

Quarterly Bulletin of the Calaveras County Historical Society

Volume LXXI

January 2022

Number 1

AN ARTIST-ARGONAUT IN THE GOLDFIELDS: J. D. BORTHWICK AND THE ART OF THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH

By Kristopher Mandell

John David Borthwick (1824–1892) arrived in Calaveras County on the tail end of a grand and arduous adventure through California's goldfields. With his book *Three Years in California*, illustrated by the author, and first published in 1857, the artist/journalist-turned-argonaut captured a zeitgeist with his firsthand account of the California Gold Rush in the years 1851–1854. Borthwick was intent on seeing all of the Motherlode region: he traveled north to south and then east as far as Nevada. On the return trip, while making his way up through the southern mines, he comes to Calaveras County after hearing a rumor about a natural bridge in the area. After finding that rumor to be true, he continued to travel the county documenting the early settlements of San Andreas, Mokelumne Hill, and Angels Camp. In consideration of Borthwick the artist, more so than Borthwick the journalist, this edition of *Las Calaveras* looks closely at the artworks he included in *Three Years in California*, and considers the importance of these images in the broader context of the art of the Gold Rush itself.

Born in Scotland to a well-to-do family, Borthwick was educated and trained in art. He made

the trip to North America where he first lived in Quebec for about a year. He then moved on to New York, but he was only there a short time before setting out on the Panama route to California in 1850. He arrived in San Francisco nearly a year later. The lure of gold was an important motivator for his journey, but he was also extremely curious about what was going on out West. He romanticized the journey of the 49ers, and he went out to follow in their footsteps.

Borthwick created hundreds of drawings during his time in the goldfields. Most of these were sold to miners and various collectors, or they were sent off for publication from the field on a pack horse—never to be seen again. There are eight images that illustrate *Three Years*. They were derived partly from drawings he had retained from the field and partly from the memories of his adventures. These illustrations make up the principality of Borthwick's known artworks. In 1856, immediately after he had returned home to Edinburgh, he set to work compiling a new manuscript based on his prolific notes from the field and producing the eight illustrations to accompany the text. The manuscript was accepted for publication before its completion, and he worked

tirelessly to finish it. The drawings were converted to lithographic plates for mass publication, and the book was published a year later.

First Impressions: A New Way of Life

Borthwick left San Francisco and made his way to Sacramento by way of river steamer. He then traveled by stagecoach towards the Sierra, first landing in Placerville—then called Hangtown. It was in this vicinity that Borthwick first tried his hand at mining, learning from those around him that were experienced miners. He was not afraid of hard work in the least for he wanted the whole experience. He became known in the camp as an artist, and soon realized that he could make as much gold drawing images commissioned by the miners as he could make working in the placer mines. By day he worked in the mines. In the evenings he would make time to draw. Borthwick left Hangtown and decided to make a go of it, with a new partner, a ways up Weaver Creek. He had developed enough confidence in mining that he was able to go out on his own; it was a significant moment, so much so that he chose the subject for the first illustration of his book.

Our Camp on Weaver Creek is an intimate portrait of life in the goldfields. The work has a great sense of time about it. It is evening, and the sun is going down over the mountains in the background. The image portrays a well-deserved meal after a long day working in the mines. The seated figure, holding a pipe and stirring the fire, is purported to be Borthwick himself—in a rare self-portrait. This is not the refined man we would expect; here, he is portrayed with a scruffy beard, seated on an overturned bucket next to a fire pit, sleeping in a tent,



J. D. Borthwick, *Our Camp on Weaver Creek*, c. 1856. Lithographic print.

and eating what could only be bacon and beans or something of the like. Both figures are wearing the same clothes: the standard uniform of the miner. All classes of people made their way to California: the practical, standardized clothes were a great equalizer. He does not mention his partner in the image by name, but we know that this man left him shortly after they arrived at Weaver Creek to seek out rumors of great wealth in other regions.

The Chinese were some of the first to arrive in the goldfields, but by the time that Borthwick set foot there, in 1851, the Chinese had already been marginalized and segregated to the outskirts of towns. The Chinese had mined gold in China for centuries and are credited with the invention of the cradle—which they continued to use throughout the Gold Rush even when other technologies had advanced. Borthwick's drawing, *Chinese Camp in the Mines*, may have been inspired by his neighbors on Weaver Creek. Borthwick recognizes the oppression and double standards being forced upon the Chinese in his text; however, it must be stated that Borthwick is often problematic, to say the least, in reference to race. His description of anyone non-European in general is at best off color—if not wholly racist. Borthwick's rendering of the faces of these individuals, with exaggerated features, borders on an inappropriate caricature; yet, still, this is one of few artistic representations of the Chinese experience in the goldfields.

The image here could be any such "Chinese Camp": such as the ones that were known to have existed in Southern Tuolumne County, Mokelumne Hill, Angels Camp, San Andreas and many others. Sheep Ranch allowed no Chinese people to live in their township. There is a story of a Chinese man who was hired as a cook and, upon entering Sheep Ranch, was subsequently removed and left on the other side of O'Neil Creek. Borthwick notes that the Chinese were taxed heavily and were forced to work the claims that had been abandoned by others. The Chinese persevered and worked these claims with slow success. The Chinese were industrious, as can be seen in the image by Borthwick; in the background you can see figures hauling, washing, and swinging picks down at the creek.



J. D. Borthwick, *Chinese Camp in the Mines*, c. 1856. Lithographic print.

Borthwick often liked to present contrast in his art. In this drawing, he presents the contrast between work and leisure. We get the sense that someone is always working in this camp. While at the same time, in the foreground, there is a meal, a conversation, and several figures are portrayed grooming. Despite adversity, the Chinese endured the Gold Rush. It is estimated that by 1860 the Chinese population of Calaveras County was 23%.

On the Trail of the 49ers

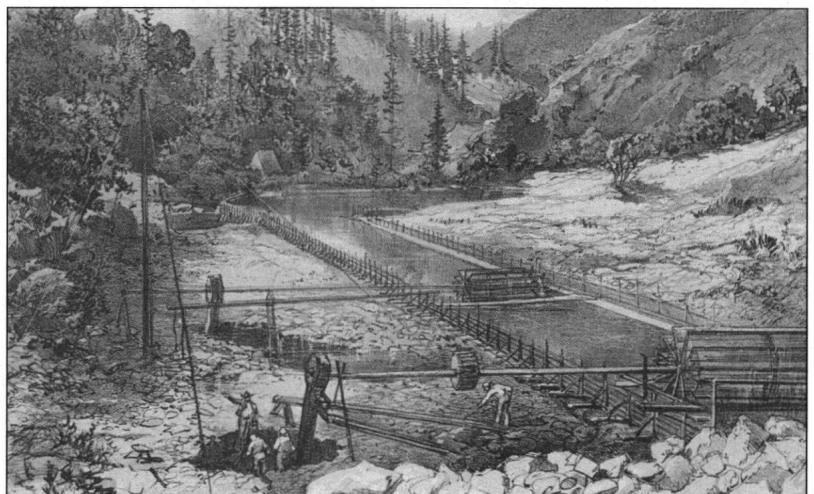
After roughly a year at Weaver Creek, moving from claim to claim along the water, Borthwick decided to continue his exploration of the Motherlode and headed north to Coloma to see where it had all begun near Sutter's Mill. In fact, Borthwick's intention was to take the same trails as the 49ers that had gone before him. He went by foot for much of the journey; literally following their footpaths and all the while romanticizing their lifestyle. It is important to note that tall tales were just as much a part of the mining culture as they were a part of the art of the day. To take the drawings by Borthwick as fact may not be completely accurate, as they may have been contrived by his romantic perspective of the 49ers and therefore exaggerated. Not only did this impress upon the viewer a wild view of the West, but also it attracted others to join the adventure. Artworks, and tall tales, which featured the exaggeration of claims, trees, and the rough-and-tumble life of the miner, did as much to further the colonization of California as did the discovery of gold itself.

Bending the Landscape: The Miners at Work

Borthwick gives us the Gold Rush in 1851–1854, a firsthand account in the years when an entire world had come up from the ground around the pursuit of gold in the Motherlode. If he had been there two years sooner, at the discovery of gold, there would have been a lot less of a world of which to draw his images. We are fortunate to have his account precisely in this time: when the gold was still in the hills, and you had to work unbearably hard pushing yourself

to create, and finance new innovations to glean what was left in the placers.

Borthwick's most substantial contribution to Gold Rush history is his firsthand view of the mining practices of the times. He thought that this was the aspect of his art and writings that would be of most interest to a publisher. It was essentially his hook; it spoke to some of the world's curiosity in regards to the methods and lifestyles of those who went to strike it rich in far-off California. His drawing *Flume on the Yuba River* is an image of work at the mines as well as an example of the elaborate mechanisms created by the miners. Borthwick made a point to document the great lengths the miners had to go to in manipulating water for their claims, and he impresses upon the viewer how essential water was to that work. The river has been diverted by a flume so as to expose the river's bend, where gold would have collected over millennia, and the miners in the foreground are working steadily digging down



J. D. Borthwick, *A Flume on the Yuba River*, c. 1856. Lithographic print.

to reach the gold that has settled to the bedrock. To the left in the composition there is an immense pole tethered with ropes. These ropes add support for the mechanisms that extend from the paddle wheels. The paddle wheels are harnessing the motion of the water to power various implements that are attached to these extensions—such as the hoist in the foreground that is removing material from the large hole. It could be interpreted that the miners are in the throes of finishing the immense task of erecting and fine-tuning the equipment they have constructed. It is really quite fascinating the way Borthwick has captured all these elements in one image.

Willard Fuller makes a point in his book *Calaveras Gold* that the miners did not necessarily invent anything new but instead combined the innovations that they had learned in their homelands. Europeans had been diverting water for centuries: you can trace the practice back to the building of the great aqueducts. Native Americans had also been diverting water for centuries, yet they always put the river back on its original course in the fall after they had channeled the water to support their crops during the hot days of summer. Flumes, such as the one depicted by Borthwick, went up everywhere in the Motherlode. A notable example is the suspension flume that crossed over a ravine south of Murphys in 1857. This flume took three months to build but only two days to wire with the cables to support it, and the construction was carried out by a small number of men. This is true also in this image by Borthwick, where only a few miners have built the entire flume and constructed the equipment. Borthwick has emphasized the difficulty of this task by showing the miners to scale with the entirety of the operation: it is a monumental feat of engineering. Although these constructions may not have been new inventions, their applications for a new purpose coupled with the challenge of an unforgiving environment make the miners seem as if they were geniuses of innovation in many respects.

The landscape in the background denotes evidence of clearcutting: the forest becomes more sparse as it fades into the distance. Deforestation was necessary to supply the wood to create mining equipment, reinforce the mines, divert water, as well as the tasks of daily life. Before the Gold Rush, timber was the primary commodity in the area. The timber industry continued accelerating to

keep up with the demand of wood to support mining projects. Borthwick had come to the goldfields intent upon documenting the environmental devastation caused by mining. In the image, the calamity that has ensued on the land is evident in the deep holes the miners have dug into the ground as well as the number of trees it has taken to build and operate their equipment. It should be stated, however, that the landscape that Borthwick has represented in the image may just have been the state of the land when the miners first encountered it. The land would have been highly manicured and well taken care of from the start—as was the practice of the Native Americans who tended it for centuries. The land that the miners worked so hard to destroy for gold, was, in most regions, highly cared for, if not completely landscaped. California before and after the Gold Rush are completely different worlds.

Borthwick in Calaveras County

According to Borthwick, there was a distinct difference between San Andreas and Angels Camp. He describes San Andreas as being a brawly, bawdy, disorganized type of place; whereas, Angels Camp is described as being much more refined and upscale. These distinctions are interesting when you consider that at the time San Andreas was a town of tents and only one wooden building, and Angels Camp was not much more. Borthwick emphasizes the Mexican presence in San Andreas, although we know that there were many different types of people living in the area. He comments on the Mexican methods of horseback riding, such as riding with straight legs instead of relaxed. He notes also the extreme skill by which the Mexican residents could wrangle animals. He notes that San Andreas had three saloons on one street, and close by one could get a cot in a tent to stay the night. Borthwick's biggest regret while he was visiting Calaveras County was that he missed a hanging in Mokelumne Hill. He laments that he had been sidetracked while in San Andreas and received the news too late to make the ride to Mokelumne Hill in time to witness the execution. It must be stated that it is not Borthwick's intention to present a happy narrative: the book is fraught with horrors where he tells the tale of a harsh world full of chaos and excruciating labor. Yet he also gives us a glimpse of the miners in moments of leisure and excess.

Drinking, Dancing, and Gambling: The Miners at Rest

Images of miners in their off hours were common subjects for Borthwick. He liked very much to study, write about, and draw the miners having a good time. Maybe too good of a time. *A Ball in the Mines* is described at length in Borthwick's account of his visit to Angels Camp. He noted that these dance parties would just break out in the drunkenness, often with only one or two violins, and the whole room would turn into a caterwauling affair. What you can't miss in the image is the chaos; it almost seems as if it is all about to go unhinged. The dancers spiral out and, in the background, there is a man who can't even get the door open to enter the ball. Borthwick's written account states that men would add a patch to their clothing to indicate themselves as women and then they would pair off dancing. He also states that there was a particular man in the camp that would do an impression of a woman, and would be encouraged to provide the miners the spectacle of his performance of the dances of the day. In this way he presents an Angels Camp with a fantastically riotous nightlife.

If you look closely, you may notice that in Borthwick's depiction of a miners' ball that there are no women. A particular exaggeration that comes up incessantly in accounts of the Gold Rush, both in art and literature, is the misrepresentation that the early mining camps were completely devoid of women. It was not an all-male event as has been taken to be truth. In the early days of California, while the territory was under Mexican rule, entire families ventured to California seeking a better life. From as early as 1841, there are accounts of many women on the wagon trains



J. D. Borthwick, *A Ball in the Mines*, c. 1856. Lithographic print.

to California. Women went through the same trials and tribulations as men—adding to the gamut caring for children and giving birth over the course of the long journey. This is not to mention the Native American women already present in the area of whom there has not been adequate mention in our history—considering the atrocities they endured during these years. There were also Mexican women living on ranchos. Perhaps many women simply didn't want to go to a miners' ball, but it is highly possible that many did. There were definitely women in California, yet in the art of the Gold Rush, outside of portraits, you would be hard-pressed to find an image of a woman among the paintings and drawings. California was very much, according to the art and literature of the time, a man's adventure. It is ridiculous to assume that women were not present, for it was women's own pioneering spirit that ensured the survival of the colonists after the Gold Rush had ended and whose children became the women who bore and raised the ranching families of the Motherlode—such as those that endured for many generations in Calaveras County, some to this day. These women's stories are the great epilogue to the Gold Rush itself.

Picture It: A World Without Pictures

Art plays a very important role in the early days of the Gold Rush, when we are reminded that it was a world devoid of images—something that is nearly impossible for us to grasp today. In present times, we are constantly inundated by pictures: on cell phones, social media, and billboards in every direction one might look. In a world without images, there is only memory. One had to remember or write down their experiences.

Artworks were rare reflections that documented an important place, person, or event that would otherwise be but a memory—easily forgotten. Borthwick's drawings were sold extensively to other miners. They would have been prized and highly sought after, because they carried the power to secure a memory. It was a way to take the experience home, proof of your travels, and a way to burn the experience into one's own mind.

Art in the time of the Gold Rush is complex and of its own incomparable context. The pioneers of California, before the Gold Rush, were not in the process of

creating drawings or other artworks to document their journey; they were in a state of forward motion, and they needed every moment of the day to stay alive. If they created objects, they were ones that would ensure their survival. Within the California Gold Rush, there was a different context for art. Art was necessary to document the fantastic and often abysmal experience. Art was actually alive and well in California at the time. Whereas other pioneering exploits, in other parts of the country, did not have the added importance of a world rushing in to make fortunes in unknown lands. These images by Borthwick reflect an understanding by the artist, as well as those whom he depicts, of being a part of something bigger than themselves, as playing a role in a movement of great importance to history and the “progress” of mankind. In consideration of the art of the Gold Rush, it is not an art of portraits of famous people. It does not feature battles or the downfall of great kings. It is an art of the everyday man. What makes the art relevant is the search for gold in California and how that search reshaped the landscape and the destiny of the United States in general. In effect, the artworks romanticized the life of the miner and enticed the viewer to join the adventure and strike it rich in California.

The invention of photography was still in its early stages in the years when gold was discovered in California. Daguerreotypes, the antecedent to the photograph, were invented in 1841 by Louis Daguerre in France. The invention was not highly regarded by the Europeans, but it caught on like wildfire in the United States. Daguerreotypes were created on highly polished copper surfaces, they were one of a kind, and went through a process of a wash of expensive corrosive chemicals to attain the finished image. It must be stated that this was not a time when miners were wandering around with Brownie cameras: photography was a complicated, toxic, and process-ridden endeavor. You would have needed a cart horse, or oxen, just to carry the equipment. These works were treasures, highly accurate, with wonderful detail, and they have preserved well through the years. Throughout the 1850s photography was improved and by the end of the century we have many photographs that document the lode mines and the miners who worked them. Photography is regarded today to be a fine art and rightly so, yet at the advent of photography it was not

considered art because a photograph was the product of a machine and not a person. However, in the context of Borthwick’s adventures at the time, it is highly doubtful that there were any miners practicing the process of creating daguerreotypes in the field. To say that the world of the miners was *completely* devoid of pictures would not be completely true. There were of course “wanted” posters, images in books, and it is known that many miners from the East Coast took daguerreotypes of their loved ones with them on their journey into the goldfields.

Charles Christian Nahl’s painting, *Dead Miner*, shows the dead figure clutching a daguerreotype. The dog raises its head to the sky, in a mournful howl, where there are storm clouds closing in on the bleak and horrific scene. The daguerreotype in his hand signals that he was thinking about someone close to him when he died in this unforgiving place, isolated, somewhere in the snow, next to his pick, while his dog fights the predators off his body. The painting was made in 1867 in a year when most of the placers had been depleted of their gold. In this way, the painting can also be taken as a metaphor for the end of the Gold Rush itself. It is a strikingly dramatic image full of high contrasts and intense emotion. However dramatic the image may be, there is a sad truth here regarding the fate of many miners. Borthwick’s works are not concerned so much with this kind of drama. To be fair they are romanticized representations, but Borthwick’s work is from a more documentary hand. Borthwick was by no means the first, or last, artist of the Gold Rush. The themes, such



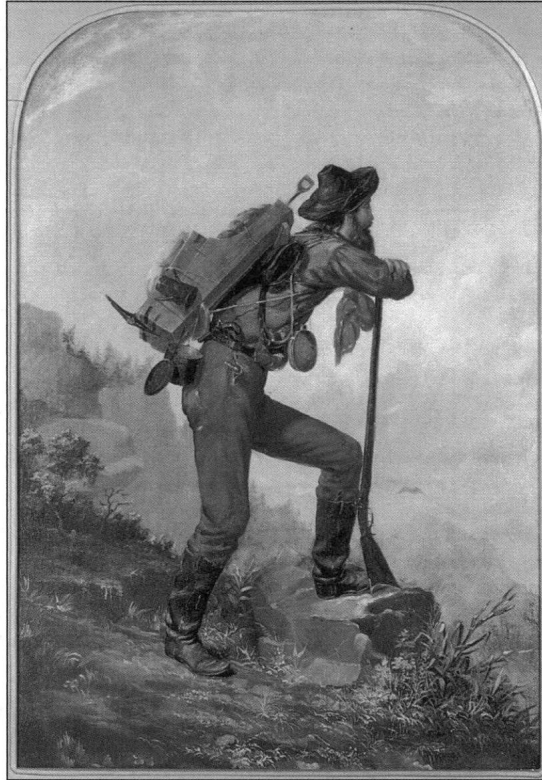
Charles Christian Nahl, *Dead Miner*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 in.
Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles.

as miners at work and at leisure, were themes presented by other artists before Borthwick. Paintings like this by Nahl were created in studios, whereas Borthwick was actually out in the field prolifically turning out work. It was only such artist-argonauts that gave the world images based directly from experiences in the field.

This image by E. Hall Martin, *The Prospector*, was created in the same year (1850) that Borthwick set off for the Motherlode. The painting is exquisitely executed. Here is the quintessential miner/pioneer. He carries everything he needs on his back. He rests his folded arms on his gun as he looks out over a wide expanse that is implied by his

gaze directed outside the confines of the image. I think everyone that has lived in, or visited, the Motherlode can relate to this picture; it is that feeling of awe that comes over you when you catch the perfect moment to see the land with perfect light, from a hill over wide open space, such as when the sun goes down over the mountains, lending beautiful color to a single oak tree amidst a rich landscape. Here there is the same feeling of awe in the painting, where the figure looks out over the landscape that is rich in both wealth and possibility.

To fully grasp the importance of these images it is essential to understand their analogous nature pertaining to the lives of the miners themselves. In many ways, the artworks were a part of the same life and experience as the themes and individuals they depict. What we don't see when we look at the images is the work it would have taken to keep them intact. In the case of Borthwick's works that he created and sold in the field, they would have traveled in the possession of the miners incredible distances back to their home countries. The painting of the prospector here, by Martin, is known to have made such a journey. The artist died shortly after the painting was completed; whereupon it was acquired by the captain of a ship named "The Invincible." The painting was installed in the ship's main salon and traveled its maiden voyage around the Cape of Good Hope of Africa.



E. Hall Martin, *The Prospector*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 36 x 25 in. Mr. and Mrs. A. R. Phillips Jr.

How interesting it is to consider the possibility that the painting made a similar journey as the many prospectors it depicts?

In the case of the works of art that remained in California, many of these works made their way to San Francisco where they were consequently destroyed in the fires of the Great Quake of 1906. Many artists saw the entirety of their work completely destroyed and lost to history. The works that we have today are but few in number; we are lucky to have the artworks that have survived. With Borthwick's works specifically, we are fortunate to have an account of the Gold Rush so well-written and so wonderfully illustrated.

Borthwick's works give us insight into the life of the miners, the impact of mining on the environment, and miner race relations amongst other aspects of life in California at the time. He takes us with him on this incredible journey—where he approaches the world with an artist's eye, a journalist's quest for documentation, and a pioneer's spirit for determination and survival—that we might witness this complex and crucial history.

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30 No. Main Street P.O. Box 721 San Andreas, CA 95249

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2022 Coming Events

Membership Meeting

Thursday, February 24 • 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM

Open House

"Night At The Museum"

Downtown Museum • 5:00 PM to 6:30 PM

Member Preview of a Brand New Exhibit:

"A Patchwork Of History"

The Quilts Of Calaveras County

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