

CALIFORNIA  
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# Bulletin







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**Front & Back Cover:** Near Nevada City, by Joseph B. Starkweather, ca. 1852. Quarter-plate daguerreotype.

California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.

Julia and Fred Rusch, sitting on the front porch of the Rusch House with their grandmother, Julia Heimroth Volle, c. unknown. Courtesy of the Volle family collection, California History section, California State Library.

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Figure 1: *Spanish Flat*, by Joseph B. Starkweather, ca. 1852. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.



# Shadows of Gold

## *Mining Daguerreotypes and Hidden California Indian Histories*

*Jordan Reznick, Assistant Professor of American Studies, Grinnell College, 2024 Kibbey Fellow*

The first reports of James Marshall's January 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill were met with skepticism by audiences beyond the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> The hubbub back East finally began nearly a year later when newspapers published news of President James K. Polk's December 5 address to Congress detailing military governor Richard Barnes Mason's report of the state's gold wealth.<sup>2</sup> Newspapers nationwide printed the President's words: "The accounts of the abundance of gold in [California] are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief, were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service, who have visited the mineral district, and derived the facts which they detail from personal observation."<sup>3</sup> Polk's emphasis on the authenticity of the report was necessary to distinguish his news from the incessant mishmash of bogus claims of California gold that preceded 1848. His words changed the course of history. Within the week, newspapers reported on the mania overtaking their municipalities, advertised companies organizing trips West, and marveled at how rapidly their streets emptied of citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Gold fever created an insatiable appetite for verifiable evidence of news that seemed too good to be true. Photography, invented just a decade prior, was suited to meet this demand. Daguerreotypes captured scenes with exactness unmatched by an artist's pencil.<sup>5</sup> With the invention of half-tone reproduction technology still 20 years away, the words "from a daguerreotype" printed under a lithograph ensured its facticity—and that its every copy would quickly sell out.<sup>6</sup> Daguerreians became the visual mediators of the reality of the Gold Rush, helping the world beyond see for themselves that the news was not mere humbuggery. Daguerreotypes of gold mining

played a pivotal role in fueling the Gold Rush as hundreds of thousands of newcomers flooded into California within a few years.<sup>7</sup>

The California State Library holds a collection of nine such daguerreotypes by Joseph B. Starkweather, exemplary

in their naturalistic portrayal of the subject matter typical of gold mining photographs. Starkweather earned a silver medal for the images at the 1880 Fifteenth Industrial Exhibition of the Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco, where he exhibited them as, "49ers or

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*Figure 2. Nevada City, by Joseph B. Starkweather, ca. 1852. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.*

Photographic Views of Old Times in California.” Starkweather had arrived in California from Massachusetts by February 1852, appearing on a passenger list of arrivals via the Panama Route.<sup>8</sup> Newspaper listings for his daguerreian services have never been found, and little is known about his photographic practice. Starkweather returned to Massachusetts in 1853 but later resettled with his family in San Francisco in 1867.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the paucity of information on Starkweather, his images remain some of the earliest and most remarkable photographic documents of the Gold Rush. *Nevada City* (figure 2) shows the newly rebuilt business district after a March 1851 fire burned Nevada City’s downtown to the ground. The image shows the city’s

newly minted buildings and the widened and parallel street layout that replaced the “narrow and irregular” streets—a layout the city maintains to this day.<sup>10</sup> *Coyote & Deer Creek Water Co. Office, near Nevada City* (figure 3), shows the joint office of the Coyote and Deer Creek Water Companies who merged forces in December 1851. By then, with gold depleted from the central goldfield waterways, miners turned to dry land, using networks of privately owned ditches to transport water into sluices that separated gravel from gold. The Coyote and Deer Creek Water Companies supplied sufficient water to support large sluicing operations, like the one pictured in *Near Nevada City* (figure 4), to work nearly any location in proximity to their six miles of ditches along the north



side of Deer Creek Valley.<sup>11</sup> Together these two images help viewers understand the unfamiliar mechanics of sluice mining, suggesting they were intended as a pair. For instance, the pictured mine could be situated in a ravine north of Nevada City, which by April 1851 employed a large crew to work the claim with long toms and sluices.<sup>12</sup> It could have been likewise taken at any number of new diggings cropping up daily along Deer Creek or Gold Run, leading the Nevada City community to believe that “mineral wealth of this vicinity [was] inexhaustible.”<sup>13</sup>

*Near Nevada City* certainly lends photographic weight to that conviction. The miners, their tools, and their operation are laid out to educate viewers in the realities of placer mining. The sluice, shovels, pans, fork, and pickaxe offer a clear demonstration of the advanced mining techniques of 1852. Beyond schooling viewers in the mechanics of sluice mining, the 10 men in this image embody the rags-to-riches allure of the Gold Rush. The mine owner at the far left (distinguished by his vest and bowtie) displays a pan of gold for the camera. A mine like his near Nevada City might pay \$12 per day (the equivalent of approximately \$6,855 in 2025 using the Production Workers Compensation index).<sup>14</sup> The enjoyment of such good wages seems to emanate from the miners’ body language. With shovels slung over shoulders and hands on hips, their postures express ease and satisfaction rather than toil. For many city-raised men contemplating the journey west, the miners’ postures reinforced the promise of easy wealth without grueling labor. Gold leaf applied to the image seals its message of fortune, tantalizing the 19th-century viewer’s eye with the glint of gold nuggets. Though now largely evaporated, a viewer can still make out, at three or four places, ghostly traces of the precious metal: in the owner’s pan, at the foot of the miner in the center foreground, in the pan of the miner in the background’s far right, and

possibly another nugget held up between the two miners in the background’s center. On the one hand the added gold leaf points to how easily photographs can be misread. Because a monotone image cannot make colors distinguishable from one another, the viewer must be persuaded to believe a gold nugget is a not just an ordinary rock. To compensate for this limitation, the gold emphasizes the image’s role as evidence: not just a pictorial record of gold, but tangible proof of its presence. The point here is clear: There really is gold in these hills.

Unlike the daguerreotypes’ original audience, 21st-century viewers are unlikely to consult these images to verify California’s gold wealth or learn placer mining techniques. Instead, these images shape how contemporary viewers remember the Gold Rush. Starkweather himself suggested so much when dubbing the set “Old Times in California.” The photo historian and scholar of American culture Alan Trachtenberg encourages viewers to consider how a single image captures a fleeting moment, and yet can profoundly influence our col-

*Figure 3. Coyote & Deer Creek Water Co. Office, near Nevada City, by Joseph B. Starkweather, ca. 1852. Quarter-plate daguerreotype. California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.*

