

Return to Sherlock Creek: An Exploration of the Old Johnny Marshall Gold Mine, Mariposa Co., California



by
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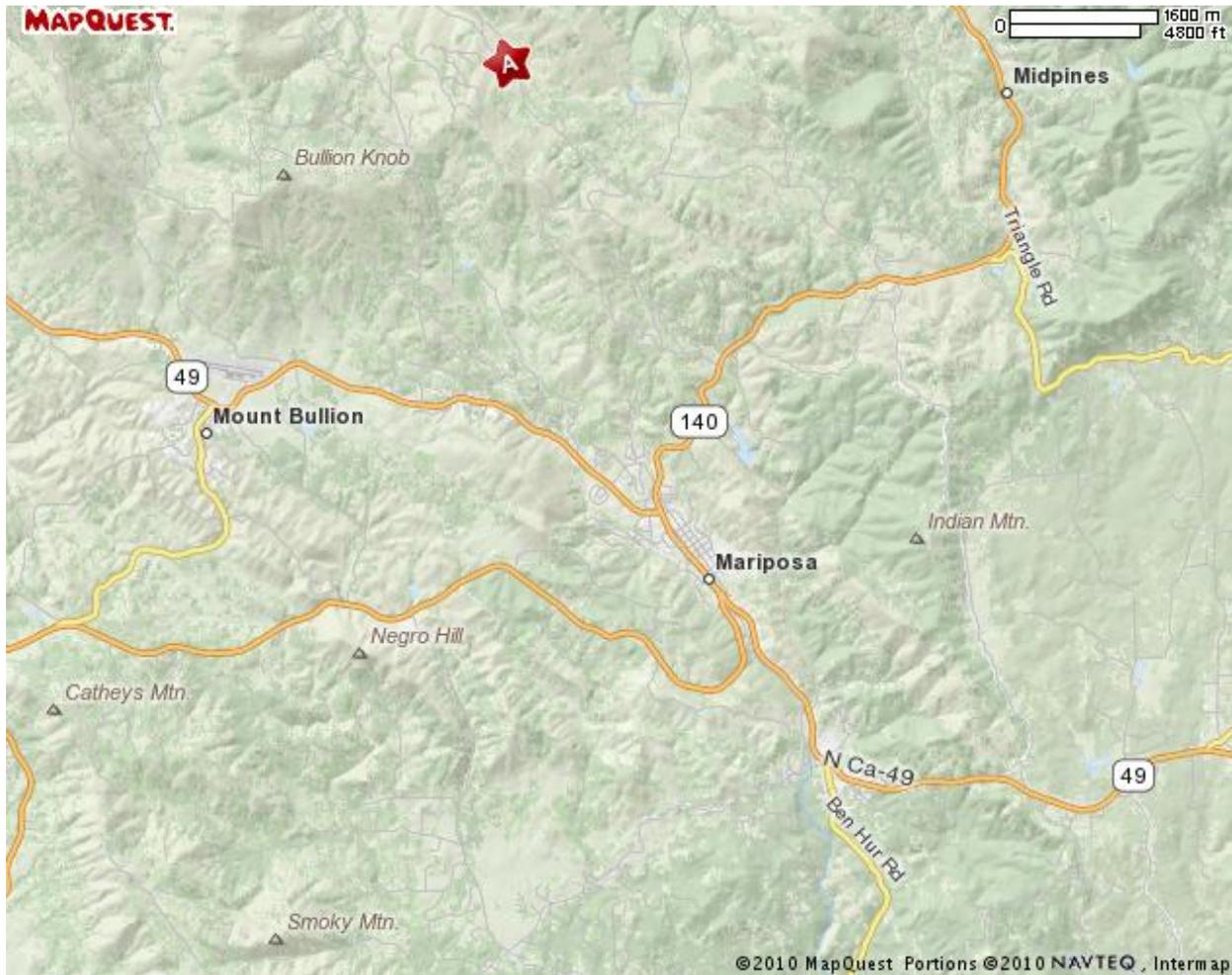
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11464 Eagle Way
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Illustrated Edition—Rev. 0--22 June 2010

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Introduction

In the late spring of 2010, this writer embarked on an expedition to find his great-great grandfather's family gold mine, once located in the Whitlock Mining District of Mariposa County, California. This search effort grew out of a previous study, completed in 2003, to document the Marshall family of Sherlock Creek and late of Chesterfield County, Virginia.

The Marshall's were an English family originally from the Northumberland County coal mining district near the Scottish border. In the 1830's, the family began a slow emigration westward from England to North America. By 1834, the Marshall family was living in Nova Scotia, British Canada. By 1839, they were in the coal mining districts of Pennsylvania and in 1840, they settled in the Upper District of Chesterfield County, Virginia, which is today a part of the city of Richmond.



Map Showing the Location of the Marshall Mine in Mariposa County, California. ©Mapquest

In 1840, the Virginia Marshall family was headed by John Johnson Marshall, who in turn was the son of another John Marshall and his wife Margaret Johnson. John Johnson Marshall, Sr. was born in 1803 and was married to the former Ann Wardell in about 1829 in Northumberland County, England. Together, the couple had four children: John Johnson “Johnny” Marshall, Jr. (b. 1830—England), Ann Johnson Marshall (b. 1832—England), Thomas Wardell Marshall (b. 1834—Nova Scotia) and Elizabeth Marshall (b. 1839—Pennsylvania).



Johnny Marshall

In 1852, the family decided to leave the dirty and dangerous coal mines of Virginia behind and travel by sea to the mining Mecca of California to make their fortune by extracting gold from the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The Marshall family arrived in San Francisco in the spring of 1852, and made their way to Stockton in a paddle wheeler. From Stockton, the family went overland and settled in the new and bustling community of Sherlock’s located

on a creek of the same name in Mariposa County, California.



Thomas W. Marshall

Sherlock Town

The valley and surrounding hills above Sherlock Creek were once the home of over 500 miners who first exploited the creek placers in 1849. By 1854, the town was a busy place with a hotel, bakery, many saloons, an I.O.O. F. hall, several blacksmiths, general merchants, and a school. The Mariposa newspapers of the day frequently advertized social “balls” to be held at Sherlock’s, which were prized respites from the heavy work of mining. The occupants of this town worked day and night sinking shafts into the sides of the surrounding hills looking for lode outcrops of the Spencer, Hoskins, and Whitlock quartz veins which traversed the area.

The old town was located roughly at the current junction of Whitlock and Sherlock Roads, about four miles northwest of the town of Mariposa. The flats around Sherlock Creek are narrow, so most of the town was located on the slopes of the valley, east and west of the water course. Very little remains of the old town today and only a few building foundations are in evidence. Heavy grass and shrubbery made searching for house remains or the village cemetery difficult.

There is a great deal of evidence of prior mining near the town and the creek shows evidence of extensive placer mining. But the long-term wealth of the community would come from lode mining the quartz ledges which were buried deep in the surrounding hills.

The creek itself is small—barely six feet wide at full flow in the late spring of the year. By September, the creek is virtually dry. This lack of water had a strong impact on the mining operations of the area. The only area with semi-reliable water was at the confluence of Sherlock Creek and Whitlock Creek about 1.5 miles downstream of Sherlock town. Here a pool formed before the water dropped in a falls to eventually join the Merced River to the northwest. It was at this location where most of the stamping mills to crush the quartz ore were located.



View Northeast from the Intersection of Sherlock Road and Whitlock Road Near the Marshall Mine. The Marshall Mine Was Dug into the Steep Slope Some 800 Feet. Photo by W.B. Carah

The hills above each side of Sherlock Creek are wooded, primarily in oak and some pine. The areas immediately adjacent to the creek are choked with willow and similar brush. Evidence of the Mariposa fire of July, 2008, is readily seen throughout the area. The enrichment of the soil due to the fire has created very tall grasses and shrubbery which obscures most of the ground.

The Marshall Family Mining Operations

The Marshall's initially were placer miners like most of the pioneers of this area, but they had switched to hard rock mining by the mid-1850's. Their mining assets included a mine on Sherlock Creek near the town, and a mill stamping operation, probably located at the confluence of Whitlock and Sherlock Creeks. No trace of the mill can be found today.

Based on family records, it appears that Thomas W. Marshall, the writer's great-great grandfather, was in charge of the stamping operation and his older brother, John "Johnny" Marshall, ran the mine.



Present-day Sherlock Creek at Sherlock & Whitlock Roads

Despite the fact that the family patriarch, John J. Marshall, Sr. was on the scene, the entrepreneur of the family was Johnny Marshall, Jr. He had a passion and talent for mining that was recognized throughout the valley. Barely 22 years of age when he arrived at Sherlock's Creek, Johnny Marshall would become a leading citizen of the Sherlock community shortly after his arrival.

The success of the Marshall mining operation was often described in articles in the early Mariposa newspapers. The mine regularly produced gold with values in excess of \$500 per week. Johnny Marshall also made some spectacular finds. In August of 1854, Johnny Marshall was prospecting above the falls at the confluence of Whitlock and Sherlock Creeks when he turned over a discarded black colored rock to discover it was really an 86 ounce nugget of almost pure gold. In 1857, Marshall also found a gold nugget at his mine on Sherlock

Creek that weighed-in just shy of one pound.

However, the economics of gold mining was turning against the pioneers of Sherlock Creek. The easy placer gold was long gone by 1855, and the miners had to invest heavily to extract the lode gold in the quartz veins buried in the surrounding hills. This meant buying stamping mills, cutting or contracting for lots of shoring timbers, procuring heavy transport, buying ore cars and erecting rail systems to handle the large amount of material coming out of the mines. It also meant the hiring of labor to bore large tunnels into the hillsides to reach the quartz veins.

Eventually the Marshall mine became heavily indebted to a Mariposa mining supplier by the name of Sullivan and Company. Sullivan brought suit against the Marshall operations in December, 1860, for unpaid obligations. On 2 January 1861, the Sheriff sold the mine and mill properties, including all equipment and buildings to Sullivan to satisfy the debt. The Marshall's were now paupers, but were asked by Sullivan to continue to manage the mill and mining operations.

On 4 May 1861, Johnny Marshall worked his last day in the mine he used to own. While fitting the mine with new shoring, a cave-in occurred crushing the mining pioneer. The Marshall family was finally done with the mine that had once brought them great wealth.

Thomas W. Marshall took the remaining family members to the Princeton Mine where he worked for a number of years as a mill operator. Johnny Marshall's widow, Susanna, remarried and moved to Mendocino County along with her children. Johnny's younger sister, Elizabeth, was married to Peter Gordon, a former stage driver, and the two ran hotels in Sherlock's and Mariposa.



Mine Identification Medallion Issued to Former Mine Owner, Robert Payton, for the “Johnny Marshall Placer” Claim. Medallion is Located at the Mine Entrance. Photo by W.B. Carah

Johnny Marshall's brother-in-law, Samuel Lord, had his own mine

on the hill just above the Marshall Mine on Sherlock Creek, but this soon became too difficult to work without reliable water and he moved to Quartzburg to start a ranch in 1862.

The old Marshall Mine was abandoned for a time, but periodically, up to modern times, the mine has been reopened and worked by small companies and individuals. But the lack of reliable water has made working the mine difficult on any scheduled basis. It was in this state of affairs, that the writer began his exploration of the “Johnny Marshall Placer Claim.”

The Marshall Mine on Sherlock Creek

The writer learned of the Marshall mine while researching the family during an extended visit to Mariposa in 2003. The mining and court records available at the Mariposa History Center provided good information on the location and character of the mine.

However, the official records and family lore frequently conflicted with one another. Often, locations appeared to be confused, or carelessly plotted. Some confusion was introduced with the naming of the general area as the “Whitlock Mining District” which also included mines all along Sherlock Creek and as far north as Saxon's Creek. Locations of apparently the same mines given in state and county records were often different, depending on the record edition. As one fellow researcher who lives in the area observed, the tangle of mines and their ownership will likely never be solved.



The Entry Vestibule to the Marshall Mine on Sherlock Creek, Mariposa County, California. Photo by W.B. Carah

Whatever these obstacles, with topo map, compass and a folder of old records in-hand, the search for the Marshall Mine began on 11 June 2010. After walking and driving on public ways in and around Whitlock and Sherlock roads to get the lay of the land, it was time to talk to land owners about what they knew of the location of the Marshall Mine. Due to the heavy vegetation, it was virtually impossible to see any distance along Sherlock Creek or up the slopes of the nearby hills, so finding the mine by eye alone was out of the question.

People who live in this remote area generally do so because they value their privacy, so it was with some uncertainty about the reception I would get that I knocked on the first door of the day. I was relieved when the person who opened the door did so with a smile and I was absolutely stunned then he said “you’ve found the place,” when I asked if he knew where the Marshall Mine was located. I would come to enjoy several hours of the best hospitality a gold mine researcher could hope for from a knowledgeable and caring custodian of a part of California history.

The mine entrance was located on the east side of Sherlock Creek about 150 feet from the owner’s residence and about fifteen feet from the creek itself. Despite the mine’s proximity to Sherlock Creek, it is not visible from the road due to the heavy vegetation. Based on the maps I had, the mine is at the 2,750 ft. contour. The mine is located less than one-half mile from the intersection of Sherlock and Whitlock Roads. The mine shaft enters a hillside which slopes upwards at a 12° grade until the 3,000 ft contour. There, the slope becomes much steeper.



View of the Marshall Mine Entry Tunnel from Inside the Vestibule. Photo by W.B. Carah

The current mine entrance consists of a mortared flagstone faced building or vestibule with a trussed gable roof. The vestibule is about 15 feet long and 10 feet wide and is some 12 feet in height. The outside entrance to the vestibule is secured by a somewhat dilapidated wooden slat door. Inside the vestibule, a more substantial door lies against a wall, apparently abandoned.

At the southeast end of the vestibule is the mine entrance proper. It consists of a narrow shaft about four feet wide and six feet tall. It is shored with tree trunk timbers about every 15 feet. On the mine floor there is a narrow gauge rail installation for the movement of ore carts.

Approximately 30 feet into the mine, the shaft splits into two tunnels. The shaft on the left is the original Marshall excavation and originally ran some 800 feet into the hill according to the land owner. The shaft on the right goes in a southeasterly direction and is of newer vintage. The newer shaft is partially shored with cast concrete uprights and cross ties. There is strong evidence that the older tunnel has completely collapsed in places. The land surface approximately 150 feet to the northeast of the mine entrance, and in line with its projected shaft course, is heavily dimpled indicative of a collapsed tunnel below the surface.



Right: View Down a Shaft at the Marshall Mine



View of the Marshall Mine Shoring. Note the Peg Type Connection Between the Cross Tie and Vertical Support. Ceiling Shoring Is Made from De-barked Logs. Photo by W.B. Carah

It appears that the original shaft turns a bit to the southeast and run upwards, whereas the newer shaft runs more northeasterly and a bit downwards. The result is that the vintage shaft actually crosses over the top of the newer shaft about 50 feet into the mine. It was eerie to look up at the ceiling of the newer shaft and see that heavy wire mesh was installed on what was once the floor of the old shaft. Looking through the wire mesh, one could see the ceiling of the original mine some 12 feet above. During my visit, the mine was heavily populated with bats and some rats, but they were more interested in fleeing the intruders than in confrontation.

The newer and older shafts exhibited signs of cave-ins, tree root intrusions and water seepage. The mine walls consist of unconsolidated cobbles and angular rocks averaging 10-12 inches in length. The rock color was yellow with dark spotting. Most of the rock face was moist and the surrounding soil was muddy and sticky in texture. The floor had some standing water in places. Wall and roof shoring was fairly widely spaced—some 15 feet between uprights and cross ties. In the original mine, the shoring was made from debarked tree trunks approximately 10 inches in diameter. The shoring in the newer mine was also



Artifacts from the Marshall Mine—Pick Head and Square Nails. Photo by W.B. Carah



View Looking from Inside the Mine Shaft to the Entry at the Vestibule. Photo by W.B. Carah

wood, but supplemented with modern concrete-like materials. It appeared that the main force holding up the walls and roof was the friction and mechanical locking together of the rock pieces.

This unconsolidated rock configuration describes the classic drift mine, a form of placer mining. Although newspaper reports from 1854, report the Marshall Mine was worked “on a quartz ledge,” the areas up to 100 feet into the mine are clearly placer deposits, likely ancient beds of Sherlock Creek. The State of California Mine Identification Medallion at the mine entrance identifies the mine as a placer, but it may have become a lode mine in the deeper portions of the original shaft.



Left: Rails Bridging Sherlock Creek About Five Feet Above Bed. Note the Stone Dressed Stream Bank. Right: Ore Cart on the Rails to Move Rock from the Mine to the Sluice Box Across Sherlock Creek.

There is no evidence of any kind of a stamping mill on-site to crush rock. Nor is there any of the expected detritus of such a mill operation. As mentioned earlier, the only place along Sherlock Creek with enough water to support a mill operation was at the confluence with Whitlock Creek. It seems likely that the quartz ore extracted from the Marshall Mine was transported to the mills, a distance slightly over a mile.

A narrow gauge rail system for ore carts is evident in the old mine extending out of the entrance and bridged over to the west side of Sherlock Creek. There, at the west side of the creek, the rails turn northwest and extend about 15 feet and terminate at a raised platform above the creek bank.

Here, it is likely the Marshall's had installed a sluice box to wash the rock and settle out the heavier gold. The current land owner has a modern version of a sluice box installed right where the old one would have been located. The banks of Sherlock Creek around this sluicing operation were lined with dressed, but un-mortared stone for some distance up and

down the stream. The stone bank walls above the creek average some five feet above the bed. Approximately 35 feet upstream from the mine, it appears a pool was constructed on the creek to reservoir water for mining operations and was likely pumped or fed by gravity to the sluice box.

Numerous artifacts have been found in and around the mine by the owner, including damaged picks, shovels, metal straps, hardware, bolts, and numerous square nails. There is also a very old well with a hand pump on the west side of the creek that appears to be original.



Modern-day Sluice Box in Place at the Marshall Mine. It is Probable a Similar Gold Sorting Device was Located in the Same Place Next to Sherlock Creek in the 1850's. Photo by W.B. Carah



A Mine Claim Medallion Near the Marshall Mine Indicating the “Broken Shovel” and “Red Hat” Lode Claims are 300 Feet Away. Photo by W.B. Carah

There was no immediate evidence of a dwelling foundation, but very high grasses and thick shrubbery obscured the ground. Snake hazards precluded a more thorough search through the brush without protective clothing. The land owner reported that several building foundation outlines exist north of the mine site and could be explored during a return visit.

Approximately 15 feet south of the mine entrance on the east side of the creek is a shed like building which serves as a storage place and outhouse and might have once been a dwelling. The structure has been much modified over the years and it is difficult to determine its original size or construction. The extended Marshall family and their laborers constituted a fairly large group of people, so a house structure(s) would have to have been sizeable. Like much of old Sherlock, the house was likely cannibalized over the years for materials for use in the mines.

Conclusion

Although it is likely that much of what we now see at the Marshall Mine is of more recent vintage, the original shaft, much of the old mine shaft shoring, the creek modifications for the sluicing operation and the water well all hark back to the 1850’s, when the mine was a very busy and productive place.

The Marshall Mine was also a dangerous place and ultimately took the life of its creator. There is Marshall family lore that the lack of proper shoring gradually whittled away the workers who were willing to go into the mine—first the Cornish walked away, then the Mexican miners found

other places to work, and finally the Chinese declined to work in the dark recesses. Johnny Marshall himself proved the fears of these experienced and wise miners were correct.

Standing in the same place where a pioneer great-great grandfather once did is a thrilling and thought-provoking experience. The Marshall Mine symbolizes the spirit and determination of an immigrant family to make their own fortune on their own terms. The descendants of Johnny, Thomas W., Ann and Elizabeth Marshall are fortunate to have such stalwart forebears to light the path to independence and success.

WBC

**Right: This Utility Building Next to the Marshall Mine May Have Once Been a Dwelling.
Photo by W.B. Carah**

