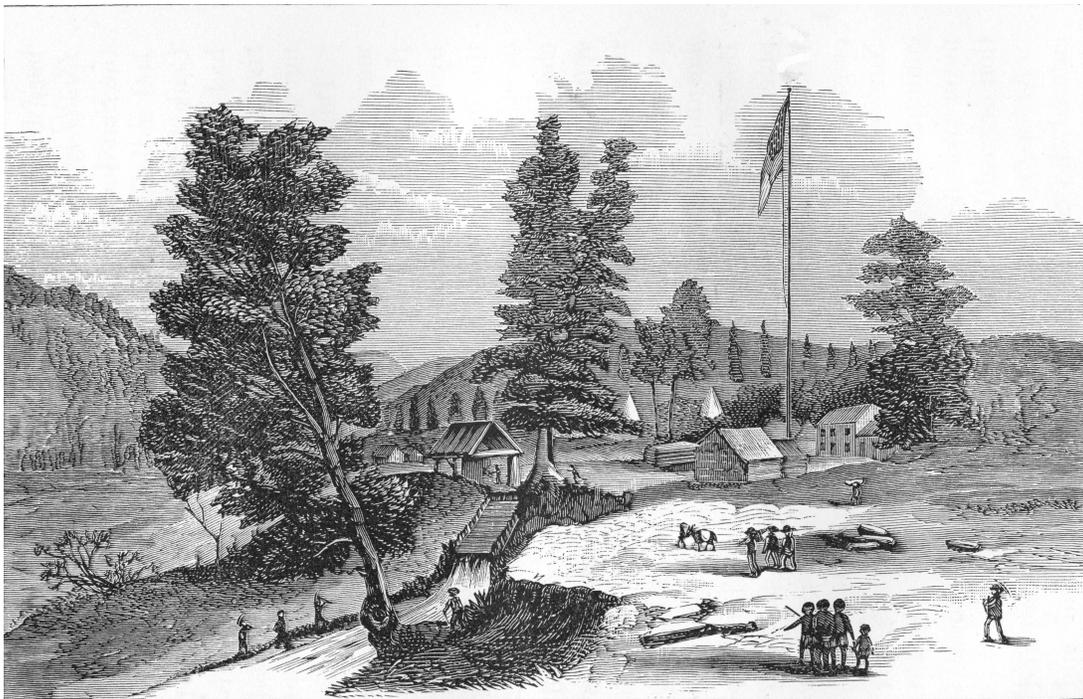




California Missions
Keeping the Past Present

California Stories

The Padre's Gold



The California Stories are a collection of interesting and historical stories from early California and the California Missions written by David J. McLaughlin.



The Padre's Gold



Working a Stream

Many think that the gold was first discovered in California in 1848, leading thousands of “49ers” to flock to the territory. However, the first gold strike was actually six years earlier in Southern California, not that far from the [San Fernando Mission](#).

On March 8, 1842, while searching for wild horses in Placerita Canyon, Francisco Lopez found gold particles clinging to the roots of wild onion bulbs. Lopez is sometimes described as a shepherd; but, according to the historian John W. Robinson, he was a well-educated member of a prominent family of Californios. He had attended the Collegia de Minería in Mexico City, was familiar with prospecting techniques, and often searched for placer gold. In the fall of that same year (1842) Lopez discovered ore gold in San Feliciano Canyon.

In the years after the discovery, rumors circulated that some of the gold from these strikes was given to the Padres at San Fernando Rey and hidden in the church.

The discovery of gold that attracted hundreds of thousands of gold-seekers in California was made in 1848 by James Wilson Marshall (1810-1885). Marshall was a native of New Jersey, trained as a wagon-maker and carpenter. He headed west at the age of 18, farmed in Missouri until about 1844, then joined a wagon train to Oregon, ultimately arriving in California in June 1845. He made his way to Sutter's Fort where he worked as a carpenter, ultimately acquiring land in the area.

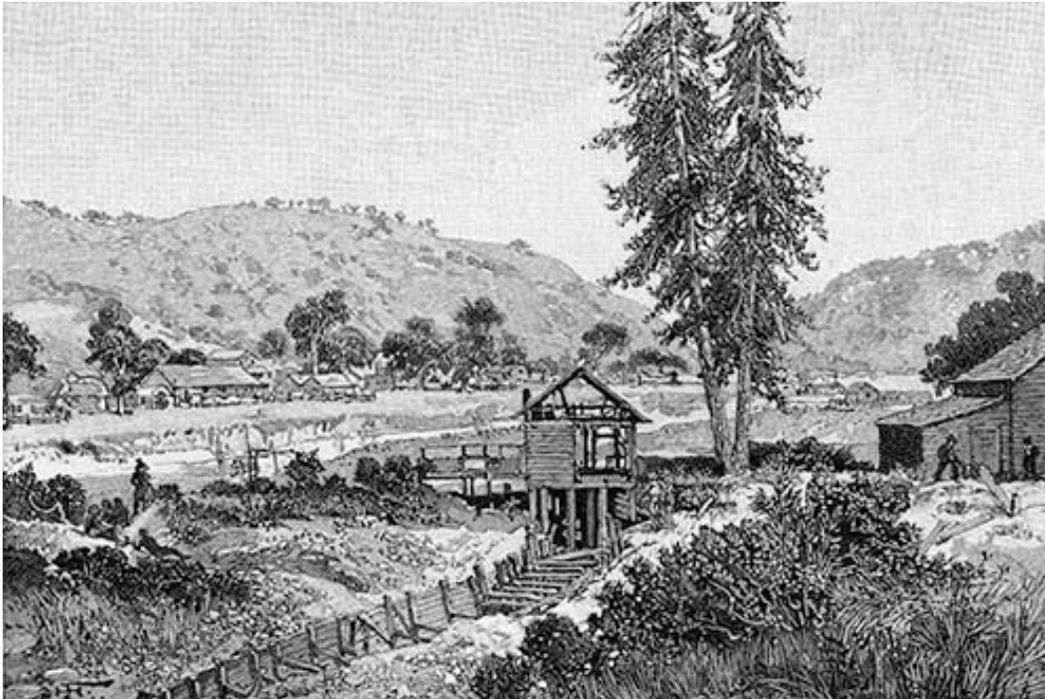


James Marshall

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Marshall joined in the Bear Flag Revolt and then fought in the Mexican-American War as one of Fremont's California Volunteers. In 1847 he and John Sutter set up a sawmill joint venture on the Americas River in the Coloma Valley.



Sutter's Saw Mill

On January 24, 1848, while checking to be sure that the tailrace of the mill had been flushed clean of silt and debris, Marshall looked down through the clear water and saw a large gold nugget, a discovery that changed the course of California history. In March, the newspaper *The California* reported the find, but initially there was skepticism. On May 12, 1848, Sam Brannon set off a raging gold fever when he waved a bottle of gold dust and shouted "Gold! Gold! Gold! On the Americas River" (he had received the dust in payment for goods he sold at Sutters Fort).



Early Scene California Gold Rush

In July 1848, Colonel R.B. Mason of the First Dragoons was sent to inspect the field. Mason estimated that \$50,000 a day was being extracted. Word spread and thousands of gold seekers from all over the world began to figure out how to get to California. The discovery became official on December 5, 1848 when President Polk mentioned the development in his farewell address.

Crewman on board ships in the waters off Yerba Buena deserted, and as other ships arrived in 1849-1850, the harbor was soon full of hundreds of abandoned ships.



California Gold Digging

Northern California became dotted with mining camps as thousands flocked into the territory. The men that discovered gold never benefitted from their finds. Francisco Lopez was unsuccessful in capitalizing on his knowledge and became a rancher. James Marshall never had any of his claims recognized. Throughout the rest of his life, he drifted from one unsuccessful venture to another, began to drink to excess, finally dying penniless at the age of 75. In 1890, The Native Sons of the Golden West erected a statue of Marshall on a small hill overlooking the gold discovery site. The Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park in Coloma contains artifacts and memorabilia, an authentic replica of the original sawmill and a few old gold rush buildings.



Harbor Buena Vista

The California missions (and the California Indians) fared badly during the gold rush days. The walls and floor of the old mission church at San Fernando Rey were dug up several times in a futile search for the “padre’s gold?” With the influx of 49ers, many of the old missions became campsites and way stations on the trip north. The first mass murder in California occurred in 1848 at [Mission San Miguel](#).



Ruins of Mission San Fernando Church