

Sunken Gold

Story of the Greatest Sunken Treasure Ever Found

It was at the height of the California Gold Rush. The SS Central America carried so much gold from California that when a hurricane sank the ship off the coast of South Carolina it triggered an economic depression with far-reaching consequences. For 130 years, the vessel remained untouched at the bottom of the sea, until a respected scientist named Tommy Thompson discovered it. But Thompson turned out to be a clever con man....

Throughout history, the burning desire for gold has driven people. Many journeys have been undertaken in the hopes of finding gold, including the exploration of the New World and other lands by the Spaniards, British, French and others. Wars have been fought and monarchies have risen and fallen, all due to the yellow metal. No other material substance has captured human interest as much as gold.

In 1848, California was a sparsely populated territory that had only just become a part of the United States after America proved victorious over the Mexican armies. Few Americans had any interest in settling the newly acquired land. Few even knew where this land was located. For most, California was the name of some distant desert somewhere at the far edge of the world.

Only a handful of men lived in the state. One of these was Captain John Sutter, a Swiss man who had arrived in 1839 when California still belonged to Mexico. He oversaw a property of tens of thousands of acres in New Helvetia, which is today known as Sutter's Fort. Sutter wanted to develop the land by building towns on it. However, he was faced with a shortage of good lumber for the construction of houses and other buildings.

To circumvent this problem, Sutter decided to build a water-powered sawmill where local logs could be transformed into usable beams and planks. He hired James Marshall to erect a sawmill along the American River, a fast-flowing river located about 50 miles from the fort. Marshall began by digging a small canal that would divert some of the water to power the sawmill. Next, he built the mill alongside the canal.

When the mill was finished, Marshall and Sutter were disappointed to discover that the bed of the canal had filled with sand and pebbles. As a result, the great waterwheel would not turn. After considering the problem for a while, the engineers came up with a plan. They constructed a dam at the entrance to the canal to stop the water. Then, at night, they opened the dam. The sudden rush of water that had collected in front of the dam



Top: How Sutter's Fort looked then. Bottom: Sutter's Fort today.

over the day washed away the pebbles and sand that had stuffed the canal.

The engineers repeated this procedure several times to flush out the canal. On January 24, 1848, Marshall got up in the morning to examine the canal and see whether it was sufficiently cleared for the waterwheel to function. The water was clear and Marshall could see right to the bottom. He suddenly noticed something glistening at the bottom of the water. Bending over, he found a small nugget of yellowish metal. In fact, it looked exactly like gold.

We Found Gold!

Marshall understood immediately the consequences of his discovery. He mounted his horse and galloped to the fort where he asked to speak to Captain Sutter in private. When they were alone Marshall opened his satchel and shook out several samples of the yellow substance.

Sutter took down an encyclopedia and studied the known properties of gold. Then he performed several simple tests on the samples in front of him, such as weighing them and soaking them in vinegar. In a short time he was satisfied that the metal was indeed gold.

"Eureka!" (Greek for "I found it") he shouted. In a short time, *eureka* became the word of the day. It entered the gold prospector's lexicon and even became California's state motto.

Sutter hoped to see his sawmill completed before the region became flooded with gold prospectors. Later, he would not be able to find anyone to do construction work. He swore his workers to secrecy for six months. The workers, however, were delighted with their newfound wealth and keeping it quiet soon proved impossible.

In a short time, the news spread that gold had been found at Sutter's Mill. By spring there were hundreds of people prospecting along the entire length of the American River. Every capable hand in San Francisco abandoned the city to join the search for gold. Local newspapers closed as there were no writers or readers left in town.

Soon the news arrived all across America, with newspapers reporting the discovery of gold in California. Rumors circulated of thousands who had become wealthy overnight by working in gold deposits. Most of the American population was still concentrated in the northeast, but people began leaving by droves to head for California. Many dropped their jobs and even their families to join the gold rush.

The Gold Rush

Of course there were no airplanes yet, but even the transcontinental railroad had not yet been built. Crossing the entire continental US by land required an arduous journey of several months, largely through uncharted and lawless lands. Nor were ships a convenient option for reaching California from the northeast.

The ships of the time were still fairly



The exact spot where Marshall first discovered gold.



The site of Sutter's Mill.



Remnant of Sutter's sawmill.

primitive and the owners were far more concerned with profits than with safety records. The number of tickets that agents sold was often higher than the number of available beds on the ship. This meant that ships regularly set sail with too many passengers on board. Private cabins were a