Gold Fields at the Sierra Nevada Mountains

This map depicts the general location of goldfields in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains (together with gold fields in Northern California).

Before gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, in 1848, Yerba Buena was a small village on the Pacific coast. By 1851 (two years after the gold rush began, the village (with its harbor) had grown into the city we know as San Francisco (as depicted in this image from the Library of Congress).

John Sutter bemoaned the discovery of gold, as this autobiographical account (from the Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco) reveals:

It was in the first part of January, 1848, when the gold was discovered at Coloma, where I was then building a saw-mill. The contractor and builder of this mill was James W. Marshall, from New Jersey...

...I was very much in need of a new saw-mill, to get lumber to finish my large flouring mill, of four run of stones, at Brighton, which was commenced at the same time, and was rapidly progressing; likewise for other buildings, fences, etc., for the small village of Yerba Buena, (now San Francisco)...

...It was a rainy afternoon when Mr. Marshall arrived at my office in the Fort, very wet. I was somewhat surprised to see him, as he was down a few days previous; and then, I sent up to Coloma a number of teams with provisions, mill irons, etc., etc. He told me then that he had some important and interesting news which he wished to communicate secretly to me, and wished me to go with him to a place where we should not be disturbed, and where no listeners could come and hear what we had to say.

I went with him to my private rooms; he requested me to lock the door; I complied, but I told him at the same time that nobody was in the house except the clerk, who was in his office in a different part of the house; after requesting of me something which he wanted, which my servants brought and then left the room, I forgot to lock the doors, and it happened that the door was opened by the clerk just at the moment when Marshall took a rag from his pocket, showing me the yellow metal: he had about two ounces of it; but how quick Mr. M. put the yellow metal in his pocket again can hardly be described.

The clerk came to see me on business, and excused himself for interrupting me, and as soon as he had left I was told, 'now lock the doors; didn't I tell you that we might have listeners?' I told him that he need fear nothing about that, as it was not the habit of this gentleman; but I could hardly convince him that he need not to be suspicious. Then Mr. M. began to show me this metal, which consisted of small pieces and specimens, some of them worth a few dollars; he told me that he had expressed his opinion to the laborers at the mill, that this might be gold; but some of them were laughing at him and called him a crazy man, and could not believe such a thing.

...So soon as the secret was out my laborers began to leave me, in small parties first, but then all left, from the clerk to the cook, and I was in great distress; only a few mechanics remained to finish some very necessary work which they had commenced, and about eight invalids, who continued slowly to work a few teams, to scrape out the mill race at Brighton.

...Then the people commenced rushing up from San Francisco and other parts of California, in May, 1848: in the former village only five men were left to take care of the women and children. The single men locked their doors and left for "Sutter's Fort," and from there to the Eldorado. For some time the people in Monterey and farther south would not believe the news of the gold discovery, and said that it was only a 'Ruse de Guerre' of Sutter's, because he wanted to have neighbors in his wilderness. From this time on I got only too many neighbors, and some very bad ones among them.

What a great misfortune was this sudden gold discovery for me! It has just broken up and ruined my hard, restless, and industrious labors, connected with many dangers of life, as I had many narrow escapes before I became properly established.

Credits:

Map of Northern California's goldfields, courtesy USGS and Wikipedia Commons.

Image, San Francisco harbor (c. 1850/1851), Library of Congress.

John Sutter's story, The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco.

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http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Gold-Fields-at-the-Sierra-Nevada-Mountains

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