



"The independent gold hunter on his way to California: I neither borrow nor lend." A Currier lithograph circa 1835-56. Courtesy of Library of Congress

"Ah! sons of New England plodding in the great cities or scattered over the rich, vast levels and prairies of the West, from the Holland Purchase to the Platte and the Brassos--is it quite sure that we have well exchanged for these the green hills and sparkling brooks of our rugged native clime?"

Vermonters in the Gold Rush

Eileen Scully

In January of 1848, James Marshall - partner of the more famous John Sutter- spotted gold in the American River near Coloma, in the California territory. In his own words: "My eye was caught by something shining in the bottom of the ditch . . . I reached my hand down and picked it up; it made my heart thump, for I was certain it was gold . . . Then I saw another."²

As one traveler recalled, however: "few people in the country believed it at first, and but still fewer believed in the large quantities said to be found. Even . . . newspapers published in San Francisco, ridiculed the idea of men making \$16 per day with only pick, shovel, and pan."³ The first great wave of prospectors came only after the enterprising merchant Samuel Brannon carried gold samples through the streets of San Francisco, after first buying up all the pick-axes and shovels in the vicinity.

An estimated 11,000 Vermonters joined the California gold rush,⁴ although rather than "rushing," most of them proceeded hence with all due speed. Slowed by distance, transportation, finances, and just plain good sense, New Englanders were late to the game, and most arrived well in the wake of voyagers from Oregon, Mexico, Chile, Hawaii, South China, and Western Europe. There were not yet transcontinental telegraph wires or rail-

road lines, and indeed “the United States” was still spoken about in the plural, as in “the United States are annexing Texas and California.”

News from California was slow to arrive on the Atlantic coast. More than timing and technology, though, there was deeply engrained Yankee skepticism about so-called fields of gold and overnight fortunes. With so much at stake, and so little known, folks awaited “the receipt of [an] ocular (sic) demonstration of the truth of previous stories relative to the ease with which gold is to be acquired.”⁵ A close-enough attestation came in early December 1848, from President James K. Polk, whose

annual address to Congress included explicit assurances that he himself had seen gold samples and written confirmation sent to him by Colonel Richard Mason, California’s military governor.

Thus it was that after months of naysaying and dire warnings to “those who were hastily packing up their ‘duds’ for the gold region,” the Brattleboro *Semi-Weekly Eagle* ruefully conceded that “all IS gold that glitters.” Earlier stories that seemed exaggerations were quite true: “It is hardly possible, at this late day, for anybody, even the most skeptical, to doubt the existence of gold in California, and in quantities sufficiently large to satisfy the cupidity of money-loving and money-getting Americans. . . Even Vermont - staid, sober Vermont – is contributing her full quota of emigrants. . . Large numbers have already left, or are about leaving Bennington, Rutland, Vergennes, Burlington, Montpelier, Woodstock, Windsor, and several other places.”⁶

At that time, it was quicker and less arduous to sail from Hong Kong to California than to make the five-month voyage from New York to San Francisco, via Cape Horn at the tip of South America. The Panama shortcut – across the isthmus by foot, horseback and barge – was an option, but one that occasioned alarming mortality.

Some dreamed of an even shorter short-cut, via an aerial “balloon advertised to start from New-York. . . or San Francisco. . . [and then to] make exceedingly short passages between the two ports – (enabling devoted husbands to return to their families once a fortnight, without a very great loss of time in the pursuit of their search for gold).” Alas, according to the

MISCELLANY.

[From the Vermont Chronicle.]

“Vermont a Gold-bearing State.”

While so many thousands of the enterprising young men of New England are rushing to the Pacific in search of gold, it seems desirable that those who remain at home in the discharge of trusts and of regular industry, should be aware of what an inheritance remains with them. It may serve to relieve the chagrin of some at not being able to go, to learn that possibly a substantial reward may follow a search for gold, made in accordance with the following suggestions.

“Vermont is a gold-bearing state,” a headline in the Vermont Chronicle, reprinted from the semi-weekly Eagle, April 12, 1849.

Pittsfield Sun, the balloon “did not sail on the day advertised, and there is probably some doubt whether the machine will accomplish at present what was so confidently predicted.”⁷

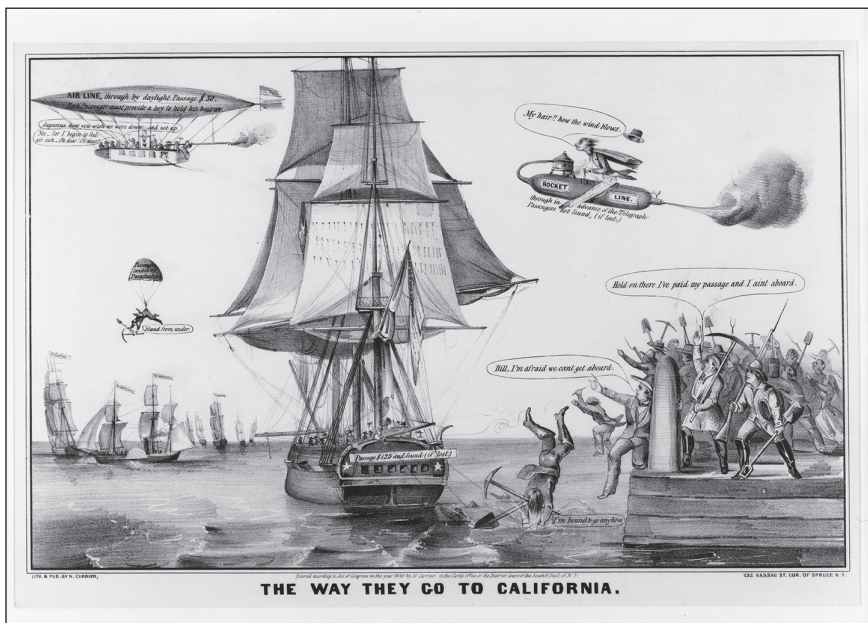
No matter how Easterners might get themselves to California in 1849-50, by then enterprising stay-at-homes had come up with an array of “must-have” gold rush-related knick-knacks and gizmos, such as:

*California Gold Grease, a salve, \$10 a box: instructions were for the prospector to rub all over his body, roll down a mountain, jump in a tub, and scoop up the gold.*⁸

*Signor D’Alvear’s Goldometer! A new magnetic instrument supposedly designed by the famed Spanish geologist who discovered gold in California.*⁹

*The Bed Bug and Cockroach Exterminator, designed by S. Killder Jr. of Lowell, Massachusetts: “Persons going to California will find their journey and residence there much more comfortable” by taking this along.*¹⁰

One had to have money to make a fortune. As editors at the *Farmers’ Cabinet* pointed out: “The class of citizens which is leaving us for El Dorado is of the better sort, well-educated, industrious, and respectable, such as we regret to part with. The rowdies, whom we could well spare, cannot as a



“The way they go to California,” a lithograph-cartoon created by N. Currier in 1849. Courtesy of Library of Congress

general thing, fit themselves out for so long a voyage.”¹¹

Like other folks throughout the eastern United States, friends and neighbors in towns and villages across New England met these challenges with fortitude and ingenuity. In short, they went into business with each other, pooling their resources into mutual protection associations and joint stock companies.

These collaborations came in all shapes and sizes, as suggested by examples from the *Farmers' Cabinet* [Amherst NH], of February 1, 1849:

Leading men of Concord, New Hampshire, gathered to establish a company; attendees adopted a code of laws, and elected a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and nine directors; it was proposed to secure fifty associates, each to put in \$1,000.

The Berkshire Company, from North Adams, 20 individuals, each pays in \$300, and the company takes out a freight of lumber.

From Connecticut, a company of twenty-five employees of Colt's pistol factory, with an experienced miner and assayer both on retainer.

Residents of Danvers, Massachusetts, subscribed \$10 each to support an agent who is to go instead of the company.

Woodstock native Captain Bezer Simmons (1810 VT-1850 CA) was one of the few Vermonters who had actually been in California before the gold rush. A long-time trader on the lower California coast, Simmons was especially well situated to get rich without actually panning for gold, because in late 1846, he had purchased for \$1,000 a large Mexican land grant from the original holder, a tract that included “the island or Peninsula in the Port of San Diego.”¹²

Simmons returned east before 1848, and when news from California arrived, his first-hand experiences on the Pacific coast and reputation for probity made him a valuable source of information and reliable business partner. In early February of 1849, he and his wife Laura Billings Simmons (1829 VT-1849 CA) left New York for the Panama isthmus, in company with other “Vermont Adventurers,” including brother Benjamin Simmons, with the latter’s wife; and brothers-in-law Frederick and Franklin Billings.

As observers noted at the time, these “Vermont Adventurers” were “not a party of gold hunters; probably none of them will go into the diggings.”¹³ Instead, like many New Englanders late to the gold rush, they went as skilled professionals: merchants, lawyers, architects, engineers, clerks, arti-

sans, store-keepers, hoteliers, and blacksmiths.

New Englanders carried westward the sturdy habits and practices of local government and public education. In gold rush California, their shared roots and connections opened the way for mutual trust and cooperation, especially among individuals who actually did pan and mine for gold. For example, the 1852 census for California shows William H. Cleveland (1831 VT-1914 OK), age 22, as a miner in Tuolumne County. His brother Stephen D. Cleveland (1829 VT-1917 VT), age 23, also a miner, was working elsewhere in the same county. Both brothers were with or near friends and neighbors from their hometown of Georgia, Franklin County, Vermont.

Vermont roots and connections had other, more intangible benefits, as suggested by the fate of Captain Simmons, mentioned above. Soon after arriving in San Francisco, his world came tumbling down. In that one epic year, 1849, he lost his wife, his mother, and a brother.¹⁴ In January of 1850, he returned to Woodstock to bury his wife's remains. Returning to San Francisco a few months later, he found his commission house on the brink of bankruptcy. This latest disaster broke his health, and he died on September 26, 1850. San Francisco papers reported that: "On the occasion of the death of the late Capt. Simmons, a meeting of citizens from Vermont, residing in California, was called to take appropriate steps to express their regard and esteem for the deceased, and to attend his funeral . . ."¹⁵

Across Vermont, the gold rush felt to many like a mass evacuation, the acceleration of an outmigration that was already diminishing the state's delegation in the U.S. House of Representatives from four to three Congressional districts. Indeed, the 1850 census confirmed what many feared: "the sons and daughters of Vermont residing in Vermont numbered less than 228,941, and the children of Vermont residing in other states mainly at the west numbered nearly 146,000. In other words, about 39 percent of Vermont's native born population had emigrated from it elsewhere."¹⁶

At mid-century, the mainstays of Vermont's economy were sheep, wool, cotton, and iron.¹⁷ Annually generating more than 3.4 million pounds of wool from some 920,000 sheep, Vermont was New England's "greatest sheep-growing and wool-raising state."¹⁸ But trouble was on the horizon. Vermont's competitive advantage was slipping. Other states and regions were catching up and overtaking it.¹⁹

And . . .then . . .just in time . . .gold was discovered in Vermont! In a lengthy article widely republished during April and May of 1849, the *Vermont Chronicle* undertook "to exhibit to the people of Vermont what is at their own doors, – to present those facts that go to show that Vermont is a gold bearing State and has a gold formation extending from her Southern to her Northern border."²⁰

The news was meant to “relieve the chagrin of some at not being able to go” to California, by showing “that possibly a substantial reward may follow a search for gold” nearer to hand.²¹ In short, Vermont’s mineral riches were more advantageous in the long run, compared to California’s, which “cost too much in the loss of life, wreck of health and dissipation of money and morals.”²²

The *Vermont Chronicle’s* gambit soon after prompted a tongue-in-cheek report in the *Montpelier Watchman* that “two superb pieces of Vermont gold were found in Barre and brought to this village, and exchanged for cash . . . The two pieces weighed 4000 pounds, and were nearly of the same size – 2000 pounds each!” The supposed finders were William and Amos Bradford, who sold the lumps for \$200 each, cheap at the price, but “then the gold was of a different quality from the California article,” i.e. the two nuggets were a pair of oxen.²³

The California gold rush was an ambiguous experience for Vermont, and for New England writ large. Ruminating on the larger lessons of California gold, the *New York Herald* suggested in 1854 that: “New England, the land of the Puritans, has much to learn in matters relating to a wise practical economy . . . The forsaking of the farm for more supposed lucrative and genteel employments . . . [was] leading to unwise and unsafe investments and speculations; extravagance and show; and expenditures in folly. . . [which] are still evils abounding among us . . . [that] must stand severely reprimanded by these hard times.”²⁴

The California gold rush accelerated out-migration from Vermont, but individual and family fortunes were brought back East, and funneled into banks, new enterprises and civic projects. Indeed, by 1860, many Vermonters who had gone off to California were back in their native towns and villages, well in time to be counted in that year’s census. Telltale signs of their round-trip journey included paid-off mortgages, sizable assets, and California-born toddlers in their households. □

¹ “Vermont. East of the Mountains,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle* [Brattleboro VT], 3 September 1849: 2.

² “Early California History: An Overview.”
<<http://memory.loc.gov:8081/ammem/cbhtml/cbintro.html>>

³ John A. Swan (1817-1896). “A trip to the gold mines of California in 1848”. Edited by John A. Hussey (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1960).

⁴ “Ghostly walk marks Peacham’s 4th,” *Times Argus*, 5 July 2006.

⁵ *Pittsfield Sun*, 26 April 1849: 2, quoting the Washington Union correspondent writing from NYC.

- ⁶ “Progress of the ‘Yellow Fever,’” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 29 January 1849: 2; “The California ‘Gold,’” *Farmers’ Cabinet*, 12 October 1848: 3; “The Rush for California,” *Farmers’ Cabinet* [Amherst NH], 1 February 1849: 2.
- ⁷ “The Gold Mania, &c.,” *Pittsfield Sun*, 26 April 1849: 2.
- ⁸ *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 22 January 1849: 3.
Barre Patriot, 29 December 1848: 2.
- ⁹ *Barre Patriot*, 12 April 1849: 3.
- ¹⁰ “The Rush for California,” *Farmers’ Cabinet*, 1 February 1849: 2.
- ¹¹ *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 11 November 1850.
- ¹² “Vermont Adventurers,” *The Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 25 January 1849: 2, from the *Woodstock Mercury*.
- ¹³ “Death of Capt. Bezer Simmons,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 14 November 1850: 2.
- ¹⁴ “Tribune of Respect. To The Late Capt. Bezer Simmons, of Vermont,” *Daily Alta California*, 28 September 1850: 2.
- ¹⁵ *Pittsfield Sun*, 31 May 1855: 1.
- ¹⁶ “Vermont Industry,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 22 December 1851: 2.
- ¹⁷ “Sheep and Wool,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 28 June 1852: 2; “Sheep and Wool,” *Barre Gazette*, 2 July 1852: 1.
- ¹⁸ “A Word to the Farmers...,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 20 August 1849: 2, from the *Vermont Watchman*.
- ¹⁹ “Vermont—a Gold-bearing State,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 12 April 1849: 1, reprinted from the *Vermont Chronicle*.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ “Geological Survey of Vermont,” *Semi-Weekly Eagle*, 17 May 1849: 1, from the *Woodstock Mercury*.
- ²² “Vermont Gold,” *New Hampshire Gazette*, 3 May 1849, from the *Montpelier Watchman*.
- ²³ *Farmers’ Cabinet*, 7 September 1854: 2.