

The Gold Rush – or “God’s Rush” to California?

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by Dr. Catherine Millard

The early social aspects in California presented phases of life found nowhere else on the American Continent. Primarily, people came to make money. It was this that filled with passengers every vessel of every class that left for this State from the ports of the East by the way of Cape Horn, and that poured legions of people across the Isthmus of Panama from **1849-1860**. It was the love of gold which sent the more than thousands of trains over the plains, across the Rocky Mountains, through the alkaline waste of the Great American Desert, and over the giddy heights of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, to this new El Dorado.

No man has attempted to summarize and give to the world the sufferings, by sea and land, of the vast numbers of men who reached the mines on the American river in **1847-51**. Nor has the least glimpse been given of the numberless graves in the ocean, across the Isthmus and on the plains, of those who died in their struggles to reach a land that was to give to all, **“Gold! Gold!!**

So easy to get and so hard to hold,” until want, with its deceptive fingers, should haunt them no more. Not since the days of Peter the Hermit rallying Christendom to rescue the tomb of the Saviour of our fallen race, had there been seen such a gathering of the nations; and, perhaps, not again in a thousand years will the world again set its face to another California. On the American River, **from 1847-1856**, gathered men of all nations, climes and peoples. The representatives of England and the nations on the continent of Europe, with the olive-colored children of the Asiatic races, here met the men of all the States of the American Union, in one wild, selfish scramble for gold.

Arrival at San Francisco

The pen of man has not, as yet, realistically portrayed the miseries, the anguish and agonies of men as they suffered and struggled and died in huts, hovels, and on the damp, bare earth, by the thousands, in the old placer mines of this State. There are many men here who witnessed those scenes of almost unparalleled human suffering, and they speak of them even now with bated breath. Those who came by sea, and the Isthmus, on reaching **San Francisco**, found themselves **two hundred miles** away from the **gold-fields**, with the **Valley of the Sacramento**, one hundred miles across, lying between, and, during the Spring, flooded with the waste waters of the river, and in summer, steaming with deadly malarial disease. These obstacles were utterly disregarded, and thousands of young men, tenderly reared and highly educated, threw away their baggage and started on foot to the field of untold riches, where they expected to realize that for which, amid the dangers of the sea, they had longed, and of which they had dreamed so fervently.

In the rallying of **Christendom to rescue the tomb of the Redeemer** from the possession of the Saracen, there was something that stirred the highest, the best, the holiest attributes of humanity; but in the meeting of nations to the “golden” sands of California, there was naught but greed for gain, with unutterable selfishness impelling all. Men forgot home, happiness and heaven; forgot the training of childhood, manhood, and the fear of God. They madly threw all their past life to the four winds, and literally **changed the words of Holy Writ** and the highest maxims of human morality, and declared in every act, that “the love of money was the best policy, and honesty the root of all evil.”

Right and Honorable Exceptions

Still there were right and honorable exceptions to this abandonment of all the restraints of the soberer rules of life and the moral teachings of the past. In early days there came here **men who rose above the glitter and glamour of gold**; men who brought with them

the unconquerable, undying belief that the “wealth of Ormus or of Ind” is not to be compared for a single moment to the glories that flame forever along the gold-paved streets of the New Jerusalem, and the **joys that await the toil-worn, faithful ones** in the “**city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God**” - men who believed in the unrevealed glories and inexhaustible wealth to which holy men and women are heirs, beyond the sorrows, the sufferings, the evils, the disappointments and heart-breakings of this sin-stricken earth on which we pass an allotted pilgrimage. May we commemorate these disciples of the Redeemer, who have passed to the “shining shore,” and in honor of the few who yet remain and wait, ready to pass up and become heirs to an inheritance whose scenes of glory “surpass fable and are yet true scenes of accomplished bliss?” These honorable exceptions laid the foundations for California.

California’s First Protestant Christian Services – Prior to 1849

June 17, 1579: **Francis Drake** stepped ashore on Drake’s Bay and one week later he held the **first Protestant Christian service** in English on the Pacific Coast. Before he departed on July 23 he erected “a great and firm post,” to which he nailed a brass plate telling of his arrival and his claim to those lands in the name of his sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I.

1846: The **Rev. Walter Colton**, a Congregational minister, was chaplain on the frigate *Congress*, which spent the summer and



Sunday Morning in the Mines, 1872. Painting by Charles Christian Nahl. Contrasting a man reading his Bible on the right, with vice to the left. Courtesy of the Crocker Art Museum. Excerpted from, *California – America’s First New England*, © 2010 by Catherine Millard.

fall of the year in the harbor of Monterey. He held services alternate Sundays on the frigates Congress and Savannah, and in 1847 there is a record of a Christian Revival among the seamen on these vessels. An article entitled "**Revival in the Navy**" appearing in the *New York Journal of Commerce*, reads as follows: "Rev. Mr. Colton, chaplain of the U.S. frigate *Congress*, in a recent letter from Monterey, Ca. says: 'There is a deep interest among a large section of our crew on the subject of religion. It commenced two months back in my Bible class, and extended to others. I now hold a prayer meeting three evenings in the week, in a retired and very convenient apartment of our ship, and usually meet there about sixty sailors – about thirty of them have been hopefully pious. I invite them to pray and speak to the others, which they do with great fervency. Among the converts are some of the best seamen in our ship. Several of the officers have attended our meetings and we have no opposition from any quarter. This is all the work of a good Spirit, and I pray he may remain among us. I am the **only chaplain** out here, and officiate alternatively on board the frigates *Congress* and *Savannah*.'" "

At this time, **Mr. Colton** did not know of the presence of another Protestant Christian minister within the limits of the State. He was useful to the people of the State in many ways. In 1846, Commander Stockton appointed him the first *Alcalde* of Monterey under the American flag. It was the policy of the American government of occupation at this time, to preserve as far as possible, the forms of the Mexican administration. But manifestly, in the interest of justice, some of these required modification. It was Mr. Colton who introduced for the first time, within the limits of the State, trial by jury.

On August 15, 1846, Rev. Colton established the **first newspaper** in California. He found at Monterey an old press and type that had been used by a pastor for printing tracts and with these he issued *The Californian*. It was printed in Spanish and English and given an eager welcome by the community. Thus, Mr. Colton has the honor of planting some fundamental American institutions in the new territory. It was he who, as correspondent of the *Journal of Commerce* in New York, gave to the east its first knowledge of the discovery of gold in California. But so far as the Protestant Christian services were concerned, he seems to have confined these to the Navy and not to have held a service on shore.

July 9, 1846: **Captain John B. Montgomery**, of the *Portsmouth*, raised the American flag over the Presidio of San Francisco. He was a **Presbyterian elder** and a profound Christian; and having no chaplain on board, he himself conducted church services on his vessel. The Sunday following the raising of the flag over the Plaza at Yerba Buena, on July 12th, Captain Montgomery went ashore with some of his men and conducted what was the first Protestant service on California soil after the raising of the U.S. flag. The **Rev. Sylvester Woodbridge, Jr.** (founder of the First Presbyterian Church of Benicia, on April 17, 1849) said: "...that noble, glorious gentleman, Captain Montgomery, came here in his sloop-of-war, *Portsmouth*. He went ashore and enquired of the means of grace. Nothing of the kind was found. "Well," said he, "I will be preacher; I will perform those duties. We will have services every Sunday." Hence, during his stay in San Francisco harbor, these were the first Protestant Christian services held on shore under the American flag in California. The Plaza was renamed *Portsmouth Square* after his vessel, and *Montgomery Street* was named after Captain Montgomery.

January 28, 1847: Lieutenant Theodorus Bailey commanding, the United States ship *Lexington* arrived in Monterey with a large box of the publications of the **American Tract Society**, which were distributed in the port.

1847: The captain of a certain whaling ship invited the **Rev. James C. Damon** to preach on board his vessel in 1847, as related by James Woods in his *California Pioneer Decade*.

April 25, 1847: The Rev. William Roberts, newly appointed Superintendent of Missions for Oregon, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, stopped on his way to preach in San Francisco. On the following Sunday, the **Rev. J.H. Wilbur**, his companion in travel, organized a **Sunday School and Bible Class** – but of short duration.

October, 1847: Rev. Elihu Anthony, a local preacher of the Methodist Episcopal Church, conducted a class in San Jose for two or three months.

1848: Mr. Anthony organized a class in Santa Cruz, which subsequently grew into the Methodist Church of that city. Rev. Anthony also preached occasionally in San Francisco during that year.

July 2, 1848: An extract from the diary of C.S. Lyman is related in an issue of the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, as follows: "**Sutter's Mill:** Mr. Douglass (his partner) and myself went to **Jones' Camp**, one and a half miles away, to engage in religious exercises. Most of the party belonging to his Camp were absent and it was concluded to appoint a religious meeting there for the next Sabbath." Also recorded - **July 30, 1848:** "Spent the day in camp. Mr. Matthews and son, and the Rev. Mr. Anthony came and spent the Sabbath with us and had religious exercises. Agreeable and profitable."

Thus it is evident that **local Methodist preachers** performed a very real service in California before there was any regular ministrations of Protestant Christianity in the State.

October, 1848: Captain Lewis H. Thomas, of the English brig *Laura Ann*, held services of the English Protestant Church on shore in San Francisco.

October 29, 1848: To the **Rev. T. Dwight Hunt, D.D.** belongs the honor of being the first Presbyterian minister to engage in Christian work in California. Prior to his arrival in San Francisco, he was pastor of the *American Church in Honolulu*. He had gone to the Sandwich Islands in 1844 as a missionary of the *American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions*. Here, in 1848, he had been invited by the Americans resident in Honolulu to build up a church among them. But when news of the discovery of gold in California reached the Islands, every foreigner who could get away started for the new territory. Mr. Hunt's congregation being thus naturally dissolved, he "obtained a leave of absence for three months, with the privilege of continued absence or return, as Providence should indicate" and set out with the rest of Honolulu for San Francisco. There was some question as to whether the recklessly wicked population would tolerate the presence of a **Protestant Christian minister**.

Only one passion possessed the soul of the place – "gold" - which, whether gratified or ungratified, became the root of all evil. But he

tells us himself that the very wickedness of the town at the time of his arrival had provoked a reaction which made even some of the godless ones long for the presence of a minister. Imagine then his astonishment when he found himself received with open arms and great enthusiasm. In **December, 1848, he became Chaplain-at-large to San Francisco**, at the same time deciding not to organize a church which would belong to any one denomination, for the space of one year. Three days later, Mr. Hunt was formally invited by the citizens, regardless of denominational affiliations, to make his home with them. He was elected *Protestant Chaplain of San Francisco*, and was voted a salary of \$2,500.00 payable quarterly. **The public school house on the Plaza** was voted by the town for his use on Sundays and formal announcement was made that he would hold services twice on Sundays – at 11:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. The attendance, however, was far too great for the accommodations which the school house afforded, and the congregation crowded the doors and windows at each service.

The Lord's Supper – First Protestant Service in California

January, 1849: It is recorded of Mr. Hunt's work, that on the **first Sunday in January, 1849**, he administered the **Lord's Supper** for the first time at a Protestant Christian Service in California and had twelve communicants who represented six different denominations. Until the arrival of the *California*, February 28, 1849, Mr. Hunt was the **only Protestant minister in California!**

"A Miner's Reverie" – 1858

...I see around me, even in the rocks amidst which I toil the dead relics of fleeting centuries, antediluvian life bristles here in its rocky tombs, fossilized and preserved for me to wander upon, study and meditate...But when I look within myself as one for the whole, what do I find? A being full of varied instincts, endowed with reason and intelligence, capable of mighty deeds; but chiefly fritting away life's precious moments in endeavors to accomplish **unattainable things**, full of lofty aspirations, full of low and groveling pursuits, performing deeds in body and mind that would shame the face of day, and were they known unto men, would place many – O how infinitely too many! – upon the black rolls of infamy. Yet in me there is a ruling instinct high over all. It is an innate desire for immortality... but looking carefully throughout the universe, do I see the desire that is in us all, **the paramount wish for happiness and immortality?**

I see in the broad field of nature, marked upon every blade of grass, every leaf that trembles in the soft air of Spring, evidence that **there is a God**; there must be a Creator, an intelligence above our own.

There is in us a greater or less desire to know more than we can see in nature's field, about **this Supreme Being**. I have passed over the tomes of the past; made myself familiar with the views of the great men of former ages, their schemes

of salvation and views of immortality; what they have said of the soul and its mysterious connections with the body, and I have searched profane history in vain for the plan of salvation that satisfied the full wants of the soul. **Man could not originate the plan, it was left for God Himself, and fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.** No man ever lived that equaled him in beauty and symmetry of person, in godlike attributes and actions.

Man cannot propose such a plan of salvation. **The Saviour's death was the most sublime scene ever recorded in history.** "Socrates died like a philosopher, but Jesus Christ, like a God."

My situation is that of many; the mountains are full of men, toiling for subsistence; they are found in every cañon, and on the hilltops. Many have given up in despair and turned drunkards, gamblers, loafers, villains and scapegraces. Others have gone down to untimely graves, beneath the weight of corroding cares; but I will maintain my own self-respect and endeavor to deserve the respect of others. I as firmly believe that industry, perseverance and energy will finally succeed, as that **there is a future life** of which **this is but the beginning**; these qualities are always equal to talents, and often superior; thousands of examples all over our country, lead me onward. "Excelsior" should be our motto under all circumstances.

No matter how lowly your situation or how dejected your thoughts, there is hope of success while there is life. the whole field of **nature was created by God himself**, and given you for a heritage. The earth, the air, the sun that illumines the heavens, the stars that gem the universe, all minister to your pleasure and happiness. And **Jesus the Son of God died for you upon Calvary**, that **eternal life** and happiness may be **yours**. That land beyond the grave you can inherit. (Excerpted from, *CALIFORNIA – America's First New England*, © 2010 by Catherine Millard).