

GUIDE TO THE MARSHALL GOLD DISCOVERY STATE HISTORIC PARK
PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Park History

Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park contains roughly 576 acres of natural, cultural, and historical resources. Located in El Dorado County, the park is situated in the Coloma Valley, transected by both California State Route 49 and the South Fork of the American River, and encompasses the census-designated place of Coloma. The park is accessible by car via California State Route 49 and Cold Springs and Mount Murphy roads.

For thousands of years prior to the nineteenth-century mass migration of gold-seekers into the region, the area containing the present-day park was home to the Nisenan and foothill Miwok, who called present-day Coloma, "*Cullumah*." Establishing village settlements along the streams and tributaries that drained into the American, Consumnes, Bear, and Yuba rivers, the original inhabitants subsisted on freshwater fish, waterfowl, elk, deer, and other small game as well as acorns, seeds, and local fruits. Having lost a substantial portion of their population in the 1833 malaria outbreak, the Nisenan people suffered their greatest losses when gold-prospectors flooded into their territory after 1848, importing diseases and alcohol, waging violent attacks, driving off game, and destroying natural resources. Today, the surviving Nisenan live on the Nevada County Rancheria and work diligently to preserve their lifeways for future generations.

In the fall of 1847, James W. Marshall, having partnered earlier with John A. Sutter—founder of "New Helvetia" (present-day Sacramento)—began construction of a lumber mill at Coloma (**Figure 1**). At the site, Marshall employed a labor force consisting of local Indians and members of the U.S. Army Mormon Battalion. On January 24, 1848, while inspecting the diggings along the American River shoreline, Marshall discovered shiny flecks in the tailrace, a discovery that ultimately turned out to be gold (**Figure 2**). Urging secrecy, Marshall shared the news with Sutter, who soon bragged to Californio General Mariano Vallejo and Mormon elder Sam Brannan, who then trumpeted the news throughout the city of San Francisco. The seaside city quickly saw the mass exodus of its able-bodied male population to the diggings. With news of the gold strike reaching all the way to Washington, D.C., thousands of American prospectors—with even more coming from around the world—embarked on one of history's largest human migrations. The California Gold Rush had begun.



Figure 1. Drawing of James Wilson Marshall, ca. 1890. Catalog # 090-2655.

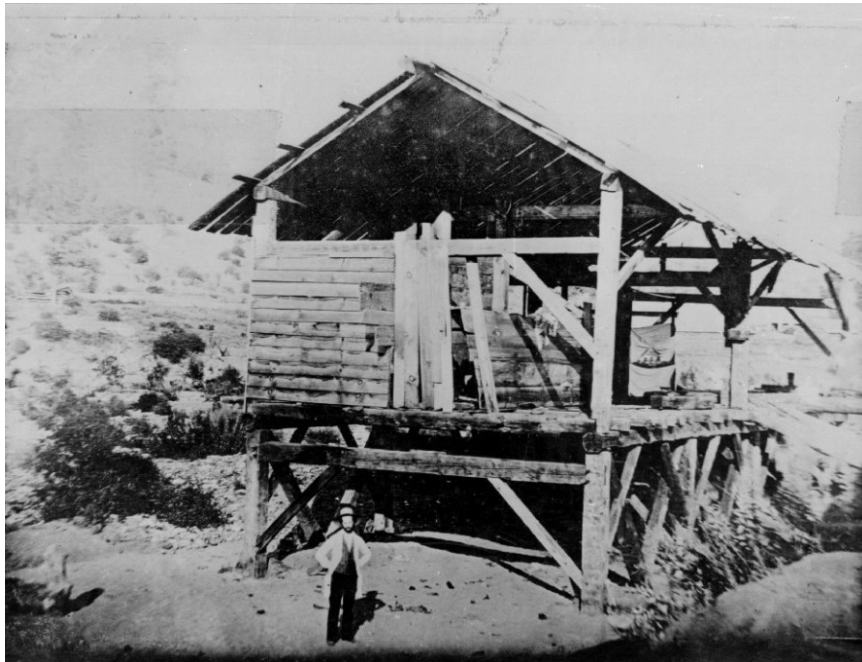


Figure 2. Sutter's Mill, ca. 1853. Catalog # 090-2635.

By July 1848, the area around Coloma saw its population quickly rise to 4,000. Following gold prospectors, merchants, doctors, lawyers, gamblers, saloonkeepers, ministers, and other service purveyors from around the globe arrived in the former mill camp (**Figures 3 and 4**). But as the local placer mines gave out and successive strikes were made further and further away from town, Coloma's population steadily declined. By 1857, most of the miners—except for the Chinese—had left Coloma, restoring the sleepy community's peaceful atmosphere and redirecting economic focus back to agriculture and transportation.



Figure 3. Gold prospectors, ca. 1850. Catalog # 090-2274.

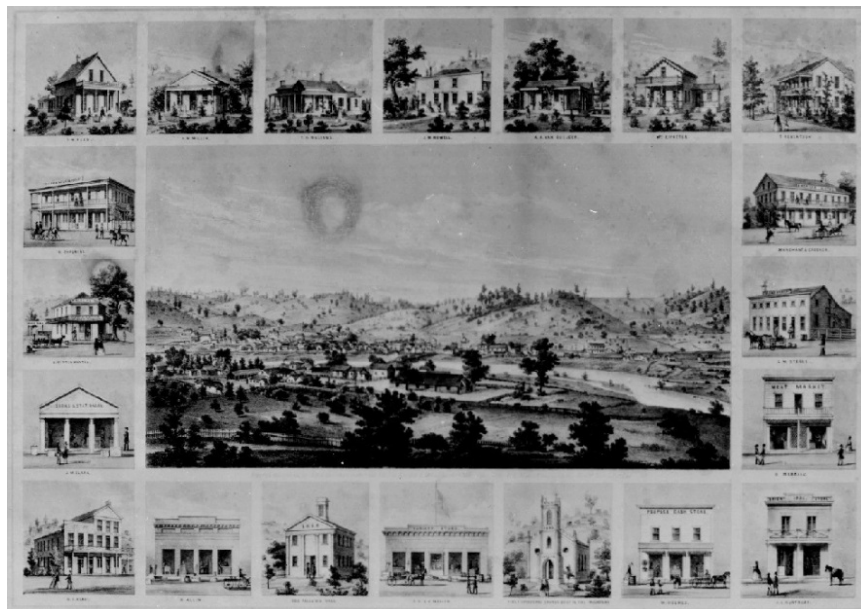


Figure 4. Lithograph of Coloma, California, 1857. Catalog # 090-2621.

Between 1860 and 1900, fruit orchards, vineyards, and a winery slowed—but could not stop—Coloma's steady decline. Though the area's terrain, climate, and repurposed system of ditches and canals supported local agriculture, pest infestations

and rising competition from other, more productive regions of California compelled the demise of the Coloma wine industry. Concurrently, the downtown business district steadily deteriorated during this period, with Main Street comprising no more than a dozen standing structures by 1900. From the turn of the twentieth century through World War II, Coloma was a quiet, rural community centered around fruit ranching, with a local population not numbering more than a few hundred.

In May 1890, five years after James Marshall's death, the Native Sons of the Golden West, Placerville Parlor No. 9, erected a monument to commemorate the "Discoverer of Gold": a statue of Marshall pointing to the place of discovery on the South Fork of the American River (**Figures 5 and 6**). This historic monument was the first of its kind in California. One year earlier, the State of California had acquired roughly 15 acres for this purpose, naming and classifying the property "James W. Marshall State Historic Monument." In 1924, an unusually low water level exposed portions of the foundation of Sutter's original sawmill. That same year, the site was marked with a stone monolith by the Society of California Pioneers, later designated a State Historical Landmark in 1942, and commemorated with a plaque by the Native Sons and Native Daughters Historic Landmarks Committees at the centennial celebration in 1948 (**Figure 7**). Upon granting the site state landmark status, the State renamed and reclassified the property "Gold Discovery Site State Park," later changed to "Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park" in 1963. In 1961, Coloma was designated a National Historic Landmark District and listed in the National Register of Historic Places five years later.

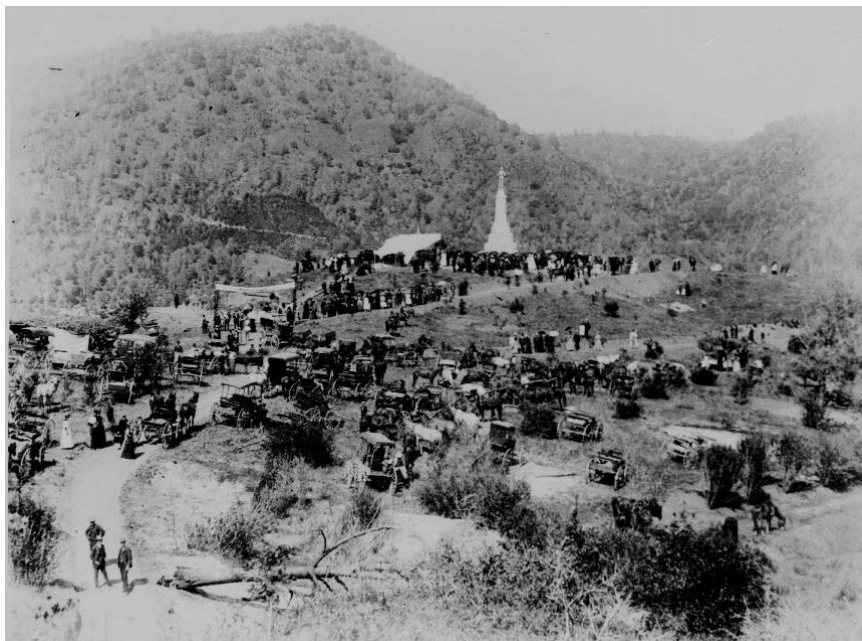


Figure 5. Marshall Monument dedication, 1890. Catalog # 090-2617.



Figure 6. Marshall Monument, ca. 1900. Catalog # 090-2698.



Figure 7. Sutter's Mill Monument, ca. 1955. Catalog # 090-2324.

California State Parks, coordinating with the Gold Discovery Park Association, preserves and interprets numerous historical, natural, and cultural resources at Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park (**Figure 8**). In addition to the monuments, the park

also features a 2015 reconstruction of Sutter's Mill. Also included are numerous restored buildings in the former boom town of Coloma, various houses and cabins belonging to historic residents, and a grinding bedrock mortar used by the region's indigenous population. The park also includes the Gold Discovery Museum, a network of hiking trails, and various picnicking areas. The park hosts numerous living history events throughout the year, including "Gold Rush Live" and the Gold Panning Championships, is open Monday through Sunday, and is day use only.



Figure 8. Marshall Monument, August 13, 2010. Catalog # 090-P70430.

Scope and Content

The Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years circa 1848 through 2015, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1947-1949, 1959, 1985-1988, and 1998-2015. There is a total of 1,327 cataloged images, including 722 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 421 35mm slides, and 184 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff.

The collection mainly depicts the built and natural features of the park's landscape at various times, the bulk of which date from 1947 to the present. Images include the Gold Discovery and James Marshall monuments, various views of the South Fork of the American River, park signage, and the reconstructed Sutter's Mill. Within the

Coloma Historic Landmark District, images feature exterior views of the Wah Hop, Man Lee, Bekeart, and Bell stores, the Blacksmith shop, the stamp mill, Marshall and Miner's cabins, the Thompson, Borland, and Pappini houses, the Pioneer Cemetery, St. John's Catholic Church, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Hall, the Coloma Jail ruins, and the park museum and visitor center. Interior views of the Thompson House also feature attendant period furnishings, and interior shots of the museum include a variety of exhibits and displays.

The collection also documents a number of events held and projects undertaken at the park. Contemporary images include excavations of the original Sutter's sawmill foundations performed in 1947 and 1970, the 1948 centennial celebration of Marshall's gold discovery, the 1958 excavation of the Wah Hop store, the 1961 museum dedication, the replication and dedication of Sutter's mill (ca. 1964-1968), "Gold Discovery Days" held in 1975, various interpretive programs conducted in 1987 and 1988, the 1990 centennial dedication of the Marshall Monument, the 1995 "Gold Panning Championships," living history activities held in 2007, and deferred maintenance programs conducted in 2009.

The collection also features landscape and aerial views of the park unit. Images include the community of Coloma, the reconstructed Sutter's Mill, and the South Fork of the American River.

The collection also features a number of historic, nineteenth-century images. Included are scanned engravings, maps, documents, drawings, reprinted photographs, blueprints, lithographs, postcards, paintings, and portraits. Images depict Sutter's original sawmill, the town of Coloma, maps of the American River and the Mother Lode region, pan-ethnic miners and gold mines, advertisements for Coloma's businesses, the old Sierra Nevada Hotel, portraits of James Wilson Marshall, and the dedication of his monument in 1890.

Related Collections

El Dorado County, California Gold Rush Papers, University of the Pacific: Holt-Atherton Department of Special Collections.

George Johnson Reminiscences and Papers Chiefly Concerning Coloma, California and its Inhabitants, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Gold Discovery in California Materials, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Gold Discovery Letters, Society of California Pioneers.

James W. Marshall Papers, California State Library: California History Room.

Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park Collection, California State Parks Archives.

Photographs of Coloma and Kelsey, California [Graphic], UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

William G. Clark Copybook, Coloma, California State Library: California History Room.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Aerial view
American River, South Fork
Chinese miner(s)
Coloma, California
El Dorado County
Gold mine(s)
International Order of Odd Fellows
James Wilson Marshall
Landscape view
Man Lee Store
Marshall Cabin
Marshall Gold Discovery State Historic Park
Marshall Monument
Mother Lode
Native Sons of the Golden West
Society of California Pioneers
Sutter's Mill
Wah Hop Store