any task.<Source: Colton, p. 139>

The absence of a dependable supply of labor bedeviled the Monterey Bay Region for the next two decades. It was difficult for anyone infected with gold fever, even those who had no success at the mines, to return to the drudgery of day-to-day work. In the early 1850s, Eliza Farnham observed that “the relation that elsewhere exists between employer and employed is reversed.”<Source: Farnham, p. 86> Charles Nordhoff noted in the early 1870s that gold fever “seems to paralyze men’s energies, and turn their thoughts from the active pursuit of other occupations than gold seeking.” For Nordhoff, at least when it came to its effects on the notion of steady work, gold was “a curse.”<Source: Nordhoff, pp. 98-99>

Without laborers or patrons, many regional businesses closed in the summer of 1848. The Californian published only fitfully during that summer as there was no one around to either publish it or read it. Even in San Francisco, “the streets were deserted, her houses untenanted, her improvements stopped in their very beginning and the bud of her prosperity and advancement nipped.”<Source: Alta California, 1849-02-01>

The 48ers

It is difficult to assess just how many of the Monterey Bay residents who went to the mines in 1848 were successful. Most miners were very secretive about their successes (or failures), so beyond the few who went public about their gold, we will never really know how many struck it rich that year. A group of seven Montereyans which included Job Dye went to the Feather River diggings and in forty-two days cleared $10,000 apiece. But Dye later lamented about just how woefully ignorant most of the
miners were in 1848. "Had we been as experienced in working precious metals as the miners now are [1869] we would have made a million of dollars in the same time." <Source: Dye, p. 23>

Walter Colton went to the mines in the autumn of 1848 and described in great detail the state of "feverish excitement." After an informal survey in one of the richest deposits, he determined that the average miner was taking out less than half an ounce of gold per day. He also noted that even a section which yielded an ounce of gold per day would quickly be abandoned upon the arrival of word of a richer deposit somewhere else. "All are in quest of gold; and, with eyes dilated to the circle of the moon, rush this way and that, as some new discovery, or fictitious tale of success may suggest." <Source: Colton, p. 172>

This "chasing the phantom of hope" as Colton characterized it, was one of the fundamental themes which not only described the Gold Rush, but which drove California's history from that time forward. To get in on the ground level of a bonanza and be able to shout, "Eureka!" became the California Dream. It was extremely difficult to convince subsequent immigrants of the virtues of patience, hard work, and thrift when the next "boom" might lie, undiscovered, just around the next bend.

A further complication came when the miners realized that even in the gold fields, hard work did not necessarily mean success. One observer put it succinctly: "Gold mining is Nature's great lottery scheme." <Source: Clappe, p. 123>. Add to this a capricious climate in which there was a wet winter in 1849-50, flooding again in 1852 and a drought during 1855-56, and then fold in earthquakes which could trash all your hard work in an instant, and you have some very powerful deterrents to the value of hard, sustained work and being it for "the long haul."

Selling was better than Mining

All of the 48ers noticed and complained about the exorbitant prices being charged for supplies in the diggings. Colton observed that one hundred pounds of flour which sold at Stockton for $20 cost $200 in the mines, a mere sixty miles distant. A pick or shovel cost $100 and brown sugar and coffee sold for $4 a pound. <Colton, p. 129>

Despite his success at gold mining, Job Dye's experience of being able to sell a load of supplies in Sacramento in a matter of minutes convinced him that he could make more money selling supplies than standing in the cold water and rooting around in the gravel. Dye, like many other early Yankee entrepreneurs (he arrived in California in 1832) knew local conditions, spoke Spanish, and had enough stature in California to be able to buy on credit from suppliers. During the next two years, Dye made two trips, the first by sailing ship to Mazatlan and back with supplies in which he earned $18,600. He then returned to Mazatlan by ship, purchased three hundred mules and drove them north through Mexico, across the Colorado River and back to Monterey. During the six months it took him to make the trip the price of mules in California dropped from $200 each to $125 and he had great difficulty selling his stock at a profit. Eventually he was able to sell some of the mules to a United States military relief expedition headed into the Sierra and then drove the remaining animals across flooded California rivers to Sacramento in February 1850. His year-long mule project eventually brought him $12,000 clear profit. <Source: Dye, pp. 24-26>

Others, like Elihu Anthony of Santa Cruz, filled narrower niches in the mining economy. In the summer of 1848, Anthony flattened eighty-seven ship's bolts into pick heads and sent them to the mines where they sold for three ounces of gold dust apiece. Anthony and Adna Hecox [see p. 127] set up a store in Santa Cruz that summer which took in an average of $400 per day in gold dust. <Source: Monterey Republican, 1870-04-28>

The later Rushes

The market and price volatility which Dye experienced with his mules was replicated time and again in the Monterey Bay Region during and after the Gold Rush. One of the earliest and most famous frenzies came to the region in 1850 in the potato business. The huge increase in population in San Francisco in 1849 brought an attendant demand for agricultural products. Potatoes had been grown on the flat south of Mission Santa Cruz as early as 1847, and when the prices paid for them began to rise in 1849, several Santa Cruz Yankees planted fields for the San Francisco market. In 1850 Elihu Anthony and some partners chartered a ship and sold Santa Cruz potatoes on the San Francisco market for fifteen cents per pound. <Source: Rowland, 1980, p. 132>
News of this success spread and Santa Cruz found itself with an epidemic of potato fever. Eliza Farnham described Santa Cruz farmers making from $1,000 to $1,500 per acre of potatoes the following season. <Source: Farnham, pp. 142-143>

The Potato Rush was On

Joshua Parrish made a “small fortune” in potatoes in the Soquel Valley that first season <Source: Duff>, and in late 1851, J. Bryant Hill leased a thousand acres of Pajaro Valley bottom land and planted potatoes. By the fall of 1852, San Francisco’s Alta California noted that of the three potato producing regions on the Pacific Coast, Oregon, Marin County, and Santa Cruz, “Santa Cruz produces the largest and best potatoes.” The newspaper went on to claim that Santa Cruz potatoes averaged a pound each with five-pounders not that uncommon. <Source: Alta California, 1852-08-01>

By then, of course, everybody was growing potatoes and that “over do” tendency flooded the market with them. In the fall of 1853, the price had fallen below what it would cost to harvest and ship them. “Everybody had [potatoes] for sale but none would buy at paying prices. Spuds were down, gone in.” The smell of rotted potatoes filled the air, and in some places around Watsonville they were used to fill in low-lying lots. The irony of the potato glut was not lost on some Irish immigrants in the region, for as they were dumping potatoes, their relatives back in Ireland were still suffering from the Great Famine. “The people of Ireland were in distress for the want of potatoes; we were ruined by the superfluity.” <Source: Sentinel, 1856-07-19>

It was about Race

We can only wonder about the cultural syntheses and accommodations which might have been made between the 49ers and the Californios had the Gold Rush not pushed the assimilative accelerator to the floor. Some of the foreigners who ventured into the region during the Mexican era came to appreciate the nuances of California culture and a few, such as Job Dye, learned the language married Californians and became true gente de pais (people of the country). At the time, becoming assimilated was known as catching “California Fever.” Even Thomas Larkin, the Ultimate Yankee, was accused by one of his business partners of having caught California Fever when he hesitated to invest in a Benicia project in the summer of 1848. “Get well of your California fever,” he exhorted, “make hay while the sun shines” <Source: Simple-Larkin, p. 327>. But, California Fever took time to catch and there was no time. The sudden influx of ex-miners with their sharply-honed notions about race, culture, land titles and due process made such niceties of assimilation and understanding impossible. Opportunity was here, said the Yankees, and you Mexicans are in the way.

A harbinger of the land war to come occurred in Alcalde Colton’s office two weeks before gold was discovered. An American woman entered and demanded that her husband be allowed to cut timber on land already owned by a Californio. When Colton explained that she and her husband had no right to cut the trees without the permission of the owner, the woman exclaimed, “Right, sir! Why, have we not taken the country?” Colton patiently explained to her that though the United States now owned Mexico, it didn’t own the private property within it. He concluded his diary entry with the warning that the incident was “a clue to the spirit with which the patient Californians have had to contend.” <Source: Colton, p. 124>

The woman’s attitude was nothing compared to the impatience and aggression which the 49ers brought down out of the mines. The mining districts in the Sierra were located almost entirely on land owned by the United States government, a government that adopted a policy of first-come first-served toward the miner’s claims. Anyone had access to the land, and should they make a successful strike, they had the right to stake a claim and work it to extract the gold. The 49ers who came into what was to become Santa Cruz County found the entire coastal terrace in private hands with some huge parcels extending all the way to the top of the Santa Cruz mountains. Over half of the land was already owned by somebody, and the remaining was the steepest and most densely-forested. (Using the acreage of the grants eventually confirmed by the U.S. government, 152,116 acres, or 55% of the 282,240 acres which now comprise Santa Cruz County had been granted by the Mexican government.)

Just as it sometimes happened at the mines, one turned a corner and there was another miner
already working the stream. The rough and tumble, winner-take-all, I’ll-go-where-I-please attitude of the Gold Rush came into direct conflict with the already established and settled Californio rancheros along the central California coast. The huge land grants and their vague titles became the symbol of all that was wrong with old Mexican California. In 1856, the Santa Cruz Sentinel lamented, “If the grants were just cut up and sold as small farms, progress would surely come to the region.” <Source: Sentinel, 1856-11-29>. When all else failed, many of the 49ers resorted to a coastal version of claim-jumping called squatting, where they just moved in on a parcel of unoccupied land and dared the owner to remove them.

Democracy and Race

In its early stages, gold fever was a great social leveler. All who caught it, no matter their social class, found themselves working side by side in an incredibly polyglot mining society. The fever washed away past accomplishments, difficulties and even crimes and everyone knelt as equals before Lord Gold. “Clear out of the way with your crests, and crowns, and pedigree trees,” exclaimed Walter Colton. <Source: Colton, p. 140>

Race and ethnicity were not washed away by the fever, however, and the American miners quickly turned on miners from France, Peru, Chile and Mexico, and later the Chinese. The Indians living in the Sierra were harassed and sometimes even killed by the miners. <Source: Rohrbough, pp. 222-229>

These attitudes about race and culture, particularly those directed at Mexicans, did not bode well for the future of the Monterey Bay Region. Ex-miners brought their preconceptions into the region and discovered an established population that had all the characteristics of the folks they had been harassing at the mines. They brought with them the term “greaser” which they applied liberally to anyone who spoke Spanish, and by the mid 1850s a race war was being fought throughout the region with the Americans determined to get the land and discredit the Californios in the process.

With very little justice being dispensed by the fledgling county government and no city governments yet formed, the 49ers quickly found that vigilante justice was the solution. Lynching became the order of the day, and as Jacob Blackburn later remembered, “As a matter of self-protection the people were often forced to take the law in their own hands.” <Source: Sentinel, 1886-03-13>. One 49’er later remembered the triple lynching which occurred on Santa Cruz’s Mission Hill in 1851. When Elihu Anthony pleaded that one of them be spared, the vigilantes refused, saying they were in a hurry and wanted to hang him “on general principles anyway.” <Source: Sentinel, 1885-03-12>. Dozens of Spanish-speaking men were lynched throughout the Monterey Bay Region in the 1850s and 1860s, and as one observer noted early on, “the state of society here is a continual war.” <Source: Pacific Sentinel, 1855-12-01>

The beleaguered Californios resisted at first, but eventually, outnumbered, they retreated away from their discredited and despised culture, and became “Spaniards.” According to Dye, before 1848 the Californios had been “the happiest people on the face of the earth.” <Source: Dye, p. 29>. “We cannot compete with the energetic Yankees,” complained John Gilroy, one of the first foreigners to establish residence in Alta California. “They will come here by the thousands. They are too fast for us. The country will become the home of thousands of happy people, but the homes of [the Californios] will be lost to them.” <Source: Sentinel, (quoting Gilroy) 1869-08-07>

This unresolved cultural confrontation is a Gold Rush legacy which continues to haunt the region. Had there been more time to weld some kind of cultural synthesis, perhaps the current racial discord in the region might have been ameliorated.

Mining

The 49ers might not have been able to see the value in other cultures, but they certainly knew how to look for gold. With eyes sharpened by months of hunting in the Sierra, they came into the region with their eyes on the ground, looking for a second Mother Lode. Of particular interest to the miners were the granite formations in the region which appeared to be similar to those in the Sierra. (Unknown to the prospectors at the time, the granite which they saw in the Monterey Bay Region was, in fact, granite that originated in the southern Sierra and was then carried north by the Pacific plate.)

The early prospectors were further encour-
aged by the rumors of gold which had drifted around the region for years. In a letter written in 1846 William Garner recounted the story of an Indian telling him of gold outcroppings in the Santa Lucia Mountains south of Monterey <Source: Garner, pp. 112-113>, and similar stories emerged frequently from the Santa Cruz mountains. One element of these stories was that the Spanish had suppressed the information for fear of the consequences that sudden wealth might have on both the Indians and Alta California. (A fear which was borne out by what happened to them in the gold fields.) Garner claimed that his Indian informant was threatened with eternal damnation by a priest should he tell about the gold. A similar story was told of an outcropping of gold on the San Lorenzo River “first discovered by an Indian in company with a priest” the knowledge of which was never made public by the Spanish government. <Source: Sentinel, 1857-01-10>

These “Spanish conspiracy” theories may have been put forward most vigorously by the Californios as they tried to explain how they had missed finding gold. As Colton noted in 1848, the Californios were devastated by the discovery of gold in the Sierra for it seemed “to convict them of stupidity;” <Source: Colton, p. 135>

Regardless of their source, stories of secret gold and silver mines spurred minor outbreaks of gold fever in the Monterey Bay Region for many years. The 1850s saw several minor gold rushes including Gold Gulch on the San Lorenzo, the San Antonio River near Mission San Antonio, and the upper Carmel Valley. The two most successful gold mining operations were in the Los Burros Mining District in the Santa Lucias in the mid-1870s with over 2,000 individual gold mining claims staked out, and in the black alluvial sand near present-day La Selva Beach.

More important than gold to the economic development of the Monterey Bay Region, however, were the other valuable mineral deposits discovered along the way. Sand, granite, bitumen, and coal were all mined in the 19th century with varying degrees of success, while the extraction of limestone and cinnabar became the cornerstones of some of the region’s most important industries.

Incurable Gold Fever

Not only does gold fever have no cure, it seems to be caused by a virus which can lay dormant in the system for years and then be revived by some glitter in the sand or the word of a distant gold rush. Some of Santa Cruz’s most established men and women were lured to Colorado (1858), Nevada (1860), South Dakota (1875), and even the Klondike (1896). John Farnes, a pre-1848 pioneer, raced off to a South American gold rush in the early 1880s where he became so ill that, even after his family brought him back, he never completely recovered.

The Memory

For most of the 49ers, the Gold Rush was the defining moment of their lives. They never tired of talking about it, and as time passed, their memories of the violence and unpleasantness were filtered out by camaraderie and adventure. As they became older, they often gathered together to reminisce about the gold old days when everyone was “away at the mines.” Even back in New England, the nostalgia for the Gold Rush grew strong enough to inspire a group to form the Society of California Pioneers of New England in 1888. The Society sponsored a reunion excursion back to California in 1890 complete with visits to the gold fields. <Source: Rohrbough, p. 291>.

The Society of California Pioneers of Santa Cruz County was born of a similar impulse in 1881. And, much like the World War II veterans of today, the 49ers would meet to renew old acquaintances and try to rekindle, at least for a moment, the adrenaline excitement that they had all shared. Forgotten, of course, were the elements of violence, racism, speculation and plain dumb luck which drove the events at the time. Through the soft-focus lenses of memory and success, they became pioneers who had built Santa Cruz County through hard work and discipline. That was their truth. There are other versions of the truth, of course, and many are still waiting to be discovered.

Conclusions

So, we should not envy the Gold Rush its Sesquicentennial observances, nor should we hang our heads about the fact that gold was not discovered here in 1848. Consider what a blessing it was that gold was NOT discovered here. After visiting most of the places which were created by the Gold Rush, it seems that they are either trying to mitigate the results — traffic, urban sprawl, crime — or trying to live up to the
past glory that departed with the gold. The Gold Rush pushed the Monterey Bay Region off California’s map, and, in the long run, saved it. The region’s resources were spared the wholesale destruction of both the mines and population, and places like Monterey and Santa Cruz were allowed to grow slowly once that initial surge of 49ers settled in. By turn of the century the Monterey Bay Region had become the “away” for people trying to escape the pressures and noise of Gold Rush cities like San Francisco. Given the way things have turned out here at the close of the twentieth century, we should give thanks that the Gold Rush happened somewhere else.

So, just as the 49ers did, we should go to Coloma and the Gold Country and play the role of prospector and miner and imagine being in the grip of gold fever. Then we should return and begin to relive, rethink and reconfigure those years during which the 49ers were in charge. We have our own sesquicentennials to commemorate in the near future not the least of which is the establishment of the counties of Santa Cruz and Monterey in 1850. We must also take the opportunity to re-evaluate the celebratory tone set by the pioneers and add to it the stories of those as yet unheard, for by so doing we might finally find some solutions to the problems the Gold Rush left behind.

The ‘Missing’ Pioneers

by

Phil Reader

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There is no greater irony in California history than the timing of the American conquest of the region and the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Fort — occurring, as they did, within a week of each other. These two events were to change forever the character of the much neglected Mexican province of Alta California. For 300 years, it had remained a part of the pastoral Spanish/Mexican frontier, sleepily stumbling along, content carefree, and giving little or no thought to what the future might bring.

Falling within the sphere of influence of the provincial capital at Monterey was the tiny Villa de Branciforte situated on the eastern bank of the San Lorenzo river across from Mission Santa Cruz. Like the rest of Alta California, Branciforte seemed immune to change. When families moved into the area, they had remained, attaching themselves to the land and putting down deep roots. A system of large cattle ranches had evolved and the needs of everyone were fulfilled with little outside contact. Life in the coastal villages and towns of Alta California was undisturbed except for the arrival of a few American and European sailors who jumped ship in order to escape the rigors of life at sea. Joining them was a small group of mountain men, fur trappers and hardy settlers who trickled over the crest of the towering Sierra Nevada range to peacefully establish homes among the native Californios, as the local Spanish-speaking peoples were called.

But all of this came to an abrupt halt on the morning of January 24, 1848, when James Marshall and Peter Wimmer made their discovery in the tail race of John Sutter’s mill on the American river. Fearing the impact that a Gold Rush might have on Sutter’s holdings in the area, the men attempted to suppress any knowledge of the strike. But it was an ill-kept secret.

At first, word of the find spread to Yerba Buena (San Francisco), where it was picked up by the Mormon entrepreneur Sam Brannan. He visited the diggings long enough to see the situation first hand. On his return to Yerba Buena, Brannan urged all who would listen to go to the mines before it was “too late.”

Initially, the only people who went to look for gold were men from the coastal towns and ranches, along with sailors who had abandoned their ships in San Francisco Bay upon hearing of the excitement in the foothills.

In the early spring of 1848, Wimmer and Charles Bennett (another witness to the discovery) set off to Monterey to report on the gold strike to General Richard B. Mason, the military