



Australian Gold Rushes

For Years 3-5

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ARTICLE

Australian gold rushes

The discovery of gold in New South Wales in 1851 began a series of gold rushes in colonial Australia. These gold rushes transformed Australia’s population and society. Miners from all over the world left their homes and tried to strike it rich on the Australian goldfields. Most were unlucky, but they all helped shape a defining era of Australian history.



A map shows the locations and years of major Australian gold rushes.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski



People panned for gold in the Bendigo region of Victoria, Australia,...

National Library of Australia (nla.pic-vn4496154)

Gold Discoveries



A man pans for gold in Australia in the late 19th century. Panning...

State Library of Victoria, Australia; gift of Mrs. T. Cameron, 1980 (accession no. H84.458/13)

Before 1851 the discovery of any gold in the Australian colonies was kept secret. England had established the colonies as penal settlements, places where criminals were sent to live. The colonial governments feared the discovery of gold would lead to an increase in crime or a convict uprising. However, the New South Wales government changed its approach after thousands of people left the colony to head to California in North America for the gold rush of 1848. The loss of colonists caused a shortage of workers and an economic downturn. To reverse these issues, the government offered a reward for the discovery of large amounts of gold in the colony.

New South Wales

In 1848 a man named William Tipple Smith found the first payable gold in Australia. (Payable gold means enough gold to be paid for it.) He found it in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. However, when he told the government about his discovery they did not want the information to get out. England had established the colonies as penal settlements, places where criminals were sent to live. The colonial governments feared the discovery of gold would lead to an increase in crime or a convict uprising. The New South Wales government changed its approach after thousands of people left the colony to head to California in North America for the gold rush of 1848. The loss of colonists caused a shortage of workers and an economic downturn. To reverse these issues, the government offered a reward for the discovery of large amounts of gold in the colony. In 1849 Smith went back to the government to ask for a reward for his discovery. The government then claimed that he had brought the gold from California.

For many years Edward Hammond Hargraves was credited as the first person to find payable gold in Australia. Hargraves went to the Bathurst region in east-central New South Wales to find gold. He assembled a team of miners: John Lister and three brothers, William, James and Henry Tom. Hargraves taught the team different ways to look for gold. On 12 February 1851 Hargraves discovered flecks of gold in Lewis Ponds Creek. Lister and the Tom brothers later found large gold nuggets. Hargraves bought the nuggets from them. He did not want to share the government reward so he claimed to have found the nuggets himself. Almost 40 years later, in 1890, the government of New South Wales finally acknowledged that Lister and the Tom brothers were the real discoverers of the gold that Hargraves claimed to have found. Meanwhile, news of the 1851 Bathurst discovery spread worldwide. Within a year, 370,000 immigrants arrived in Australia to find their fortunes.

William Tipple Smith finally received credit for his discovery in 2020. Some of his descendants worked for years to prove that his story was true. They found evidence to support the story, and in 2020 the government of New South Wales helped create a memorial to Smith in the cemetery where he is buried.

Victoria

Other colonies wanted to attract new settlers as well. The government of Victoria offered a reward to anyone who found gold within 320 kilometres (200 miles) of Melbourne. In August 1851 James Regan and John Dunlop discovered gold in Ballarat, Victoria. Ballarat became the most productive alluvial goldfield in the world at that time. (Alluvial gold means gold found in riverbeds, streambeds and floodplains.) Many other discoveries in Victoria followed. Victoria's gold deposits were so rich that the colony accounted for more than one-third of the world's gold production during the 1850s. The largest alluvial gold nugget ever found was in Victoria. On 5 February 1869 miners found the 'Welcome Stranger' nugget. It weighed 72 kilograms (159 pounds).

Other Colonies



The massive Super Pit gold mine at Kalgoorlie, Western ...

© Ints/Fotolia

The first major gold find in Queensland came in 1867. James Nash discovered gold in Gympie, a small town about 145 kilometres (90 miles) north of Brisbane. The Gympie gold rush brought about 25,000 people to the area. In late 1871 an Aboriginal boy named Jupiter Mosman found gold in a stream in north-east Queensland. The town of Charters Towers was founded at the site, and miners flooded in. In 1882 Edwin and Thomas Morgan made one of Australia's most important gold strikes, at Ironstone Mountain. The mountain, which the brothers renamed Mount Morgan, became known as the 'mountain of gold'. It was one of Queensland's richest and longest surviving gold mines. Work continued at the site until 1981.

Promising gold rushes occurred in Western Australia in the 1880s and 1890s. Two of the most widely known finds in Western Australia were at what became known as Coolgardie in 1892 and Kalgoorlie in 1893. However,

that colony's goldfields posed great challenges for miners. The desert landscape increased the miners' risks of disease, dehydration and heatstroke. Other areas of Australia did not produce as much gold as the eastern colonies and Western Australia.

Immigration Boom



A Chinese gold miner uses a yoke to carry his mining tools.

State Library of Queensland, Neg: 60526



A scroll represents the Lambing Flat Riots, when white miners attacked Chinese miners. The riots led ...

National Museum of Australia

The gold rushes attracted people from all over the world to Australia. They came from the United States, Germany, France, Hungary, China and other countries. These immigrants created incredible population growth. The population of Australia grew from 438,000 in 1851 to 1.7 million in 1871. The gold rush era was also the first time Australia received large numbers of Chinese immigrants. By 1861 Chinese people made up more than 3 per cent of the population. The Chinese were treated very badly by the white miners. The white miners were distrustful of the Chinese and resented their success. Eventually, riots broke out. Some of the most violent were in 1861 at Lambing Flat, where about 3,000 white miners attacked the Chinese. The Lambing Flat Riots led to the Chinese Immigration Act in New South Wales. This law greatly reduced the number of Chinese who could immigrate to the colony. Other Australian colonies passed similar laws. These laws were the beginning of what became known as the White Australia policy.

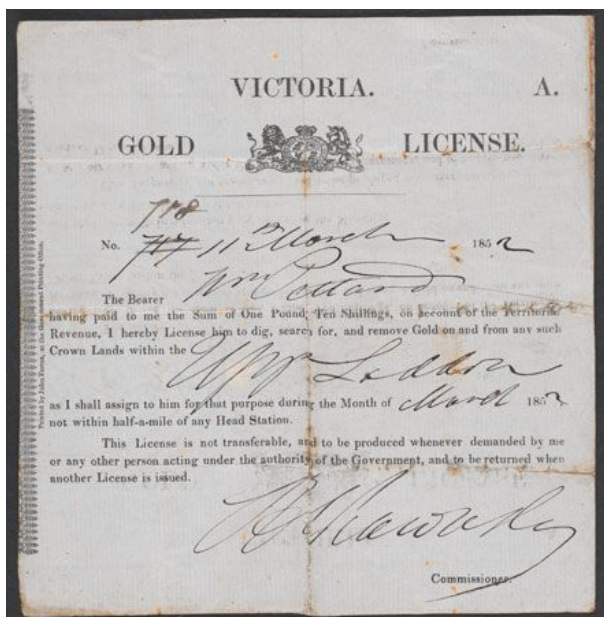
Life on the Goldfields

Life on the goldfields was difficult for everyone. Housing was very basic. It could be a piece of cloth draped over a tree branch or a hut made with wooden slabs, mud or clay. Food was mostly meat and damper, a kind of bread. Meat had to be eaten quickly since there was no refrigeration. Clean drinking water was hard to find since rivers and creeks were polluted by the mining process and human waste. Water had to be boiled to make it safe to drink.

These living conditions made it hard to stay healthy. Many people became ill with such diseases as typhoid fever, cholera, scurvy, influenza and scarlet fever. Medical treatment was hard to find and expensive, so most miners used apothecaries. Apothecaries made medicines using plants and other local ingredients.

Law and Order

Crime was very common on the goldfields. Miners who were unlucky often resorted to stealing. Bushrangers were criminals who attacked and robbed miners travelling between goldfields. The first miners tried to prevent crime and worked out a system of law and order for themselves. They established courts to put criminals on trial and to hand out punishments to those found guilty. In the early gold rush years the colonial governments relied on the Native Police. The Native Police was a force made up of Aboriginal men. Their knowledge of the land helped them to track bushrangers and other criminals. However, more police officers were needed, so governments had to accept anyone who was willing to join the police. This meant the police force included ex-convicts and many young, inexperienced recruits.



A license issued in 1852 grants the miner the right to 'dig, search...

State Library of Victoria, Australia (accession no. MS 8203)



An illustration depicts the rebellion at the Eureka Stockade in Australia in 1854. The attack lasted ...

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (Call no. SSV2B/Ball/7. Digital order no. a928052)

To cover the costs of maintaining law and order on the goldfields, the governments of New South Wales and Victoria introduced a license system. Every miner had to pay a high fee for a license every month, even if they did not find gold. The license had to be carried at all times. A miner who did not have a license when a police officer asked to see it could be fined or arrested. Miners did not like mining licenses for many reasons. One reason was that the police charged with enforcing the license system were known for being dishonest and cruel. Opposition to the license system reached its height at Ballarat in 1854. There were a number of clashes between police and miners. The miners marched to Eureka and built a stockade. The police and military attacked the stockade and killed about 22 miners. This conflict became known as the Eureka Stockade or the Eureka Rebellion.

Effects of the Gold Rushes

The discovery of gold resulted in many long-term effects on life in Australia. During the 1850s Australia produced more than 40 per cent of the world's gold. This economic boost was crucial in the modernisation of colonial Australia. Gold was used to establish towns and to transform cities with new banks, stores, hotels and other businesses. There were large investments in transportation, with the construction of roads, railways and bridges. The gold rushes had already pushed settlement farther into Australia, especially in Queensland and Western Australia, so the new roads and railways made it easier for people to settle into more remote places.

Another impact of the gold rushes was the immigration boom. The huge increase in the population included people from many different cultures. Some of the new immigrants brought ideas about democracy and equality with them from the United States and Europe. These ideas, along with the events of Eureka Stockade, encouraged democratic reforms in the colonies. The colonies slowly introduced voting rights and other changes. Fifty years after the first gold was discovered at Bathurst, the colonies came together to form the country of Australia.

Citation (MLA style):

"Australian gold rushes." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Australian Gold Rushes*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 1 Mar. 2024. packs-learn.eb.com.au. Accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

Eureka Stockade

The Eureka Stockade is considered the birthplace of Australian democracy. On 3 December 1854 it was the site of a conflict between gold miners, or diggers, and the government in Ballarat, Victoria. The conflict, also known as the Eureka Rebellion, is the most celebrated uprising in Australian history.



An illustration depicts the rebellion at the Eureka Stockade in Australia in 1854. The attack lasted ...

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (Call no. SSV2B/Ball/7. Digital order no. a928052)

Background

In the early 1850s gold was discovered in Victoria. Thousands of people moved to the state to search for treasure. The state soon made laws that the gold diggers felt were unfair to them. For instance, all diggers had to buy a mining license to dig for gold. Diggers often fought with the police when the police checked these licenses and collected fees. The diggers were also upset about not being able to vote.

When Charles Hotham became the new lieutenant governor of Victoria, he made the police check mining licenses twice a week instead of once a month. Conflicts between the police and the diggers became more frequent. In October 1854 James Scobie, a digger, was killed. His murderers were not punished. The diggers responded with demonstrations and clashes with the police.

The Attack

On 11 November 1854 the diggers formed the Ballarat Reform League. The goal of the League was to achieve reforms, like the termination of mining licenses. On 29 November many diggers burned their licenses. The next day there were more clashes with the police.

The diggers then marched to Eureka, where they built a stockade. The stockade was a wooden barricade that covered about 0.40 hectare (1 acre) of the goldfields. They gathered guns and made pikes to defend the stockade. The police and military attacked the stockade and about 150 diggers on the morning of 3 December. The attack lasted approximately 20 minutes. About 22 diggers and 5 soldiers were killed.

Some diggers were put on trial for treason. They were all found not guilty. In March 1855 all the demands of the diggers were met. The Eureka Stockade is the only Australian example of armed rebellion leading to the reform of unfair laws.

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 IMAGE

Australian gold rushes



The massive Super Pit gold mine at Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, dates back to the gold rush era. Gold was first mined at the site in 1893.

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 IMAGE

Australian gold rushes



A man pans for gold in Australia in the late 19th century. Panning is a simple method of separating gold from soil or gravel by swirling the mixed material in a pan with water.

State Library of Victoria, Australia; gift of Mrs. T. Cameron, 1980 (accession no. H84.458/13)

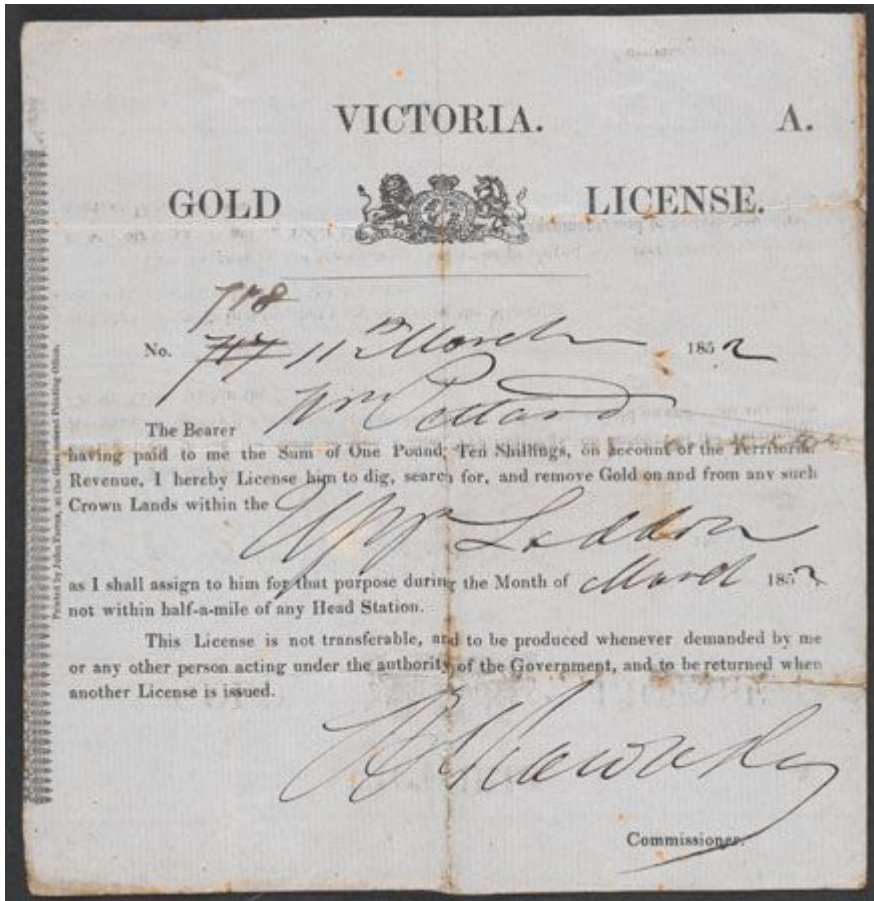
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IMAGE

Australian gold rushes



A license issued in 1852 grants the miner the right to 'dig, search for, and remove Gold' in Upper Loddon, Victoria.

State Library of Victoria, Australia (accession no. MS 8203)

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IMAGE

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A Chinese gold miner uses a yoke to carry his mining tools.

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