CALIFORNIA
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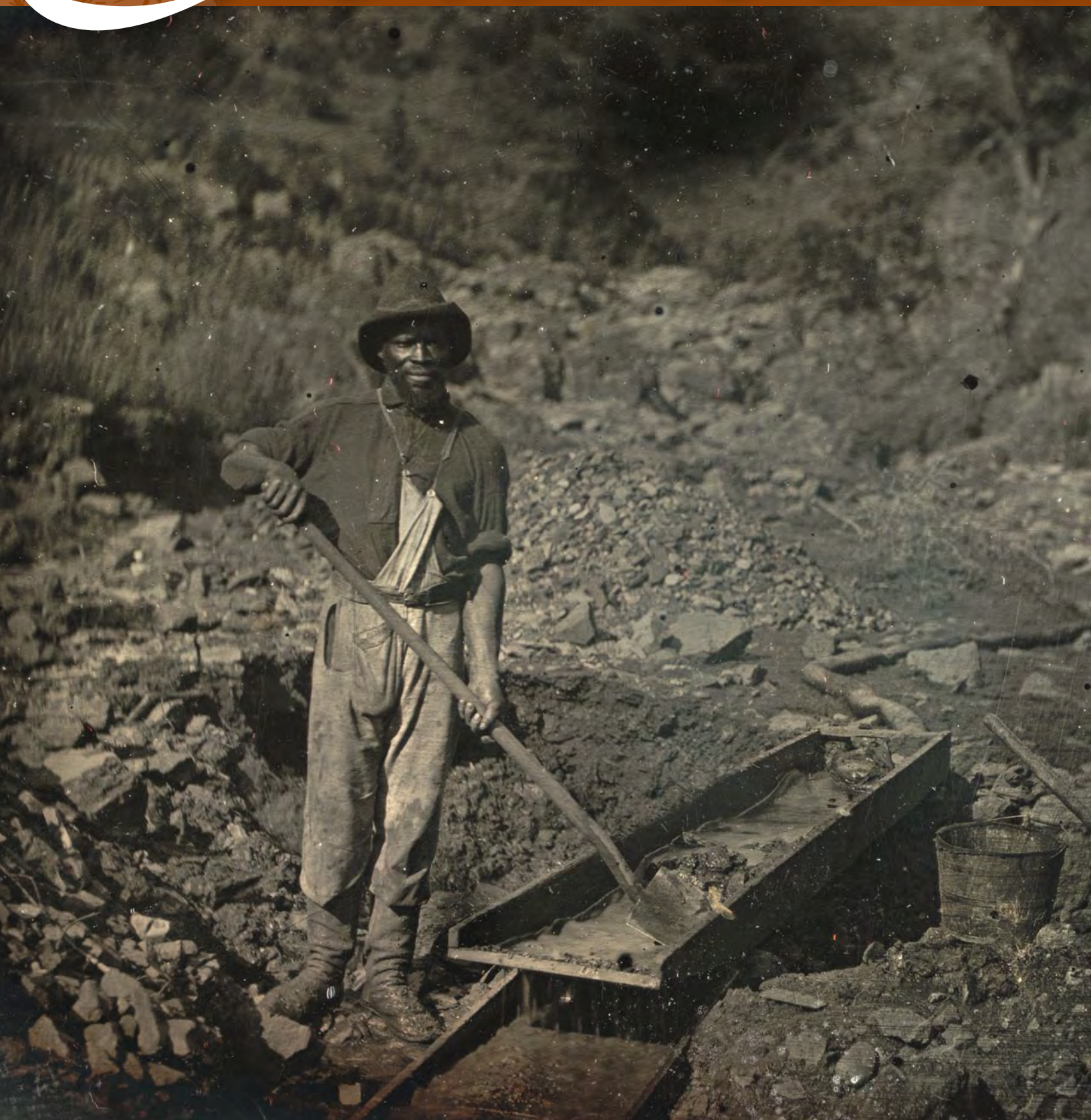
FOUNDATION
Number 128
2020

Bulletin



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The *California State Library Foundation Bulletin* is published when we are able.

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Front Cover: Daguerreotype of Black Miner Working a Sluice Box in Auburn Ravine, circa 1852. Quarter-plate daguerreotype by Joseph Blaney Starkweather.

Back Cover: *How Does Your Garden Grow,* mixed media piece by Angela Tannehill.

Illustrations and Photo Credits: Pages 2-3, California History Section, California State Library; pp. 4-9, Cameron House, San Francisco and California History Section; pp. 10-13, Angela Tannehill-Caldwell; pp. 14-19, Sutro Library, California State Library and Naval Historical Foundation; pp. 20-25, Center for Sacramento History and Sacramento Bee; p. 27, Oregon-California Trails Association.

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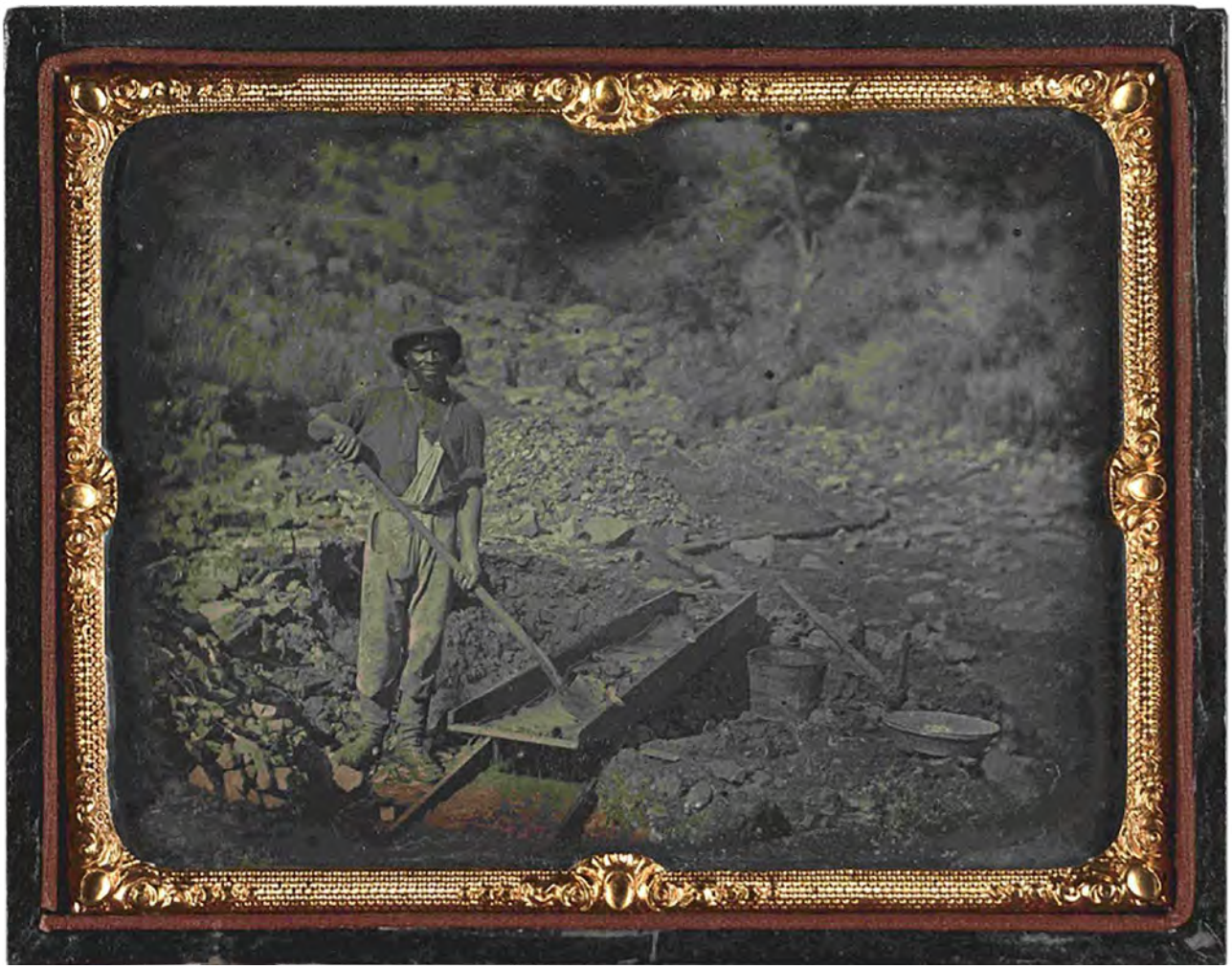

Anonymous Black Gold Seeker at Auburn Ravine, 1852

By Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, Ph.D

Dr. Shirley Moore is Professor of History, Emerita, California State University, Sacramento. She is a highly acclaimed scholar in the field of African American studies. She is the author of "Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails,1841-1869," *which won the 2019 Barbara Sudler Award for the best nonfiction work on a Western American subject written by a woman.*

Joseph B. Starkweather's daguerreotype of an unnamed black miner posing with shovel in hand in front of a sluice box somewhere in Placer County's Auburn Ravine, circa 1852, recalls the old saying "a picture is worth a thousand words."(See Editor's Note) While the miner's name and nationality are lost to history, he was likely an African American who shared with his gold-seeking counterparts, irrespective of race or nationality, a willingness to endure the harsh and perilous conditions of the goldfields for a chance to "strike it rich." The image, one of the treasures of the California History Section of the California State Library, provides glimpses of the life and times of this man, but when the racial landscape of the United States in the nineteenth century is considered, a fuller picture emerges.

Like all 19th-century African Americans, he lived in a society that consigned him to a subordinate status. Whether enslaved or free, black people had few legal rights, were denied the franchise, and were particularly vulnerable to exploitation of all kinds because of race. If he were a slave, he likely was compelled to leave his family behind to accompany his owner to the goldfields. His only solace was his owner's promise of manumission for him and his loved ones in exchange for his labor. Unfortunately, many slaveowners reneged on their promise. This was the plight of Kentucky-born slave Alvin Coffey who trekked from Missouri to California with his owner in 1849. Although his owner had promised that Coffey could purchase freedom for himself and his wife and children, he broke his promise, stole Coffey's hard-earned gold, and sold him to a new master. Coffey would make three round-trips to California with two different masters, work again as a gold miner, and perform other jobs before he had made enough money to finally buy himself and his family out of bondage.

The black miner at Auburn Ravine may have been a free man. If so, he, like many other free blacks, refused to remain in their home states where black laws and anti-black violence restricted their livelihoods and threatened their lives. In a bid for real freedom and opportunity, countless free black people headed for California and other western regions. If the anonymous black miner were free but had family members still enslaved back home, he may have been like Peter Brown, a free black man from Missouri who in 1851 was a gold miner on the Cosumnes River. In a letter to his wife, Alley, in St. Genevieve City, Missouri, Brown revealed that his efforts were for the purpose of getting enough money to purchase their son's freedom. If, however, the black miner at Auburn Ravine were a free man without loved ones still enslaved, his story might have been like that of David Brown. David was a free man from Ohio who left his free-born wife Rachel in Ohio and set out for California in 1852, bound for the goldfields. He wanted Rachel to join him, but she refused. David stayed in California where he began a new life in Downieville as a miner and businessman.

This daguerreotype is intriguing for what it reveals but even more so for what remains unknown. Fortunately, the image of the anonymous black miner at Auburn Ravine has been preserved, but his name, his story, and his reasons for working in the gold fields have yet to be discovered. These things remain as hidden as the gold that he and countless other anonymous argonauts toiled so hard to find.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Unfortunately, little is known about the pioneer daguerreotypist Joseph Blaney Starkweather. A short biography of him was published by Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn in *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840–1865,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 521–522. Born sometime between 1822 and 1827 in New York State, he came to California around 1852 but lived in Massachusetts through the 1850s and early 1860s. He worked as a photographer in San Francisco from 1867 to 1904. In 1880, he exhibited 10 daguerreotypes of mining scenes at the Fifteenth Industrial Exhibition at the Mechanics' Institute in San Francisco, which may have included the Starkweather quarter-plate daguerreotype in the Library's collection, featured in Dr. Moore's article. In addition, the State Library has two other quarter-plate daguerreotypes by Starkweather taken in Placer County.

Starkweather employed the daguerreotype process. Invented in 1839, this is considered the first practical form of photography. Briefly, the daguerreotype was made by using a thin sheet of copper plated with silver and sensitized with iodine in a portable dark tent when on the road. The plate was then exposed in the camera for several minutes to make a "latent" image which was, in turn, made visible by exposing the plate to mercury vapors. Once fixed, this "mirror image" of sensitive chemicals was placed under a glass shield and inserted into a protective case usually made of wood and leather. Each image is unique and did not involve the positive-negative process. Fortunately, with digitization, the full glory of these highly detailed and unique images can be readily seen on a computer. The vast majority of daguerreotypes were portraits. Open-air scenes like the Auburn Ravine image are extremely rare as it took a great logistical effort for these early photographers to set up their dark tents, equipment, chemicals, and compose the scene.

Discoveries in the Library's Archives

Louis J. Stellman's Photographs of the Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco's Chinatown.

By Julia Flynn Siler

Tien Fuh Wu (standing in the back, on the left) and Donaldina Cameron (seated, center), with a group of women who may have been Mission Home staffers. *Photo by Louis B. Stellman, California State Library.*

Four years into my research for my recent nonfiction book, *The White Devil's Daughters,* I came across a photograph that upended my understanding of the role Asian women played in the fight against slavery. Snapped in the early twentieth century, it was a formal portrait of six women. Two were white; the other four were Chinese. All wore light-colored garments unsuited to their daily work in a group home where as many as sixty people lived at any one time. The white women in the portrait wore summer muslin gowns with delicate lace. The Asian women wore shimmering *quipao* gowns, whose high collars were joined by fabric frogs.

The setting was a light-filled parlor in the Presbyterian Mission House, an often-chaotic refuge for trafficked and vulnerable women in San Francisco's Chinatown. After the photographer set up his camera, he arranged the six women in front of a dark, wood-paneled wall, placing the white woman with the Gibson Girl bun in the center of the frame. At the moment the shutter clicked, both of the white women gazed languidly off to the side. The four Asian women, in contrast, looked directly at the camera lens, as if any fear they might have felt as immigrants living in a time of virulent anti-Chinese racism was gone. The photograph gives equal visual prominence to both the Chinese and the white women.

This portrait came as a revelation to me. Asian activists and anti-slavery pioneers had been all but cropped out of the frame by

Julia Flynn Siler is the author of The White Devil's Daughters: The Women Who Fought Slavery in San Francisco's Chinatown *(Alfred A. Knopf, 2019) a finalist in nonfiction for a California Book Award. She is a longtime staffer at the Community of Writers in the High Sierra, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary next summer. For more information, please visit www.juliaflynnsiler.com.*