



Gold!: The Story of the 1848 Gold Rush and How It Shaped a Nation

Fred Rosen

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On January 24, 1848, as carpenter James Marshall worked on building a sawmill at John Sutter's Fort, east of Sacramento, California, he accidentally discovered a pea-sized nugget of gold in a ditch. Just like that, the scope of the American myth changed. From 1848 to 1850, 90,000 people trekked across the continent; by 1854, that figure had risen to 300,000. Representing every ethnic group, more than ten percent of the American population migrated to California's gold fields in six years. Defying disease, crime, the deprivations of nature, and each other, fortune hunters risked all for the slim chance of riches. The Gold Rush marked the moment when people stopped believing that hard work leads to a good life, which then leads to a good afterlife. They started believing, instead, that anyone could strike it rich. Americans thus began their phantom pursuit of wealth, a pursuit that continues to this day.

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