

Rush for California Gold

It struck the 11,000-citizen village of Fall River like a thunderclap. "Gold in Immense Quantities: \$60,000 to \$100,000 a Day," was the Nov. 30, 1848, headline of "The Weekly News. All eyes turned to California.

Within a month, the leaked secret of John A. Sutter's American River claim near Sacramento earlier in January turned into the gold rush of '49, with astute businessmen, the footloose, the adventurous and the greedy flocking to California from the four corners of the globe.

By the dozens, around Cape Horn, across the Isthmus of Panama, by

prairie schooner, the Forty-Niners from this city went to pan their fortunes.

It was inevitable that some would succeed.

But many more were known to have died in the effort. Some came home with their precious "dust." Others were never heard of again. And there were some who turned from panning to go into business in the territory where the population leaped from 10,000 to 100,000 in four years.

The dramatic story of this city's gold rush fever was presented as a paper entitled, "The Fall River Gold Seekers," before the

Fall River Historical Society in 1953 by Mrs. William E. Fuller of Assonet.

From this and other sources we can see the impact of the West Coast discovery on this little community of textile workers, where visions of riches came easy to those working for 82 cents a day in the horrid conditions of the textile mills.

What they found there, in essence, was worse. The territory suffered terribly from lawlessness.

It was a land without even an organized territorial government, formerly belonging to Mexico. Murder and claim jumping were

commonplace. Gambling, commercialized vice and fighting were rampant. A constitution, legislature, governor and statehood were still to come.

All that Fall Riverites knew about California was from the dozen or more whaling ships that from 1840 on had worked out of the Oil Wharf, later known as Bowen's Wharf. Those boats had stopped at West Coast ports for water and wood or to collect hides.

It was known as a dreary land of few harbors and contrary winds. But with newspaper headlines citing "The Age of Gold," it beckoned like a trumpet.

As Henry M. Fenner wrote in his History of Fall River in 1906, "the whaling business was profitable.

"But it was generally abandoned here on the discovery of gold in California when the vessels were used to carry passengers to the Pacific Coast."

That cold December of '48 the barque Charles Devens was loading with passengers in Boston for the gold fields, followed by the brig Saltillo from the same port with brandy, gin, rum, whiskey, wine, shovels, pickaxes, hats, shoes and other provisions. That was the first announcement of local interest.

The first Fall Riverites to leave were Capt. Charles G. Pettey and William Dunning, along with F. Simmons and Dr. George Rice and son of Somerset. They were among 17 passengers on the ship Aurora, which left Jan. 11, 1849, from Nantucket.

Pettey was back the following December, and Dr. Rice the following year.

The first voyages took some 192 days. Board in Panama was advertised at \$4 a day. The Fall River

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FALL RIVER

WE ARE PROUD
TO BE SHARING

YOUR

175TH

Anniversary

Gifts for the
Beautiful Home

INTERNATIONAL IMPORTS

GIFTS FROM

PORTUGAL, ITALY

AND MANY OTHER FOREIGN COUNTRIES

CRYSTALS - CHINA - CERAMICS - RADIOS

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297 COLUMBIA ST. FALL RIVER, MASS.

ld Claimed Many Lives

Mining and Trading Co. was formed with stock at \$300 a share for the venture. The names of the partners, the ships' crews and the adventurers all read like a litany of the area's patriarchs.

Joseph Chace, Alexander Borden, James Brown, James F. Davol, Thomas R. Hood, Peleg Tripp, George Gray, George W. Slade, Warren Brownell, Enoch French, Benjamin S. Shove, Edward Kershaw, Charles L. Smith, Simeon Manchester, Dr. Jerome Dwelly, William P. Marble, Benjamin P. Barker, Luther Anthony, George G. Chaloner, David A. Brayton, Ray G. Sanford, Warner Cook, Joseph Fish, Benjamin M. Hambly Jr. — just to name a few.

That January the ship Hopewell out of Warren had three Fall Riverites on board. One of them, Holder Wordell, was to return in February 1850 with \$3,500 in gold dust.

He organized a second expedition. It arrived at the Isthmus and started to transport goods by horse and hand power. During the operation, Wordell became ill with an unknown tropical disease. The party moved on without him. He returned home, lived to the age of 106 and is buried in the family plot in North Westport.

On Feb. 1, the Pharsalia sailed from Boston with George H. and William M. Runnels, John A.G. Cottrell and Moses Whittam, all of this city, on board. Meanwhile, James M. Hathaway, also of this city, was starting out by the overland route, going to St. Louis and Fort Independence, Mo., to begin the long journey to Sacramento.

In a letter he tells of 125 days on the Midwest plains, riding 2,200 miles. Hathaway went up to near Sacramento and wrote back that "Israel Tripp, Harrington, Christopher

and myself are here together."

Also that "Mr. Birch went to driving a stage out of Sacramento; Mr. Stevens bought a wooden shack in the center of Sacramento City and hung out a sign: 'Rest for the Weary and Storage for Trunks'."

A letter from a New Bedford whaler captain told of his crew deserting. Another, from Franklin Gray of the local mining company, tells of the business dealings of the gold adventure. Aboard the Mallory out of this city, and after 189 days from New York and 17,000 nautical miles, he arrived, sold the ship and went into mining. Gray left the mines and stayed in Sacramento through the flood of 1849. He later went to Trinidad and almost everywhere else between Frisco and Oregon north.

Gray wrote: "Managed to pick up enough (gold dust) to get home, and in September 1851 pulled up stakes for home."

Dr. Jerome Dwelly, after whom the school here is named, graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1847 and began practice here. He shipped on the Mallory as ship's physician and stayed in California seeking his fortune for two years.

On his return, he crossed the Isthmus of Panama on horseback, saying he considered it a very dangerous trip with all those returning with gold at the same time.

His daughter in her memoirs recalls hearing her father and Franklin Gray referring to their adventures.

"Well what fools we were," said the doctor. To which Gray added, "Those who made enough to get home were lucky."

One of the greatest adventures was had by three brothers, Edmund D., Charles W. and Dr. Edmund V. Hathaway.

From Panama they took a ship to Monterey, where Charles and Edward paused to vote for delegates to the constitutional convention. From Panama to California took three months. Giving up prospecting after a few weeks, they went into the commission and warehouse business in San Francisco. The physician returned, taking up practice in Providence. Then he rejoined the duo in California.

They became rich building wharves and warehouses; incorporated the first marine insurance company in the new state; and inaugurated the Republican Party there with 97 friends. Charles was elected to municipal government and was on the famous Vigilance Committee.

Dr. Hathaway once captained a cannon to rescue two friends arrested for murder and thrown into jail. The two were recaptured and hung.

Two enterprising city merchants got on the bandwagon, advertising: "Buffum's gold saving wash pan, for sale by Westgate and Brigham, corner of Bedford and Main Streets."

One of the "newsiest" letters on record came from Benjamin T. Chace, written in San Francisco, Dec. 30, 1849. It reads:

"Fire has just destroyed part of San Francisco. Andrew Dix and Benjamin Waite are to open a boarding house. The Bay State House. Thomas Hood and James Briggs have done better at the mines than the average. They are now in San Francisco. Hood working at his trade (tinsmith) and Briggs playing the guitar for the U.S. Hotel at \$14 per evening. The Fall River carpenters are doing well. John S. Bourne has a

general commission in the business of Swift and Bros. on Sacramento Street."

He further reported: "James F. Angell and James E. Eddy have a grocery and commisssion business on Washington Street with as many signs up round the store as Angell used to have in Fall River."

This was the winter of terrible rains and floods in California. Capt. George W. Chace was drowned trying to cross a swollen river on a raft. Capt. William Cobb of Dighton returned with \$4,000 in dust, but so weak that he had to be carried.

In September 1849 another local, James Birch of Swansea charged a dollar a mile on his stage coach route in Sacramento. Later he became president of the California Stage Company, which controlled travel for some 1,500 miles. He returned to Swansea in 1855.

Capt. Daniel A. Akin of Westport built the first frame house in Sacramento, but a severe earthquake changed his mind, and he returned here.

Gold fever receded almost as quickly as it occurred. The recession found hundreds of former Fall Riverites in California, where many of them stayed, creating business that carried their names for decades, some of them to this very day.

They had left a life where they reported for mill work before dawn, ate breakfast for 30 minutes at 8 a.m. and had dinner at noon, not leaving for home until 7:30 p.m. — all for less than a dollar a day.

Ironically, those fortunate to find a new life in California lost it quickly as the catastrophic recession of 1848, felt heavily here, caught up with them on the Pacific Coast two years later.