



## **California Gold Rush**

**Scott #3316**

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**Designed by Howard Paine**

There were two excellent articles concerning African American participation and contributions during the California Gold Rush that appeared in past editions of ESPER's newsletter, Reflections. The first is by Ekundayo Azibo and the second is by Eugene Robinson. I have included both of these articles below.

### **Slavery and Freedom During the Gold Rush Days**

by Ekundayo Azibo

Mr. Edward Polk, caretaker at *Allensworth State Historic Park* is also an expert in Black California history. He once regaled a group of visitors with a tale about an enslaved West African taken to California during the Gold Rush Days by his southern owner. He was exploited because of his famous gold mining expertise associated with many men from that part of Africa. This long-ago miner carried the name Timbuktu!

Although I could find nothing more about the man called Timbuktu, I was able to peer through the hazy curtain of time via the power of the Internet to find out more about how the California gold rush effected many Black people. The Oakland Museum in Oakland, California has an interactive web site which highlights exhibitions, such as the Gold Rush Days at <http://www.museumca.org/goldrush/fever13-cy.html>. It offers spoken presentations that simulate the voices of miners and others. One section on African Americans depicts a Black miner toiling with a white miner in a *coyote hole*, a hole dug into a stream bed that may have been 100 feet underground. This method was used to gather the dirt, gravel and gold from the underground streams before the nuggets appeared on the surface to be panned by other seekers of the precious metal.

Some of the Black miners were slaves, like the mysterious Timbuktu. They were resented by white miners, not because they were African, but rather because their status was seen as demeaning the job of gold mining. The white miners were also resentful of the backers who reaped the wealth without doing any of the arduous digging. However in reality, either slave or free, Black men were not accepted as equal by the white miners.

Some of the Black gold miners were free men but their labors often had a dramatic purpose. Their wives and children might be held hostage back in the slave south and the ransom was the wealth of gold. One enslaved miner was reported to have attained a goal of \$120,000 to redeem himself and his family from bondage,

although since he was in *free* California he was technically free.

Fortunes were made and lost during the gold fever. Levi Strauss, a Jewish man, sold the miners sturdy trousers of tough canvas sailcloth reinforced at the seams with copper rivets. He made a fortune with these precursors to today's ubiquitous blue jeans. Women cooks made fortunes with their culinary skills since few women were there. One woman boasts of making \$18,000 on pies alone. Still, one wonders how long it took to gather \$120,000 worth of gold.

Other non-white miners included Chinese who often brought soot and grease encrusted woks back to China. Once home, these woks were cleaned to reveal solid gold. Native Hawaiians, called Kanaka were in California before 1848. Some were lucky enough to be working for John Sutton when gold was discovered on his place. Hundreds more sailed to California to join in the rush to the gold fields. Many were exploited by white miners and died from their labors.

Another web site that discusses the multi-ethnicity of the Gold Rush Days is <http://www.isu.edu/~trinnich/collision.html>. Here, author JoAnn Levy in her book, "*They saw the Elephant*," quotes white miners as they voiced their resentment to having slaves work next to them. Links to a PBS public television documentary are also provided at this web site.

The June 18, 1999 California Gold Rush stamp issue (Scott 3316) commemorates the 150 years since the Forty-niners rush to California. Four men are depicted panning for the metal. The miner on the far left is a Black man. Whether enslaved or free, we can not know. The painting of the miners a work in the Sierra Nevada Mountains was done by John Berkley.

Allensworth, California was an all black town built during the early 1900s and was known as the Pearl of Tulare, a county north of Fresno, California. The story of it's founder, Colonel Allen Allensworth and the other pioneers who built the dream town is dramatic and gut-wrenching enough to earn the people their own US commemorative postage stamp!

## **California Gold Rush**

By Eugene Robinson

On June 18, 1999, the United States Postal Service (USPS) issued a stamp to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the 1849 rush of prospectors to California, where gold had been found the year before. James W. Marshall's discovery of the precious metal at Sutter's Mill, touched off the rush of the Forty-niners into the territory from all over the world.

Inspired by the Story, "*Slavery and Freedom During the Gold Rush Days*" by Ekundayo Azibo in Reflections Volume 7 issue 1, I sought out the story of the stamp's design and the significance of the figure of the black man depicted in the scene.

When the stamp design was first produced by the USPS on November 19, 1998, the four men in the picture were originally all Caucasians. Collectors were surprised when the stamp was finally issued, because the figure on the extreme left had been transformed into an African American.

John Berkley, the artist for the stamp, wanted to show prospectors working in the Sierra Nevada mountains. They were separating gold from dirt and gravel in a stream by panning and using a device called a cradle. As Berkley developed his ideas, *Photo Assist*, the Postal Service's research firm, showed his preliminary sketches to a California state archivist. Based on the advice of the archivist, the artist made extensive alterations in his painting.

His finished illustration showed four men; Caucasians, bearded and wearing hats. The blue-shirted figure at the far left stands, a shovel in his hand, ready to load dirt into the cradle that is being rocked by the seated prospector next to him. The third man walks towards the, with a bucket in each hand hanging from a yoke across his shoulders. On the other side of the stream, a white shirted man on his knees is panning. This was the illustration the USPS made public on November 19, 1998 with its announcement of the stamp, but when the actual stamp appeared, collectors noticed that a change had been made. The blue shirted man on the left, holding a shovel had become an African American.

Gary Kurutz, the California archivist had previously suggested to Photo Assist, "*that the pictured group be ethnically diverse. An Asian or African American miner would not be out of place,*" he had told the firm, adding that, "*diversity is a major issue in California.*" Another California official, Dr. Kevin Starr the state librarian, also protested about the lack of minority group representation in the stamp. So emphatic was his objection that USPS officials met with him to examine the evidence he offered for his contention that free black men had actually participated in the *California Gold Rush*.

Officials finally agreed to make the changes and sent the painting back to John Berkley along with pictures that Dr. Starr gave them for references. Berkley repainted the man as a black man. Finally the task was finished in February, 1999, some six months after Berkley had thought he had completed his painting. The final version of the stamp was issued on June 18, 1999.

**Source:**  
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