

The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War

Leonard L. Richards

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Richards, Leonard L. (2007) "The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss1/1>

Interview

THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR

Richards, Leonard L.

Winter 2007

*Leonard L. Richards, professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, took his degrees at the University of California, Berkeley and Davis. He has also taught at San Francisco State College and the University of Hawaii. His *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* won the 1970 American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Award. *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1987, and *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* took the second-place 2001 Lincoln Prize. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.*

Interview with Leonard L. Richards

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Would you characterize 1850s California as a southern state or a northern state?

Leonard L. Richards (LLR): It was a free state. By 1860, 47 percent of the state's population had northern roots, 40 percent were foreign-born, and only 13 percent hailed from the slave states, and most of them came from nonslaveholding families. Yet despite being a minority, the friends of slavery undoubtedly had disproportionate political clout. Why? Patronage played a big role. Men like William Gwin made sure that the lion's share of government jobs went to southern men. And these men, in turn, became activists in the dominant Democratic Party. Nonetheless, even though they controlled the state Democratic Party in 1860, they could not deliver the vote for the Southern Democratic presidential candidate, John C. Breckinridge. Although he did well in California, winning almost 30 percent of the vote, he finished third in the

field, trailing both northern candidates, Lincoln and Douglas.

CWBR: In the prologue to your book, you recount the duel between antislavery California senator David Broderick and David S. Terry, chief justice of the California Supreme Court and a member of the proslavery Chiv political faction—a battle that personifies the debate between these two political poles. How did individual personalities influence antebellum California politics?

LLR: I'm no believer in the great man theory of history. I use David S. Terry just to tell the story. Only in killing a notable figure did he play a decisive role. Far more influential were William Gwin and David Broderick. Both were driven, ruthless, and opportunistic. And both left their mark on the state's politics. In the case of Gwin, he was typical of most southern leaders, a man of great wealth who had the means to devote himself full-time to politics. Broderick, in contrast, was more unique. Even in the age of Lincoln, the sons of stonemasons seldom rose to the top. They had neither the time nor the wherewithal to muscle their way up the political ladder. Broderick was the exception, partly because he was operating in a wide-open society at the right time, one in which he could make a fortune in just six months, and partly because of his mastery of Tammany Hall methods and parliamentary procedures.

CWBR: Could southern slaveholders have migrated west and successfully mined using slave labor or did this idea constitute a fit of fancy among proslaveryites in an effort to protect and expand the Slave Power? How seriously did southerners (and northerners) take these plans?

LLR: In 1849, few men North or South knew much about mining, much less hard-rock mining. Blissfully ignorant, most thought gold mining took no skill whatsoever, just a pan and a strong back. Accordingly, many slaveholding politicians believed that gold mining was ideal for slave labor and that the profits would be huge. The Virginian Henry Wise, among others, imagined his slaves tripling in value. The Mississippian John Quitman thought the value of all southern slaves would increase by at least 50 percent. Instead of being worth \$2 billion, the value of the South's slave property would shoot up to \$3 billion. Hundreds agreed with him.

By 1851 or 1852, however, panning was no longer profitable. Most of the easy gold had been taken. Now mining involved high-powered water hoses and

blasting. Now to get the gold workers had to be entrusted with hoses that could kill a man at 200 feet, or with black powder. Did attitudes about mining keep up with the technology? No, attitudes changed slowly.

Could slaves still be used in the mines? Many slave owners undoubtedly had the capital to buy the necessary equipment. But how many would be willing to trust their slaves with black powder? Or with lethal hoses? And how many understood the risks and complexity of underground mining? In the end, some of the biggest mining corporations decided that no American workers, black or white, had the necessary skills to do the job. They thus began importing hard-rock miners from overseas, especially Cornwall.

CWBR: Like so many places in 1850s America, California seemed ridden with conflict over the slavery issue. Yet in spite of the often pro-southern political outlook that Senator William Gwin and many California politicians had, the concept of free labor seems important to many Californians. How did the Gold Rush and the exodus of white laborers to the gold fields influence the state's politics?

LLR: California in the 1850s was a strange place. First, it was overwhelmingly male, and the males came from all over the world. In addition, most of them were young, in their late teens, twenties, or early thirties. Settling in some 500 isolated gold camps, these men differed in many ways. But the vast majority made it clear that they had no desire to compete with slave labor, peon labor, or corporate labor. They wrote laws to that effect, limiting mining claims to what one man could work by himself. Men like William Gwin, who visited the camps to get political support, grasped this fact very quickly. That is why he seconded the motion to outlaw slavery in California. As he later explained to John C. Calhoun, he had no choice. He had to do it if he wanted the miners to support him for the U.S. Senate.

CWBR: Did southerners come to consider the loss of California as a major turning point in North-South relations"?

LLR: Yes. In the eyes of most Southern leaders, especially Southern Democrats, the admission of California as a free state was a disaster. It meant that the number of free states now outnumbered the number of slave states, 16 to 15. It also meant that someday the slaveholding South might lose control of the Senate. That did not happen immediately, thanks to the election, first, of William

Gwin, and then, of John Weller. But what about the future? Just the thought of two free-soilers sitting in the Senate haunted men like Jefferson Davis, James Gadsden, and John Quitman.

CWBR: The change in political mood against the proslavery Chiv faction following the Terry-Broderick duel and during the secession crisis seems swift and decisive. What other factors contributed to the rise of unionism in the state?

LLR: Despite the power of men like William Gwin, the state in 1860 was overwhelmingly northern. Men from the Deep South totaled about 6 percent of the population, and men from the border slave states totaled about 7 percent. In contrast, about 47 percent of the state's population had northern roots. While these northern men might have been indifferent to much of the political fanfare of the 1850s—the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, etc.—they were not indifferent to what happened in 1861. They knew that the Confederacy fired the first shot.

CWBR: You discuss the role of California and its people in the Union during the Civil War and argue that while the state provided little manpower to the war effort, the infusion of California gold into the Union treasury benefited the war effort. Had politicians in both the North and South ever anticipated this contribution?

LLR: They did, but seldom spoke about it. They probably saw no need to. Rightly or wrongly, virtually everyone assumed that gold was money, that it had a huge impact on the world's currency and on the nation's measured wealth, and that whoever had it had the whip hand. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels said as much. So did scores of others. In 1848, in emphasizing the importance of the gold discovery, the top military brass in California, Colonel Richard Mason and his aide Lieutenant William Tecumseh Sherman, pointed out to President James K. Polk that California gold would pay the cost of the war with Mexico a hundred times over. Polk, in turn, made much of their report in his annual message to Congress, repeatedly emphasizing the abundance of gold and predicting that California and the other territories taken from Mexico would add more to the strength and wealth of the nation than any previous acquisitions. Some doubted this, but thousands of Polk's countrymen voted with their feet and headed west.

***CWBR*: Thank you.**

Photo of Leonard L. Richards by Theresa Richards