In 1848, just a few months before the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the Mexican War, something happened that would change the history of the United States forever. In California, John Sutter was having a sawmill built on his property. He hired a carpenter named James Marshall to be in charge of the construction. Mr. Marshall and his crew were building the sawmill on the American River, near present-day Sacramento. It was there, in the muddy waters of the American River, that James Marshall found gold nuggets. John Sutter tried to keep James Marshall’s discovery quiet. He did not want people entering his property to search for gold. Within a few months, the secret was out. Most of Sutter’s workers left him in search of their own fortunes. Sutter was unable to keep hundreds of prospectors from trampling his land, destroying his crops, and killing his cattle. People all around him were “striking it rich,” but John Sutter lost everything and died a poor man.

**THE FORTY NINERS**

Within a year of James Marshall’s discovery, thousands of people from the United States and other countries traveled to California to claim a piece of gold for themselves and hopefully become rich. Gold-seekers from Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and China traveled across the ocean by boat. Prospectors from the United States and Mexico arrived on horseback and in covered wagons. Nearly 100,000 people traveled to California during that first year. Because the year was 1849, they became known as the “Forty Niners.”

**MINING FOR GOLD**

In the beginning of the Gold Rush, miners “panned” for gold by scooping pans with screen bottoms into the muddy waters of California’s rivers and streams. The holes in the screens were big enough to let sand fall through, but small enough to stop any flakes of gold large enough to have value. Later, the miners used a method known as cradle rocking to search for gold. They scooped up the mud, sand, and water from the bottom of the river and dumped it into a box with a screen bottom. The miners rocked the box back and forth to separate the gold from the mud and sand. After the gold in and around the streams had been removed, miners turned their attention to the land around the rivers. To remove the gold, hard-rock miners used picks and axes to dig shafts and tunnels that were up to 40 feet deep. Ox-drawn wagons carried supplies into the mines and gold out of the mines.

**GOLD RUSH TOWNS**

In 1848, before James Marshall’s gold discovery, there were a few hundred people living in San Francisco. After gold was discovered, San Francisco became the starting place for most miners hoping to strike it rich during California’s Gold Rush. Thousands of wagon trains packed the Oregon and California trails. Ships sailed across the Pacific Ocean. All were loaded with supplies and eager miners who started their golden journeys in San Francisco. By 1850, San Francisco’s population had grown to 25,000.From San Francisco, miners traveled to the towns of Sacramento or Stockton. These towns became the center of activity for prospectors heading to the northern and southern mines. After a long week panning for gold, miners returned to one of these towns for a hot meal, a warm bed, entertainment, and new supplies for the next week. Everything could be purchased with gold nuggets or bags of gold dust.

**GOLD RUSH MINING CAMPS**

After the first discovery along the American River, gold was discovered in the tributaries of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Other gold discoveries were made around the Trinity, Klamath, and Salmon Rivers. Temporary towns, or mining camps, were built near the mines. Gold miners lived in tents and wooden shacks where they survived on salt pork, biscuits, and molasses. Hundreds of mining camps were created. In just a few short years, more than 465 million dollars’ worth of gold was mined in California. As these mining camps grew into towns, store owners with supplies were needed. Doctors, nurses, lawyers, ministers, and teachers soon arrived in California’s new towns.

**DISAPPOINTMENT**

Unfortunately, not everyone found gold in California’s mines. It was difficult work that required a lot of patience and money. When a miner thought he had discovered gold, he filed a claim giving him the right to mine and take all of the gold he found. It was impossible to do all of the work by himself, so the claim holder hired miners to dig holes, lift large stones, and remove the gold. Sometimes it took months or even years to actually nd and remove the gold. During this time, the claim holder was responsible for paying his workers and supplying them with food, picks, shovels, pans, and mules. Most of the time, claim holders went broke before any gold was actually found and removed.

**OTHER GOLD DISCOVERIES**

California may have had the most famous gold discoveries, but it was not the only territory in the West experiencing a Gold Rush. Many disappointed miners left California when they heard the news that gold had been discovered in the Colorado Rockies, Montana, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and the Dakotas.

**THE DONATIONLAND ACT**

In 1850, Congress passed the Donation Land Act. Congress hoped that giving away free land would encourage more people to settle in the Oregon Territory. The Donation Land Act gave 320 acres of land to any white man who lived in the Oregon Territory before 1850. He simply needed to build a house and work on the land for four years. If the man was married, his wife was also given 320 acres of land. White pioneers arriving from 1850 to 1855 were given 160 acres of land. An extra 160 acres was given to these men if they were married. Thousands of families poured into the Oregon Territory to claim their free land.

**THE PIG WAR**

You have already read that in 1846, the United States and Great Britain signed a treaty that divided Oregon Country between them. The agreement did not include the San Juan Islands. It was unclear which country legally controlled this small group of islands located south of the border between the United States and Canada. Both countries thought the islands should belong to them. American and English farmers and fur traders living on the islands had many disagreements. In 1859, an American farmer shot and killed a pig belonging to an English settler from the Hudson’s Bay Company. The United States and Great Britain sent soldiers to the islands to keep peace. It was feared that killing a pig would finally send the United States and Great Britain to war over ownership of the San Juan Islands. Instead of fighting, the United States and Great Britain asked Germany’s ruler, William I, to decide which country owned the islands. After listening to both sides, William I decided that the United States had a stronger claim to the San Juan Islands. From that point on, the San Juan Islands became the property of the United States and the present-day state of Washington. Even though no shots were ever fired, the conflict was known as the Pig War.

**THE HOMESTEAD ACT**

In 1862, Congress encouraged settlement in the Nebraska and Kansas territories by passing the Homestead Act. The Homestead Act gave 160 acres of free farm land to any man who was at least 21 years old. He simply needed to agree to live and work on the land for at least five years. The Homestead Act granted more than 270 million acres of land to homesteaders.

Notes Questions

Directions: Answer the following questions as you read the article.

1. Where was gold first discovered in California?

2. Why did John Sutter want James Marshall to keep the gold a secret?

3. Who were the 49ers & where did they come from?

4. What 3 methods did the 49ers use to find and obtain gold?

5. How did gold rush cities and mining camps help draw people to the West?

6. Explain some of the challenges miners faced searching for gold?

7. What other places did gold pop up in the West?

8. How were the Native Americans affected by gold being discovered in the West?

9. How large was the Oregon Territory? How did the United States government claim it?

10. Why did the Donation Land Act inspire more settlers to brave to Oregon Trail and go west?

11. What conflict was the PIG War trying to resolve?

12. What was the Homestead Act?