California changed when gold was discovered

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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After their marriage in the fall of 1847, Robert and Frances Anne Semple settled down to develop Benicia into a thriving new center of commerce.

“At first we thought California would be a great stock country,” recalled Frances Anne, “a fine place for farming, an elegant climate to live in ... “

All that changed in an instant after January 24, 1848.

The first whispers of gold filtered back to San Francisco in early March.

(This column continues the story of Frances Anne Cooper, married to Benicia founder Dr. Robert Semple, and her sister, Susan, who later married John Wolfskill. The San Francisco Chronicle published their histories of life in early California on September 9, 1900, to commemorate California’s 50th anniversary.)

On March 15, 1848, “The Californian” reported that gold had been discovered along the American River at a sawmill owned by Capt. John A. Sutter.

Similar rumors in the “California Star” on March 25 also failed to raise much excitement.

Frances Anne’s sister, Susan Cooper Wolfskill of Winters, recalled the next momentous events that set off the California Gold Rush for good.

“I saw the first gold ever discovered in California,” she recalled in 1900. “[James Wilson] Marshall came over to our house in Benicia and stayed all night. He was on his way to San Francisco from Sutter’s mill. He said he thought he had gold. He took out a little rag that looked like the bit of a bag that housewives keep aniseed in and opened it. We all looked at it in wonder.”

This took place sometime in early May 1848.

“Three days after that Sam Brannan, a Mormon, came riding breathless into our place in Benicia and asked John Wolfskill, who was afterward my husband, for a fresh horse. He said that gold had been discovered, and that he was going up there to locate all the land he could and return to Monterey and file on it.”
At the time, Monterey was the capital of California.

“But some time before that Brannan had been very unaccommodating to Mr. Wolfskill when he wanted horses to help bring his fruit trees from Los Angeles, so he would not let Brannan have a horse. Brannan rode on, urging his tired beast. He and [John] Bidwell were going to locate the whole gold-bearing country, but Mr. Wolfskill told them it was placer mining, and that they could not hold it all.”

Sam Brannan reached San Francisco on May 12, catching people’s attention when he waved a bottle of gold dust and shouted “Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!”

Residents left San Francisco in droves. Only a couple of weeks later, reports talked about crews deserting their ships on landing in San Francisco to rush off to the gold fields. Coastal towns emptied out quickly.

“... in 1848 and 1849 Dr. Semple was the only man left in Benicia, and mother, my sister and I the only women. All the others had gone to the mines,” said Frances Anne Semple.

“Everybody was guarding the secret of gold in California in hope of monopolizing the product,” added Susan Wolfskill.

That proved to be impossible.

As Susan Wolfskill remembered, “My father was the first man to write of the discovery. He sent a long letter East to his old friend, Senator Thomas Benton, who had secured him the position of Indian Agent at Council Bluffs years before, and that letter of my father’s was primarily the cause of the gold fever that swept through the Eastern States.”

On May 29, The “Californian” wrote: “The whole country from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and from the sea shore to the base of the Sierra Nevadas, resounds with the sordid cry of gold, GOLD, GOLD! while the field is left half-planted, the house half built, and everything neglected but the manufacture of shovels and pickaxes.”