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The Georgia Gold Rush  
Twenty-Niners, Cherokees, and Gold Fever

David Williams

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS

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*For "T"*

## Contents

Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Introduction	1
Chapter One	7
"No Talke, No Hope, Nor Worke, but Dig Gold": The Origins of Southern Gold Fever	
Chapter Two	21
"Acting Like Crazy Men": Gold Fever and the Great Intrusion	
Chapter Three	37
"Get a Little Further": The Cherokee Nation Abandoned	
Chapter Four	47
"Civilized Life" Comes to the Gold Region	
Chapter Five	65
"It's Just Like Gambling All Luck": Mining in the Gold Rush Days	
Chapter Six	83
"Gambling Houses, Dancing Houses, & Drinking Saloons": Life in the Georgia Gold Region	
Chapter Seven	105
"Prosper the Americans and Cherokees": The Climactic Year of 1838	
Epilogue:	117
"Gold Fever . . . Ain't No Cure for It"	
Notes	125
Bibliography	155
Index	169



## Illustrations

### Figures

following page 48

Benjamin Parks, one of the original twenty-niners  
First evidence of a gold strike in Georgia  
Gold miners in nineteenth-century Lumpkin County  
John Ross, principal chief of the Cherokees  
Major Ridge, leader of the "treaty faction"  
Congressman David Crockett of Tennessee  
President Andrew Jackson as "King Andrew the First"  
George Gilmer, governor of Georgia (1829-31, 1837-39)  
Wilson Lumpkin, governor of Georgia (1831-35)  
Drawing tickets in the Land Lottery  
Panning for gold on Long Branch  
An African-American miner operating a cradle rocker  
Bill and Tom Jenkins at their sluice box  
The hollow gum rocker or Long Tom  
A variation on the sluice box  
A variation on the gum rocker and sluice box

following page 112

A two-man dredge boat  
Bracing a mine tunnel  
Entrance to a gold mine in Lumpkin County  
Gold-bearing quartz vein at the Hamilton Mine  
A nineteenth-century stamp mill  
A small stamp mill  
Runaway slave notice  
The Federal Branch Mint at Dahlonega  
The Cherokees on the Trail of Tears  
Matthew Stephenson, assayer at the Dahlonega mint  
Nineteenth-century Dahlonega  
Hydraulic Mining on Crown Mountain



The Dahlonega Consolidated Gold Mining Company  
Stamp mill of the Dahlonega Consolidated  
Auraria today  
The old Graham Hotel in Auraria

## Maps

Cherokee Nation, 1820s	15
North Georgia, 1830s	29
1832 Lottery Districts	49
Heart of the Gold Region	76
The Gold Deposits of Georgia	92

## Preface

It was during my undergraduate days at North Georgia College that I first became aware of the Georgia gold rush. As a native of south Georgia's coastal plains, I was fascinated by the north Georgia mountains. As a student of history, I was intrigued by their past. That past, I found, was laced with tales of the native Cherokees and gold. I spent weekends roaming the hills and canoeing the rivers of the gold region, all the while taking in the natural beauty and trying to imagine what life in these hills must have been like for the Cherokees and the gold miners. I even found a little gold myself on occasion. More difficult to find, however, was a convenient source of information on Georgia's great antebellum gold rush.

For all the popular interest in Georgia's gold rush, "bibliography of the Georgia gold era is," as one Georgia historian recently put it, "thin indeed." A few county histories provide some treatment of gold mining, especially Andrew Cain's *History of Lumpkin County*. But *The Gold of Dahlonega*, a beautifully illustrated work by Lou Harshaw, and *Gold Fever*, companion volume to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources video of the same title, have until now stood alone as attempts to deal with the gold rush in a general way. However, both works are very brief (fewer than fifty pages of text each) and serve as little more than introductions to the topic. The only other books on Georgia's gold rush era are E. Merton Coulter's *Auraria: The Story of a Georgia Gold-Mining Town*, Clair Birdsall's *The United States Branch Mint at Dahlonega*, and Sylvia Head and Elizabeth Etheridge's work *The Neighborhood Mint: Dahlonega in the Age of Jackson*. Coulter's work, still the best portrait of a single mining community, treats only a one-year period between 1833 and 1834 when the town's newspaper, *The Western Herald*, was in publication. The other two books are, like Coulter's, limited in scope, dealing only with the Dahlonega mint. The following pages represent an effort not only to expand on this valuable body of work, but also to bring together and place in perspective all the diverse elements that contributed to this exciting and, in many ways, tragic episode of American history.

This effort would not have been possible were it not for the contributions of those who helped lay its foundations and those who encouraged it along the way. First I wish to thank my parents, Harold and Anita Williams, for their loving support over the years. The support and interest of my in-laws, Donald and Peggy Crisp, is greatly appreciated as well. I also wish to extend affectionate gratitude to those who made my time in Dahlonega such a special experience Lisa Stepancic, Kay (Ray) and Tom Amsler, Bob Patterson, B. J. (House) Morris, Beth (McNeil) and Robert Abernathy, Kathy (Yarbrough) Jones, Connie Dunbar, Renee (Bruce) Bishop, Debbie (Brannon) Muller, and my brother Scott. For their camaraderie through graduate school, a warm "thank you" goes to Gene Smith, Jim Segrest, Bill Bryant, Susan and Johnny Dollar, Martha and Tim Viator, Sandra and Jack Bergstresser, Mickey Crews, Hal Parker, Church Murdock, Kim Cantrell, and Mary Lee Carter.

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Thanks for their encouragement and assistance with research go to Ray Rensi of North Georgia College; John Inscoe and Sheree Dendy of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly*; Sharon Johnson of the Dahlonega Courthouse Gold Museum; the Auburn University Department of History; the staff of the Auburn University Library; the staff of the University of Georgia Library; the staff of the Georgia Department of Archives and History, especially Gail Miller; the Georgia Historical Society; the Valdosta State University Research Fund; and Joe Tomberlin and my colleagues at the Valdosta State University Department of History. I particularly wish to thank Richard Porter, chief photographer and photo editor of the *Tifton Gazette*, for his help with the illustrations.

Finally, I want to thank my wife Teresa, who has been with me since we met at Dahlonega. Without her constant support and sacrifice, this book might never have been written.

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Lotteries of 1832-1833," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73 (Fall 1989); "Thar's Gold in Them Thar

Hills: The Georgia Gold Rush," *Mountaineer Times* (Summer 1990); "Gold Fever, the Cherokee Nation, and the Closing of Georgia's 'Frontier,'" *Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians* (1990); "Georgia's Forgotten Miners: African-Americans and the Georgia Gold Rush," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75 (Spring 1991).

## Introduction

"What dost thou not compel the human heart to do, accursed greed for gold?" So wrote the Roman poet Virgil over two thousand years ago. Since the dawn of recorded history mankind has found a special fascination for the precious yellow metal. As Virgil lamented, gold historically has been placed above all else, even human life. In their quest for this lifeless element people have stolen it, lied for it, even killed for it. Entire nations have gone to war for it. Shakespeare called it the worse poison to men's souls. Chilon, a philosopher of the sixth century B.C., observed that "gold is tried with the touchstone, men by gold." The passage of time has seen little change in what is, with some degree of irony, called civilization. The ultimate worth of a human being is still measured more by wealth than by anything else.

But there was a time before the rise of civilizations, even before the first small farming communities had come into being, when people placed little or no value on gold. For tens of thousands of years before the development of agriculture and civilization humans lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. 1 Constantly on the move, these people knew nothing of working metal. To them stone for making projectile points and other tools was the most important resource provided by nature. Gold, often found remarkably pure in its natural state, is soft and pliable. It is dense but will not hold a sharp edge. Thus it was not of much use to Paleolithic peoples. Nonetheless it seems that this unusual glittering substance held special attraction as a curiosity even then. Small nuggets have been found in caves inhabited by humans dating back forty thousand years.<sup>2</sup>

Mankind's consuming passion for gold dates from a time just before the rise of that complex ordering of human society and interactions we of the modern world call civilization. About five thousand years ago in the region of the eastern Mediterranean Sea there arose a myriad of civilizations and religions that held the sun as their primary object of worship. The pharaohs of ancient Egypt were believed to be direct descendants of the sun god. Ancient writings reveal that gold, because of its amber glow, was thought

to have emanated from the sun itself. As late as the first millennium B.C. the Greek poet Pindar referred to gold as the child of Zeus. The Hindus of India viewed gold as "the mineral light," representing divine intelligence. The Christian Book of Revelation describes heaven as a city made of pure gold. Small wonder that gold has come to be widely revered above all other elements.

Gold is indeed a gift of the heavens, though not in quite the way believed by the ancients. It is produced in the fireball of exploding red-giant stars called supernovae. Near the end of its life a massive star larger than our own sun uses up all the hydrogen which fuels the solar fusion process. It then begins to use the helium produced over billions of years of fusion reaction as fuel. This burning produces heavier elements such as carbon and oxygen that are in turn consumed when the helium is exhausted. Most of these elements escape into space as the star swells to many times its original size. The process continues with the star producing increasingly heavier elements until, with a final catastrophic explosion, it creates extremely dense elements like lead, silver and gold. These, along with the previously fashioned elements, are thrown off into the cosmos to become the raw material for the formation of new suns and solar systems. Such stellar debris went into the makeup of our own planetary system nearly five billion years ago.

Volcanic activity spanning hundreds of millions of years, coupled with the tectonic pressures of continental drift, pushed gold and other more abundant metals near the surface of our planet, filling cracks and fissures in the Earth's crust. No one can be certain how much gold lies beneath the surface, but all that has been mined to date would equal almost three billion troy ounces. This is roughly equivalent to a cube measuring 55 feet on each side.

Volcanic and tectonic activity is associated with the formation of great mountain ranges, and gold is occasionally deposited in or near them. The Appalachian chain, born in the formation of the Pangaeian supercontinent some three hundred million years ago, experienced just such a boon of nature. The gold veins that were laid down with these Blue Ridge Mountains form an intermittent belt just east of the range and roughly parallel to it, stretching from central Alabama, through Georgia and the Carolinas, northward into the middle states, New England, and Nova Scotia. <sup>3</sup> The belt's richest portion lies in its southern half, and one of its points of highest concentration is the Dahlonega Belt of northeast Georgia.

The soft rolling hills of the Dahlonega gold region were once much taller than they are today. Three hundred million years of

erosion have worn the mountains down and molded them into their present configurations, in the process carrying flakes and nuggets of gold to the valleys below. As one mining engineer put it, "only the roots of once mighty veins are left." 4

Tiny bits of gold that did not sink to the bottom of mountain streams were eventually washed to the sea where they were distributed throughout the oceans of the world. In our epoch a cubic mile of sea water contains about 50 pounds of gold, or 240 million dollars' worth at 400 dollars an ounce. But with current technology the cost of extraction renders the process impractical. More money would be spent obtaining the gold than would be made in the effort.

Larger particles of gold settle in pockets and layers on the valley floors to become placer deposits that can be washed out and collected with shovel and pan. The discovery of such deposits has led to several gold rushes in American history. Almost anyone having even a casual acquaintance with America's past is familiar with the gold rush fame of South Dakota's Black Hills, Colorado's Pike's Peak, Alaska's Klondike, and the California gold region. The latter is more widely known and is generally assumed to be the first area of the country to see a rush of gold fevered prospectors. But though the California gold rush of 1849 was the more famous, it was not the first.

In the middle and late 1820s a series of gold strikes from Virginia to Alabama caused such excitement that thousands of miners from all over the country poured into the region. This Southern gold rush the first in American history lasted well into the 1840s.<sup>5</sup> Since the region of northeastern Georgia that would later be called the Dahlonega Belt was one of the richest parts of the gold formation, it was to this area that many of the miners came. So struck were these Georgia miners with that peculiar disease known as "gold fever" that it persisted long after the gold rush was over, and many area residents remain infected to this day.

Unfortunately for the native Cherokees, the gold fields lay on and adjacent to their land that Georgia claimed as its own. That claim went back to 1732, when Georgia was granted a colonial charter, and 1763, when the western boundary was fixed at the Mississippi River. But soon after the Yazoo land fraud in 1795, Georgia gave up title to what are today Alabama and Mississippi in exchange for a promise from the federal government to remove Indians occupying the state's remaining claims. According to the agreement,

Indian lands were to be "peaceably obtained on

reasonable terms." 6 By 1826 the Creek Indians had been forced out of the potentially rich cotton land in what is today southern and western Georgia. The state next turned its attention northward to the Cherokees. The Cherokee Nation had long recognized the threat from Georgia and assisted the Creeks in their struggle against removal. Now the Cherokees faced Georgia alone. This time the driving force behind removal would not be cotton, but gold.

The first gold mines in north Georgia opened in the summer of 1829, and by autumn the region was flooded with gold-hungry prospectors. These Georgia twenty-niners represented only the first wave of an invasion that gathered momentum with lightning speed. Georgia quickly extended its control over the territory, and in 1832 and 1833 the greater portion of the Cherokee Nation, which lay within Georgia's claim, was raffled off in a land lottery from which the Indians themselves were barred. The Cherokees resisted this land grab through the judicial system, and their position was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Worcester v. Georgia*. But Georgia, with the backing of President Andrew Jackson, simply ignored the ruling and continued its intrusion of Cherokee land. By 1839 the Cherokees had been driven west on the Trail of Tears to what is today the state of Oklahoma. Nearly every American history text mentions the now famous *Worcester* case and the Trail of Tears, but gold as a motivation for Cherokee removal is often ignored.

Ironically, the gold rush era survived the Cherokees in Georgia by only a few years. The early 1840s saw a dramatic decline in the fortunes of the Southern gold region. It became increasingly difficult for individual prospectors and mining companies to turn a profit. The conclusion was inescapable the Southern gold fields were beginning to play out. When word of a new gold strike in California reached the miners, they wasted no time in following the banished Cherokees beyond the Mississippi. It was in fact the gold miners of the South who formed the core of the California "forty-niners" and provided the expertise and technological knowhow gained during a quarter century of mining Southern gold. As one miner put it, the Southern gold region was "the cradle . . . in which the California '49er was born."<sup>7</sup>

But gold fever never died out in what one resident once called "this favored region of God's creation."<sup>8</sup> Gold mining as a means of making a living, or at least of supplementing a farm income, continued in the Georgia hills through the Great Depression of the

