

Featured Artifact: Gold Nugget

<http://historyexplorer.americanhistory.si.edu/resource/?key=1412>

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801-1861)



Look at the artifact presented to you. In a few sentences, respond to the following questions:

Describe: Objectively describe the artifact. What do you think it is made of? What does it look like? Does it look old or new? Is it intact, or is it damaged in some way?

Analyze: When, where or how do you think this item was used? What kind of person may have created or used this item? What significance do you think the object held, either for the creator or the user? Do you see words or images on the artifact that connect it to others (besides the creator and user)?

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Share your conclusions with a partner, then discuss the following:

Evaluate : Justify why you came to those conclusions about the artifact. What further questions do you have about the object? Of those questions, which could you solve by observing the object in person and which would you need to solve with research?

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Background Information

This small piece of yellow metal is believed to be the first piece of gold discovered in 1848 at Sutter's Mill in California, launching the gold rush.

John Marshall was superintending the construction of a sawmill for Col. John Sutter on the morning of January 25, 1848, on the South Fork of the American River at Coloma, California, when he saw something glittering in the water of the mill's tailrace. According to Sutter's diary, Marshall stooped down to pick it up and "found that it was a thin scale of what appeared to be pure gold." Marshall bit the metal as a test for gold.

In June of 1848, Colonel Sutter presented Marshall's first-find scale of gold to Capt. Joseph L. Folsom, U.S. Army Assistant Quartermaster at Monterey. Folsom had journeyed to Northern California to verify the gold claim for the U.S. Government.

In August of that year, as evidence of the find, this piece and other samples of California gold to Washington, D.C., for delivery to President James K. Polk and for preservation at the National Institute. Within weeks, President Polk formally declared to Congress that gold had been discovered in California.

The gold samples then traveled with U.S. Army Lt. Lucien Loeser by ship to Panama, across the isthmus by horseback, by ship to New Orleans, and overland to Washington. A letter of transmittal from Folsom that accompanied the packet lists Specimen #1 as "the first piece of gold ever discovered in this Northern part of Upper California found by J. W. Marshall at the Saw Mill of John A. Sutter."

In 1861, the National Institute and its geological specimens, including this gold and the letter, entered the collections of the Smithsonian Institution. The Marshall Nugget remains in the collections as evidence of the discovery of gold in California.

After reading and considering the background information, compose a response to the following:

Analyze: Address the following object-specific questions:

- How large do you think the gold nugget is? What evidence do you have?
- Why was the discovery of gold in California such a momentous event? What did it mean for the American people?

Synthesize: What does this object tell us about the era in which it was created, or the American experience as a whole? How would you describe the social, economic, or political climate of America during this time? What connections can you make between this object and other things that you have seen, read, or experienced?

Analyze: Address the following era-specific questions:

- How did United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 affect relations with external powers and Native Americans?
- How did the industrial revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed the lives of Americans and led toward regional tensions?