

First there was Alta, or Upper, California, a large portion of the landmass of Mexico

The Mexican-American War, 1846 to 1848, ended when US forces occupied Mexico City. One of several results of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was the sale of Alta California by Mexico, for \$15 million dollars, as war reparations to the United States. The Treaty was signed in February 1848, within days of gold being discovered by James Marshall at his lumber mill near Sutter's Fort. Alta California became the California Territory and has since been divided into the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, western Colorado and southwestern Wyoming.

How did the US acquisition of the California Territory and the discovery of gold shape history?



Sutter's Fort

acquisition of Alta California in 1848, Sutter's authority suffered a rapid decline. A clash between the old Spanish system and the Oregonians new American way was about to take place.

James W. Marshall had recently arrived in the vicinity of Sutter's Fort and, In 1847, made an agreement with Sutter to build a lumber mill with the proceeds to be shared. The mill was ready to operate in January of 1848, with the exception of the tail-race, which was found to be not deep enough. Marshall opened the floodgates and allowed the swift current to run all night. In the morning he found a great mass of sand and gravel at the end of the tail-race ditch, under a few inches of water. Marshall noticed a brilliant yellow reflection from several areas of the gravel, picked up a few of these objects, found them to be heavy and malleable and determined that they were gold. He shared his find with a carpenter at the mill and word of the discovery spread rapidly.



Sutter's Mill

News of the gold discovery gained momentum as parcels of gold were offered as payment for goods in local stores. Disbelief was the first reaction of the public, however. The fact that large amounts of gold were being used in business transactions soon established the reality that vast quantities of gold were waiting to be mined. The result was towns were being emptied, workers left their jobs, farms were abandoned and men were heading for the "diggings" to make their fortunes. Communications were not

helped when newspapers were forced to close their doors because every man, “right down to the printers devil”, walked off their jobs and went to the mines.



The slow communications were a benefit to the men of the Oregon territory, however. They became some of the first, who were outside the California territory, to arrive at the mines. The Oregon territory then suffered the same manpower drain as was experienced in California. Farms and families were abandoned, workers quit their jobs and headed off to the gold fields to make their fortunes. The Oregonians arrived just ahead of the flood of emigrants heading to the gold fields. Alta California had just been declared a United States territory and the Oregonians were delivering their version of US law to the California Territory. A clash was inevitable and the Oregonians were destined to be among the first of those involved.

The first Oregonians to hear of the gold were involved with ships that docked at ports on the Columbia River. Crews would talk of the “diggings” and fortunes being made. It turned out that as soon as California merchants realized that gold miners would be pouring into the territory, and in need of supplies, they sent the ships out to purchase the needed supplies and, in this way, the first to know about the gold were those at the ports of call. The merchants knew that items were going to be in short supply and costs were going to escalate rapidly. This contributed to ships being not available for passengers for several months, which disrupted the word-of-mouth communications considerably.

The Indians, who lived on the rancheros and worked for the Californian owners, had been mining for gold since January 1848 and the Oregonians started arriving on the gold fields late in 1848 and early 1849. The first Oregonian arrivals were from the Columbia River area and soon became known as “Columbia River Men”.

The California merchants were already taking advantage of the Indian miners. As an example of the cost of a calico shirt or a miner's pan an assayer scale would be used to determine how much gold was needed to purchase these items. The merchant would place three silver pesos on one side of the scale, then the Indian would put gold on the other side until it balanced. This amount of gold would purchase the item. Shortly after arriving at the gold fields some Oregonians decided that mining for gold was hard work and went into competition with the California merchants and traders. At first the Oregonians would use two silver pesos as the counter-balance, then the Californians reacted by using one silver peso for Indian purchases. Needless to say, the Californians lucrative rip-off of the Indian miners was being ruined. William M. Case documented that some of these California traders were Weimer and Besters, of Coloma, Marshall and Winters, of the lumber mill, and even Sutter, himself, was suspected. Case and the other Oregonians later became convinced that these California traders were in a conspiracy with the Indian miners to kill the Columbia River Men.



Assayer's Scale

Traditionally the Indians that lived on a rancho looked upon the Californian owner as their employer and supreme law. This was the old Spanish system which was now being replaced by American law and business practices. Some of the California rancho owners, businessmen and traders capitalized on this Indian loyalty and came up with a plan to rid themselves of the Columbia River Men. The Indians, themselves, divulged this scheme to the Oregonians, as will be shown as this story evolves. The Indians were told that the Columbia River Men were bad people, who were stealing the gold that rightfully belonged to the Indians, and were cheating them by selling the Indians poor quality goods. The Indians were told that they should get rid of the Columbia River Men. By April of 1849 approximately 35 Oregonians had disappeared without a trace.

The Incident at Murderer's Bar

A group of Oregonians, from the Clatsop Plains and Astoria areas, arrived on the Middle Fork of the American River in April 1849. The names of these mining partners were Talmage Benjamin (Ben) Wood, Robert Alexander, Nathan English, Arthur H. Thompson, Ninian and Crockett Eberman (brothers) and Humphrey O'Brien. Their camp was just below a waterfall on a large bar of the river and they had made a rich strike. The miners were running out of provisions and the Eberman brothers, along with O'Brien made the journey to Coloma for supplies.

When the three men returned from Coloma they could not find Wood, Alexander, English or Thompson. Nothing was left of the campsite and all that was present was evidence of a bloody battle and a heap of ashes containing some human bones. Ninian Eberman knew that miners would bury their gold, for safe keeping, and he dug around the site finding two bags of gold. Of the four murdered men, two were married and Eberman vowed to take a bag of gold to each of the widows, which he did on his return home to Clatsop Plains.

At roughly the same time, and a short distance down the river, another massacre took place. Indians attacked three Columbia River Men named Leonard, Sergeant and



The Indians Attack

Carter. A group of Indians had been mining for gold, close to the three Columbia River Men, and the next morning these same Indians attacked. The Oregonians left their firearms back at the campsite and only had rocks to use in self-defense. Leonard and Sergeant were immediately hit by arrows and starting to bleed out. The three decided to cross the river and try to escape. Leonard had lost too much blood, collapsing in the river where he drowned. Sergeant and Carter made it across and Carter was helping his wounded partner until Sergeant declared he could not proceed, telling Carter to leave him. Carter

was a strong runner and he took off with a powerful Indian in hot pursuit. Carter was able to look back as another Indian bashed in Sergeant's skull with a rock, killing him instantly. Carter won the race for his life and immediately took the news of Indian

ambush and murder back to his fellow Oregonians in Coloma. Carter's escape was the undoing of the Indians secretive efforts to get rid of the Columbia River Men. Now the Oregonians knew what had happened to all their missing friends. When the murder scene was revisited, they found Sergeant's body had been mutilated, which outraged the Oregonian's even more.

When the Eberman brothers and O'Brien reached Coloma with news of the murders of their four partners a group of about 13 Oregonians, under the leadership of William Case, immediately bought provisions for a posse which set out in pursuit of the killers. The murderers recruited other members of the tribe into forming small parties which would take off in many different directions, thus confusing the posse and making them co-conspirators in the massacre. The pursuit was abandoned and the posse returned to Coloma. William Case had remained in Coloma, as a lookout, to report any suspicious activity. He witnessed the return of many small groups of Indians who all crossed the river at one location and took the same trail away from the area. These were identified as valley Indians who worked in the gold fields and did business with the California merchants and traders. The posse was informed of this and they crossed the river, at the same place the Indians had crossed, and started tracking them.

The trail led to an Indian camp at the mouth of Weaver Creek, about 20 miles from Coloma. Since the victim's campsites had been stripped it is assumed the Indians would have brought the victims useful property back to the Indian camp. The Oregonians rode through the Indian camp and saw that these were the Indians they were looking for (presumably identifying belongs of victims). The posse gathered together and determined that they would kill as many of the Indian men as possible. Shots rang out for a little over a minute and 26 Indian men were killed and six Indian men surrendered. Indian women fell down, weeping, asking, "Why was this done?" An Oregonian named Greenwood, who was half-blood Crow Indian and knew the Indian language, answered that it was done because they had murdered six Columbia River Men. Four Indian women immediately acknowledged that the Indians had been told they should kill the Columbia River Men and named the California merchants and traders who told them to do it. Now the Oregonians knew who the killers were, who had put them up to it and what had happened to all of their other missing Oregonian friends.

Forty-three prisoners were brought back to Coloma, the six men and all the women and children from the Indian camp. An Indian who worked at Marshall's lumber mill was brought to join the other Indian prisoners and the Indian women cried out that he was no longer one of them. "You have deceived us! You were going to save all of our husbands and now they are killed!" and the women pushed him away. Winters, who was the sawmill supervisor, employer of the Indian spy and one of the California traders involved in the plot to kill Columbia River Men, attempted to free his Indian employee. The Oregonians, now knowing who the conspirators were, called out for Winters to be shot. An Oregonian named Flem Hill grabbed Winters by the collar and told him to get out of the area, fast, or be filled with lead. Winters did flee the area, fearing for his life, as did James Marshall. It is said that Marshall did not return to the area for two years.

The Indian men, now numbering seven, were confined in a house with Flem Hill, Jack Smith and Crock Eberman in charge. It was said that four Indian women had identified several of the Indian prisoners as the ones who murdered the whites and they were detained to act as witnesses at the trial. The other Indian women and children were

released. Adding to the evidence was when an Indian prisoner loudly protested his innocence until Carter entered the room, pointed at the protestor declaring that he was the Indian who murdered Sergeant. John Sutter sent word that he would take charge of the situation and the Oregonians, knowing that Sutter could be a conspirator, firmly declared that they were capable of doing justice themselves. Sutter did not come to Coloma to attempt to officiate at the trial.

Thirteen year old Miss Sarah Francis "Fannie" Eberman, sister of the Eberman brothers, was standing a few feet from the door when the Indian prisoners were brought out of the house to stand trial. It was not the intent to execute all of the prisoners, just those who had done the murders. When the last Indian cleared the door he uttered a command and all seven broke and ran in a direction that was clear, "being in the direction of the trees upon which ropes were already in place", Miss Eberman reported. Several were shot and fell at once. Two reached the river where one was shot and sank in the water and the other was shot as he was climbing out of the river on the opposite side. Six of the Indian prisoners died in their escape attempt and one escaped.

James W. Marshall told a different story to the Indians. It came down through time as oral history, then was included in a book. An Indian Internet Website (<http://www.1849.org/ggg/massacres.html>) picked up the story and it goes like this: *Upon learning that five white men had been murdered, a group of Oregonian prospectors decided to exact revenge on some of Marshall's workers in the central mines, despite the fact that none of the workers could have possibly been involved in the incident. Marshall reported that the Oregonians "found our friendly Indians; induced a part to come, telling them I wanted to talk to them; brought them to Coloma; picked out eight which were most friendly to me, and dismissed the others; drank plenty of whiskey; took out the eight Indians ... bid them run, commenced shooting, killed seven of the eight prisoners."* The reader can choose the story they want to believe, and the author of this story accepts Miss Fannie Eberman's eyewitness version as the truth. In later years Fannie became Mrs. Fannie Clayton, of Seaside Oregon, and her recollection of the incident appeared in the Oregon Historical Society Quarterly of June 1901.

The killing of Indians stopped, for a while

The situation at the mines calmed down for a few days until another Columbia River Man was murdered about eleven miles from Coloma. The Oregonians decided to kill Indians on sight until either all Indian men were dead, or, attacks on Columbia River Men stopped.

The Indians paid a heavy price

The Indian women, who acknowledged that the California traders had told the Indians to kill Columbia River Men, paid the ultimate price. Their bodies were found in a thicket, shot full of arrows.

The Indian women and children that were released by the Oregonians were fearful and went into hiding up in the mountains. The California traders sent beef and flour to the starving Indians and, in a few days, they were all dead.

Dear Father Robinson, I am in low spirits

Obediah Motley writes home to his father in-law about the Indian massacre. Obediah was a ship captain and made voyages from Skipanon Harbor, on Clatsop plains, delivering food and goods to San Francisco at a considerable profit. While in California he visited with his brother in-law, Arthur Thompson, who was working the Middle Fork of the American River. A few days later Thompson and three others were murdered in an Indian ambush. Motley, the Eberman brothers and the Greenwood brothers immediately went to the murder scene to recover the bodies. None of the victims were found. One bag of gold was discovered, buried where the miners had camped. Motley writes that he is all alone, having lost all of his best friends. In his letter he says that he is not going to stay at the gold fields any longer.

Other Oregonians are becoming disturbed by the lust for wealth, the killing, and they pack up and return to the Oregon territory. Ninian Eberman had seen too much of the gold mining life, as he recorded in his memoirs, and returned to his home on Clatsop Plains.

The Naming of Murderer's Bar

Captian Ezekiel Merritt, Thomas Buckner and an Indian boy set out on an exploration for gold on the Middle Fork of the American River. When they came to stream near a waterfall they found evidence of Indians, so the small group, with weapons ready, proceeded with caution. They came to a large gravelly bar and found the evidence of death and a camp plundered by Indians. They camped at a large, clear place on the river bar and remained on guard through the night. In the morning the small group set out to explore further. With weapons at the ready they had only traveled a short distance when a some 60 or 70 Indians appeared on high ground, armed only with bows and arrows, yelling and gesturing in a fearful manner, but they did not attack. The small group waited, weapons ready to fire, but after a few hours the Indians retreated and disappeared from view. Buckner thought about all the other river bars having names, so he used his pocket knife and carved on the bark of an alder tree, "Murderer's Bar", by which the site has since been known. The small group then left the scene.

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