

A speck of glitter triggers the California Gold Rush

JOHN SUTTER HAD A DREAM.

As a young man he had left his native Switzerland, abandoning his wife and a string of creditors, to seek his fortune in the New World. Crossing the North American continent, he fell in with a group of missionaries, and ended up in the Mexican territory of Alta California, one of the most fertile areas on Earth. There, not far from what is now Sacramento, Sutter began work on the project he hoped would make him a rich man: New Helvetia ('New Switzerland') – a fort with stores and workshops, designed as the centrepiece of a thriving new agricultural community.

By 1848, Sutter had been in California for almost a decade. In the intervening period, American settlers had broken away from Mexican rule and the state had been occupied by the US military. But Sutter's dream of building a remote pastoral utopia was still intact: he even hired a younger man, James Marshall, to build him a sawmill on the American River nearby. And it was Marshall who first found the gold.

On the morning of 24 January, Marshall noticed something that looked like glitter in the bed of the channel they were digging for the water mill. As he later recalled: "I picked up one or two pieces and examined them attentively; and having some general knowledge of minerals, I could not call to mind more than two which in any way resembled this... iron, very bright and brittle; and gold, bright, yet malleable." He

banged it between two rocks, and "found that it could be beaten into a different shape, but not broken". Then Marshall knew. He took "four or five pieces" over to Mr Scott at the carpenter's bench, and said: "I have found it." "What is it?" Scott asked, and Marshall said simply: "Gold."

For John Sutter, the news that his men had found gold was a hammer-blow. As he well knew, a gold rush would shatter his dreams of agricultural riches, and at first he tried to cover up the news. But men talk, and the rumours spread. After just a few weeks, there were even

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stories that some of Sutter's employees had been using chunks of gold to pay for goods in stores at New Helvetia.

Intrigued, a San Francisco publisher and store owner called Samuel Brannan went to see for himself. When Brannan realised the rumours were true, the first thing he did was to open a shop selling prospecting supplies. Then he went back to San Francisco, put on his best clothes and strode through the little town, holding a vial of gold like a trophy above his head. "Gold!" he shouted. "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!"

In the next few months, everything changed. The news reached the east coast in

A big day in history
by Dominic Sandbrook

24

January 1848

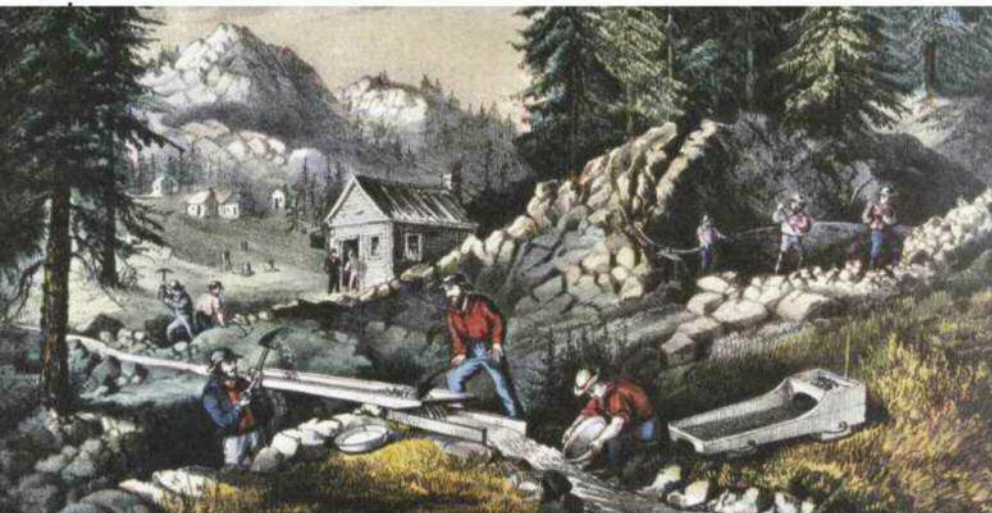
August, and in December President Polk officially confirmed it to Congress. By the beginning of 1849, thousands of would-be prospectors were flooding into the state every day. "The whole country resounds to the sordid cry of 'Gold! Gold! Gold!'" lamented one newspaper, "while the field is left half-planted, the house half-built and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pick axes."

At first, San Francisco had almost emptied overnight, as its residents dashed off to the gold fields. But so many '49ers' were moving in that the town was changed beyond recognition. In January 1848 San Francisco had boasted just 800 residents; by the end of 1850 it had some 25,000, many of them in shacks and tents. So many ships' crews deserted, hoping to find gold, that their boats were converted into warehouses, stores, inns and even a floating gaol.

The California Gold Rush was one of the greatest mass migrations in American history, bringing an estimated 300,000 people to the west coast in just a couple of years. With new ports, towns and railroads springing up to meet the demand, the state was transformed overnight, and the dream of the Golden State was born.

The grim irony, though, was that there were more losers than winners. Few prospectors became genuinely rich, while tens of thousands of Indians were killed by immigrants or by disease. As for James Marshall, his sawmill failed and he ended his life bankrupt, while John Sutter abandoned the New Helvetia project and died a bitter man. For the men who found it, gold had been nothing but a curse. **U**

Dominic Sandbrook's latest book is *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (Allen Lane). He is a frequent guest on Radio 4's *Saturday Review* **BBC**



Gold miners in California in 1849. The gold rush sparked one of the greatest mass migrations in American history

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