A woman helped start the rush for gold. That fact was remembered more than twenty-five years later by a feature writer for the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin, who risked venturing to a hotel in “a quarter where up town ladies seldom visit” for an interview. The lady-like reporter, Mary P. Winslow, there located “Aunty Jenny” (Elizabeth J. Bays Wimmer), former cook for Sutter’s workforce at Coloma. She and her husband had arrived in the city in 1874 “in the hope of getting some relief from the society of Pioneers” with the claim that they had Marshall’s original gold nugget, plucked from the millrace, in their possession. Winslow invited them to dine, and after dinner, when Wimmer was settled in the largest available rocking chair sucking on her pipe, Winslow allowed the storytelling to begin. Jenny recounted the day when her little son, Martin, came running into the house, calling, “Here, mother, here’s something Mr. Marshall and Pa found, and they want you to put it into the saleratus water to see if it will tarnish.” Jenny replied, “This is gold, and I will throw it into my lye kettle . . . and if it is gold it will be gold when it comes out.” The next morning, after her lye soap was removed and cut, she recalled, “At the bottom of the pot was a double-handful of potash, which I lifted in my two hands, and there was my gold as bright as it could be.” True story or not, the nugget (shaped, according to Winslow, like “a piece of spruce-gum just out of the mouth of a school-girl”) was not bought by the Society of California Pioneers, but did go on display at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, a symbol of continuing interest in Aunty Jenny’s tale.1

By then “her” gold had become the main catalyst of subsequent California history. As Winslow put it, Jenny Wimmer had revealed “this magic instrument that revolutionized the world, gave us the Central Pacific Railroad, Emperor Norton, Bret Harte, Occident, the Comstock ledge, [the] Palace Hotel, strawberries and cream the whole year round, Mark Twain, earthquakes, James Lick and King Kaiakaua.”2

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As California transformed, so did the lives of its women. The world of the Indian rancheria and Mexican rancho became surrounded and submerged by Yankee settlement. As the society shifted to one commanded by men from “the States,” the position of—and opportunities for—women likewise transformed. Some groups of women were discounted or destroyed, while others arrived, taking advantage of fleeting opportunities, either in traditional or new labor categories largely determined by the desires of the women themselves. But as the Yankee men replicated their past society by bringing “respectable” women from the States, many such possibilities evaporated and society began to harden.

Of course, none of this was anticipated. Jenny Wimmer had not come to Coloma to discover gold. Her specific tasks included cooking and washing laundry for white laborers, as well as caring for the local Indians also in Sutter’s employ. Her husband, Peter Wimmer, according to James Marshall, “had charge of the Indians, [and directed] at what particular point to set them to work for the day.” In 1855, Jenny and Peter were interviewed for an article in the San Francisco Daily Herald, which reported that “Mrs. W., assisted by Martin and Sarah her children, did cooking for the party, and employed her leisure time in making shirts for the Indians.”

Then gold was discovered. As the rush started, much of the northern California population flocked to the Mother Lode. The earliest gold seekers often utilized the handiwork of Sierra Indian women in their haste to get rich. As the San Francisco Californian reported on August 14, 1848, extractive methods included rockers and long toms. “But far the largest number use nothing but a large tin pan or an Indian basket into which they place the dirt and shake it until the gold gets to the bottom.” Indians worked side by side with miners such as Mr. Murphy, who had “a small tribe of wild Indians who gather gold for him . . . in part [due] to the fact that he has married the daughter of the chief—a young woman of many personal attractions.”

These peaceful, cooperative, sometimes familial relationships foundered in the sea of incoming Argonauts, who routed Indian women from the hills and replaced their beautifully woven baskets with mass-produced products of eastern manufacture. Women’s existence disappeared in the stock figure of the lone, unshaven miner with his battered tin pan.

THE UNACCULTURATED

Unacculturated men, fresh from the East, set the tone for gold-rush California due to the sheer weight of numbers. Based on the 1860 census, males outnumbered females in San Francisco by three to two. However, the sex ratio for those under fifteen was about even, so the marriageable population—from fifteen to fifty—faced even more skewed proportions, wherein about 47 percent of the men found no
Eliza Jane Steen Johnson, a native of County Antrim, Ireland, who came to California in the Gold Rush with her husband, John, and opened a dry goods and millinery shop off Portsmouth Square in San Francisco. A strikingly handsome woman, independent-minded and ambitious, she helped make the enterprise a success by modeling clothing for the men who crowded the store. With its overwhelmingly male population, California presented women with both unique opportunities and challenges. Courtesy Oakland Museum of California; gift of Barbara Smith.

ready marriage partners. Because so many women stayed in San Francisco because of better amenities, greater work opportunities, or other reasons, the proportion of males to females was even more unbalanced in the diggings. Consequently, men acquired most of the gold. Women had to find ways to earn or extract it from them in order to survive.

Furthermore, although Forty-niners came from all over the globe, the majority
were white men from the northern states. Most had been reared with the typical American conventions of the day by good, God-fearing mothers. Their slice of society was preoccupied with the notion of the “separate spheres” in which men went out and swung the ax, killed Indians, engaged in sordid politics, pursued grasping commerce, and gambled for gain, while women, pure vessels of societal morality, stayed home to nurture havens for embattled males when they should be able to return. Before courting such women, some Argonauts resolutely awaited a return to the East, such as avid correspondent Horace Snow, who longed for “old New England and its comely girls!” Like Horace, most male Argonauts believed that slipping into sin, vice, and consorting with “bad” women was the surest road to hell. Not that they did not do such things in faraway California, but they retained ambivalent attitudes about their own behavior and were more or less willing to revert to type when “good” women showed up to demand their conformity. They shared the view of sacred womanhood articulated by pioneer Eliza Farnham, who wrote that “there is no inviolate fireside in California that is not an altar; no honorable woman but is a missionary of virtue, morality, happiness, and peace, to a circle of careworn, troubled, and often, alas, demoralized men.” She acted on this perceived need by offering to organize a large-scale emigration of highly respectable women of age twenty-five or older to San Francisco. It was not a success.

Testaments abound to the demoralization she feared. For example, an account of the southern Mother Lode by Mrs. Lee Whipple-Haslam (her first name is unknown) revealed that “in early days I have seen all that made life worth living to a young and handsome man, vibrant with life, destroyed in five minutes, by a man’s fists.” This observation was occasioned by the attempted seduction of another man’s wife. The would-be seducer carried life-long scars of his beating, testimony to the value of at least one gold-rush woman.

Many eastern men who panned streams in the Sierra had little experience with people other than themselves, but the relative lack of women spurred a general openness and curiosity. Around them they found a variety of unfamiliar types—darker, Spanish-speaking, Roman Catholic Mexicans; native peoples as varied as the Hupa, Maidu, and Yokuts; citizens of Pacific nations such as the Chinese, Peruvians, Chileans, and Hawaiians. These people, and especially their women, had no prescribed niche in the Yankee cosmology. Therefore, the Forty-niners’ reactions to these “exotics” had to be based on other notions—sometimes race, sometimes religion, sometimes the pure inventiveness born of novelty. This gold-rush multiethicnity and internationalism worked to the disadvantage of some of the women, but opened new possibilities for others, at least until the moral civilizers that the men recognized—their own Yankee women—arrived in force. Then, a newly reconstructed eastern-style society imposed its own dichotomy of femininity, of “good” and “bad” women, a division that superseded lesser concerns of race, class, and ethnicity.
California natives from an interior tribe attend to daily chores in a wood engraving of the mid-1850s. The Gold Rush disrupted traditional patterns of life for Indians throughout California, and within a couple of decades, warfare, disease, and starvation had decreased their numbers by three-quarters or more. Even more than the men, Indian women suffered from the violence and exploitation that marked the era. From John Russell Bartlett, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents* (1854). California Historical Society, FN-30529.

"WRETCHED CREATURES"

Of course, there were exceptions to this acceptance—most persistently in the prejudices against California’s earlier inhabitants. Generally, Yankees condemned native Californians without bothering to distinguish one band from another, nor mission ex-neophyte from “gentile.” “One fundamental difference between the Hispanic and the Anglo-American cultures,” a modern historian noted, “has always been the fact that the former utilized the native as its primary source of labor whereas the latter never did. There simply was no place in the American cosmos for the Indian.”15

One of the more charitable views of California native women came from “Dame Shirley” in her first letter from Rich Bar in 1851. She admitted that she previously “took” to the Indians portrayed as “glorious forest heroes that live in the Leather Stocking Tales.” She consequently noted “the extreme beauty of the limbs of the In-
dian women of California” despite the “haggardness of expression, and ugliness of feature . . . of these wretched creatures.”16

In general, native people were perceived as not much different from the animals in the forest, and their women, when their gender was even noticed, usually served as objects of prey, derision, or pity. Some locals even took Indian slaves. In 1846, the military commander of California, John Montgomery, found it necessary to extend a proclamation addressed particularly to persons “imprisoning and holding to service Indians against their will . . . [that] the Indian population must not be regarded as slaves.”17 These lofty sentiments were directly countermanded by the state legislature of 1852, which permitted the enslavement of Indian women, men, and children if a small sum be given as a bond to the county justice of the peace against cruel abuse. Indians could also be arrested as vagrants and sold to the highest bidder for up to four months’ unpaid labor, their “vagrancy” ensured by the fact that their land was taken up as “unoccupied” by opportunistic pioneers.18

To some extent, this picture of absolute destruction is belied by historian Albert Hurtado, who makes specific reference to the survival of Indian women. But while “survival” may have been achieved, it was at a grim cost. In 1853, an official report from El Dorado County noted “open and disgusting acts of prostitution” among Indian women driven by poverty and misery, to the extent that syphilis had proceeded so far in one camp that the women “were unable to walk.”19 Indian women also suffered from rape as well as more generalized violence (murder, burning of their rancherias, destruction of food supplies) that characterized Argonaut–Indian relations as a whole.20

Men who married Indians in an attempt to form stable unions could also be discouraged or prevented from doing so, sometimes by social mores, sometimes by government policy. Some Argonauts imported sectional ideas of race that discouraged these unions. For example, William Brewer, a future Yale professor, deprecated “squaw men,” equating them with “rank secessionists” and “poor white trash from the frontier slave states, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas.”21 A particularly violent reaction occurred about 1854 among the southern Yokuts. According to Thomas Jefferson (“Uncle Jeff”) Mayfield, raised partially among the Yokuts, “the government had been trying to establish Indian reservations on Kings and Fresno Rivers, and a troop of cavalry was attempting to round up all of the Indians of the valley.” They rode up to the cabin of a white man named Mann, who had been living with his Indian wife for several years and “demanded the mokee. Mann told them that she was his wife, that he had provided for her for several years, and that he could continue to do so in the future.” The expedition’s leader demanded that the woman be brought forth, which Mann refused to do. The soldier forced his way into the cabin. “The mokee had crawled under the bed, and the cavalryman started to drag her out. She called to Mann for help. Mann ran to her aid and was shot in the back and killed by one of the troopers outside. The troopers tied the mokee and took her with
them and left Mann lying where he had fallen.” The Indians later buried him, and Uncle Jeff subsequently saw the woman “many times and heard her tell what happened.” Obviously, she survived, but with what future?

**LEAD INTO GOLD**

The future first intruded as the last lead bullets were fired in the Mexican-American War. Almost simultaneously, gold was discovered, lending credence to the rampant American belief that a benevolent Protestant God assured the “Manifest Destiny” of one nation over another, of Americans over Mexicans. The earliest views of American superiority had been shaped by firsthand accounts such as that of Richard Henry Dana, who described the *Californias*’ “fondness for dress . . . [that] is excessive, and is sometimes their ruin. A present of a fine mantle, or of a necklace or pair of earrings gains the favor of the greater part.” The war itself had generated a spate of potboiler literature by such famous hacks as Ned Buntline. His formula novels involved heroic American frontiersmen; backward, superstitious Catholic
priests; evil, cowardly Mexican men; and breathtakingly beautiful señoritas who predictably fell in love with the Yankee frontiersman (and adopted his ways). The American elite as well as the working class gobbled up these accounts, ensuring that many would bring inaccurate, preconceived notions to their encounters with real Mexicans in California. These views differed sharply from actual Californio values, which put strong emphasis on the sanctity of family, maintained a landed elite, supported a traditional mission system, encouraged the inclusion of Indians on ranchos as laborers and as house servants, and carefully chaperoned daughters until an early marriage with a suitably stationed husband. Thus, conflict was inevitable.

The most egregious confrontation occurred in Downieville on July 5, 1851. The account of Major William Downie, for whom the town was named, indicated not only the prevailing racial prejudice but the value placed on women. Downie described a man named Cannon, falling-down drunk after the Independence Day celebration, who smashed through the door of an adobe hut occupied by a Mexican couple. He apparently assaulted the woman, although Downie claimed Cannon only insulted her. The next day, Cannon returned with his male companion of the previous night, supposedly to apologize. Increasingly heated words in Spanish—not understood by the companion—passed between Cannon and the Mexican couple. Suddenly, the woman, Juanita, pulled out a knife and stabbed Cannon to death. The companion rushed back to camp and a lynch mob assembled. Although cries of “Hang the greaser devils!” rang out, the Mexican man was acquitted. Juanita, dressed in her finest, was led to a hastily erected scaffold. “Big” Bill Logan, notorious for administering a vicious flogging a year earlier, was summoned as “it took a man like that to hang a woman.” Juanita spoke to “the bloodthirsty mob,” explaining why she had killed and that she would do it again. (One wonders how many present understood her.) Then she placed the noose over her own neck and “leaped from the scaffold into eternity. . . . But there was a blot on the fair name of the Yuba which it took years to wash out,” concluded Downie.

Perhaps the Yuba River region’s notoriety came partly from resultant publicity. A year later, another Hispanic woman died violently with no echoing fanfare. In June 1851, arsonists took flame to San Francisco to facilitate looting. They achieved their ends, as reported by Mary Ball, a widow originally from England who kept an insightful diary. “The robbers were so numerous,” she wrote, “that they were allowed to go at large after giving up the articles they had stolen.” She also reported the “horror of the night was increased by a man shooting a poor Mexican woman named Carmelita without any cause”; this, while looters went free.

Ball’s account of the lack of repercussions for killing a Mexican woman easily squares with the views of William Streeter, an observer of Santa Barbara in the 1850s. He described the Americans: “the majority of these rough, reckless men
had little respect for persons or property of the Californians. . . . The generous hospitality of the latter was often repaid with insult . . . This treatment embittered them [the Californios] towards the Americans and together with other causes prevented their reconciliation to American occupation."29 Similar opinions peppered the testimony of Californias interviewed later for Hubert Howe Bancroft's histories. They stressed the centrality of family and importance of familial loyalty. John Sutter was chastised by Rosalia Vallejo de Leese as a man who "left a wife and several children [in Europe and] was living in open concubinage with two black women [Hawaiians] whom he had brought in his vessel from the Sandwich island."30 Those women who encountered the Bear Flaggers hated and despised them as barbarians assaulting the civilized Californios, and saw the Americans as lacking in virility, both figuratively and literally.31 Finally, Angustias de la Guerra de Ord asserted, "La toma del país no nos gustó nada a los californios, y mucho menos a las mujeres."32 Earlier faulty translation rendered an apparent double negative ("no . . . nada") into a positive—that is, that the Californios didn't mind the American takeover, and it bothered the women least of all—instead of recognizing the Spanish use of nada as emphatic language, equivalent to "they really didn't like. . . ." The saying should thus be more properly translated: "The Californios really didn't like the [American] takeover [literally, the taking of the country], and the women liked it even less."33

Given the already civilized nature of the very dons who constituted the main target of Bear Flagger displeasure (headed by John Frémont’s prisoners, Mariano and Salvador Vallejo, and Jacob Leese, the husband of Rosalia Vallejo) and their own animosity to the Mexican government, Californios no doubt wondered what the gringos were really after. Diarist Mary Ball, who in 1851 was managing the Oriental Hotel in San Francisco, had this insight: "Julio [July] 15 Martes [Tuesday]. Had a party last night for the Vallejo family who have been some days with us. All the men of the army seem crazy after California Senoritas or their Padres’ land, I think too often it must be the land and not the women."34 Vallejo had his own views of this road to acculturation. Historian Leonard Pitt specified four Yankee–Hispanic unions from southern California and noted that "two of Mariano Vallejo’s daughters married Yankees . . . and his son Platón returned from a New York medical school with a bride born in Syracuse."35 Most Californias, however, remained segregated from Yankee society. Besides, most Argonauts anticipated better prospects mining gold.

WOMEN IN THE MINES

From the beginning, women mined. In August 1848, Walter Colton, the alcalde of Monterey, remarked on "a woman, of Sonoranian birth, who has worked in the dry diggings forty-six days, and brought back two thousand one hundred and twenty-
five dollars.”36 Touring the gold fields himself, Colton remarked on a nearby discovery, where “a little girl this morning picked up what she thought a curious stone, and brought it to her mother, who, on removing the extraneous matter, found it a lump of pure gold, weighing between six and seven pounds.”37 A general rush for the place ensued. Another Sonoran woman, finding only about a half dollar worth of gold in the bottom of her bowl, “hurled it back again into the water, and . . . strode off with the indignant air of one who feels himself insulted. Poor woman!” he continued. “[H]ow little thou knowest of those patient females, who in our large cities make a shirt or vest for ten cents!”38 This sad scenario, the result of male control of capital, was soon replicated in California, although at inflated prices.

Intermittently, women still dug gold for themselves and their families. Mining historian Sally Zanjani reported that “the briefest glance at the [1850] census reveals several possible combinations among the gold rush women listed as ‘miners’—daughters working with a mother or a father and women on their own as friends working together and as lone teenagers.”39 Almost inevitably came the rumor of a woman who had disguised herself as a man to join her husband in the diggings—perhaps fearing attack from so many lonely males.40 Two women who reported a pay streak near Marysville earned particular notice because “both . . . were seventy years old.”41 A famous Frenchwoman, who traded homelessness on the streets of Paris for California’s opportunities, had arrived in 1850 seeking work as a maid. She soon turned to mining, “cut off her hair, donned men’s clothes, took the name of Marie Pantalon, and went prospecting in the gold country.”42

Women who had first adopted other pursuits soon realized the possibilities of digging their own gold, or at least increasing their proximity to it. For example, by August of 1852, Mary Ball had quit managing San Francisco’s Oriental Hotel and had gone north to Barton’s Bar. There she boarded miners and dealt with cholera and other illnesses using remedies in Good’s Study of Medicine, a gift she had received before leaving the East. In October she noted, “I have received over $120 and have as much more on my book for medacine, and no doubt can make more as I get more known. . . . No rest, a man has just come for me to dress his leg.”43

The Argonaut’s willingness to pay well for scarce feminine services could be heightened when a working woman reminded him of female relatives he had left at home with no financial support.44 An example of this phenomenon was reported by the mystified Louise Clappe (Dame Shirley), who described a widow who had lost her husband to cholera after a few weeks on the trail west. With no one to accompany her back to the States, she pressed on to California with her eight sons and one daughter, the oldest apparently a teenager. “She used to wash shirts, and iron them on a chair—in the open air, of course; and you can fancy with what success. But the gentlemen were too generous to be critical, and as they paid her three or four times as much as she asked, she accumulated quite a handsome sum in a few days. . . . Poor woman! She
A woman joins a party of miners working a long tom at Auburn Ravine in 1852. Women found a range of opportunities for earning money in the diggings, from washing clothes to preparing meals to dealing monte, and despite the hard labor entailed in placer mining, some toiled with pick and shovel and pan alongside men. *Courtesy California State Library.*

told me she seldom gave them as much as they could eat, at any one meal."45 Her children, with the exception of the eldest, were nonetheless rated "as healthy looking a set of ragged little wretches as ever I saw."46 Dame Shirley’s myopia about the economic difficulties of women alone can be partially excused by her own lack of need to work. Her husband, a doctor, supported her; the cook at the local hotel fixed their meals, and the one time she tried gold panning: “I wet my feet, tore my dress, spoilt a pair of new gloves . . . and lost a valuable breastpin, in this my labor of love.”47

Poorer women took gold panning much more seriously. Hard-working Mary Bal-lou, a slightly educated white woman from New Hampshire living at Negro Bar, took a holiday break from her boardinghouse chores to pan. As she wrote home to her sons, “I just washed out about a Dollars worth of gold dust the fourth of July in
the cradle so you see that I am doing a little mining in this gold region but I think it harder to rock the [miner's] cradle to wash out gold than it is to rock the cradle for the Babies in the States."48 California's opportunities always came at a price.

UNPREDICTABLE EXOTICS

The sight of a Frenchwoman in trousers, or two septuagenarians shoveling pay dirt, did not seem so outlandish in a land where "seeing the elephant" (that most exotic of beastly adventures) served as a handy metaphor for life in general. In fluctuating gold-rush society, circumstance and setting, as well as individual taste, dictated the judgments placed on women, particularly where Americans—and Yankee sensibilities—did not dominate. The most Hispanic of the gold-rush settlements, Sonora, had been founded by Mexicans from that state, but had also attracted Peruvians, Chileans, and French, predominately. American diarist William Perkins wrote at length of his experiences there, including one evening when a difference over a game of lansquenet, presided over by a Frenchwoman, led to a cold-blooded murder. He returned to the gaming table, where "the beautiful Mlle. Virginie . . . greeted me with a fascinating smile." After exclaiming "'Ah Monsieur, quel horreur!'" she described recent events "with all the calmness she would have evinced had she been relating a scene from a novel. To me, her delicate white hands seemed smeared with blood and I left in disgust. . . ."49 Also in Sonora, Englishman Frank Marryat saw "a lady in black velvet who sings in Italian and accompanies herself, and who elicits great admiration and applause on account of the scarcity of the fair sex in this region."50 In another saloon, Marryat remarked upon "a very interesting and well-looking young girl [who] was attending at a part of the bar where confectionery was sold. I should not have supposed her to have black blood in her veins, but J. B. assured me that she had been a slave, and had been once sold at New Orleans at a very high price."51 Even a Yankee woman, Elizabeth Gunn, bent somewhat in her social conventions to survive in Sonora's isolation. Seldom able to visit the nearest New England female, who lived five miles away, she made other friends in town. These included Mrs. Yancey from New Orleans, and a Catholic, Mrs. Lane. Even her French neighbor, who supported her mother, younger sister, and brother "by going to the gambling houses and dealing out the cards to the players," did not receive her censure.52

The social dynamics of female loneliness also shaped a distinctive future for California's first female Chinese immigrant. Marie Seise arrived in 1848 with the Gillespie family, Hong Kong traders originally from New York.53 Her name had been acquired upon her marriage to a Portuguese sailor in Macao, who had later been lost at sea. After serving another family, she was hired by Sarah Bentner Gillespie as a personal maid, and grew to live "not . . . as a servant but above a servant—rather as
a companion—enjoying her [Sarah's] fullest confidence.” The two women were even confirmed together in 1854 in the first such ceremony at San Francisco’s Trinity Episcopal Church, kneeling side by side.54

Unlike Marie Seise, most gold-rush Chinese women were slaves, PROCURED for prostitution. Long-standing Chinese cultural tradition regarded daughters from an economic perspective. They were valued less than sons because they could not inherit, and left the family that raised them to work in their husband’s family upon marriage, essentially providing no return on investment. This imbalance could be corrected, to some extent, if the daughter were sold or bartered to pay family debts, especially if she could, after transferal, earn an income that could be remanded to her family. One of the main ways a daughter could be useful, just as were women of other nations, was through her womanly skills. Daughters could be indentured as mui tsai—literally “little sister” in Cantonese—to provide domestic service on a twenty-four-hour basis to a more prosperous Chinese family. Under this system, the girl was supposed to be freed through an arranged marriage at eighteen so she could start her own household.55 Like Seise, sometimes mui tsai were well-treated by their host families, although, in faraway America, if the wife beat them or the husband sexually assaulted them, there was very little recourse.56 Mui tsai could also, despite their original agreement, be sold into prostitution, which made them the slaves of their owners for life.57

The combination of Chinese attitudes toward daughters, the sizable influx of Chinese men to Gum San (“Gold Mountain”), and the American fascination with exotic women and girls (the ideal age for a Chinese prostitute was said to be fourteen) created a high demand for Chinese prostitution.58 Ah Toy, San Francisco’s most famous Chinese prostitute, had come in 1849 to “better her condition” in this pursuit. Men thronged to gaze on this fascinating creature. In 1849, she charged an ounce of gold dust “to gaze upon her countenance,” as the newspaper put it, undoubtedly meaning more than just her uncovered face.59 This fact emerged only because she had filed suit in court against those who paid her in brass shavings instead of gold, a course of action practical only because she was a free woman (not married, indentured, or a slave) and spoke English, a unique combination.60 She successfully maintained her independent status in court, despite an attempt by local Chinese men who wished to return her to an alleged “husband” in Hong Kong.61 In 1850, she was again in court as a public nuisance, and in 1851 to repel an attempt by Chinatown leaders to control her and the two other Chinese prostitutes she had recently employed.62 She relied partly on her beauty to maintain her status, and was appraised by a Frenchman in 1851 as one of the “few girls who are attractive if not actually pretty . . . with her slender body and laughing eyes.”63 Her rivalry with the local Chinese male power structure escalated, especially against Yuen Sheng (also called Norman As-sing), who headed a local benevolent association and protection
ring. The men were able to extend their influence, as indicated by the export of eighteen Chinese prostitutes in 1852 to Weaverville, in Trinity County, far up the Sacramento Valley.\textsuperscript{64} As their business expanded, the men’s power increased vis-à-vis a female independent like Ah Toy. Nonetheless, the growing wealth of the Chinese merchants also opened a new niche for Chinese women in America—as wife. In an example of feminine adaptation to changing society, Ah Toy apparently took this route, settling down with a husband in Santa Clara, where she died in 1928 just short of her hundredth birthday.\textsuperscript{65}

**Expanding Roles**

During the Gold Rush, California was larger than life, in its appetites, its tastes, and its spectacular successes and downfalls. Lola Montez (born Eliza Gilbert in Ireland), the perfect embodiment of risk and the risqué, found a temporary home on the California stage and cut another niche in the edifice of gold-rush California. She arrived in San Francisco in 1853 bearing the reputation of the discarded mistress of the mad king of Bavaria and the title his love-struck highness had bestowed, the Countess of Landsfeld. Her tour de force, the spider dance, both fascinated and repelled, according to Mary Jane Megquier, the wife of San Francisco physician Thomas Megquier and the proprietress of a San Francisco boardinghouse. Megquier wrote that “Lola Montes is making quite a stir here now but many say that her playing is of that character that is not proper for respectable ladies to attend but I do want to see her very much. Mr Clark said that in dancing the spider dance . . . she was obliged to look rather higher than was proper in so public a place.”\textsuperscript{66} Whether or not Megquier ever attended the performance (she never wrote of it), much of San Francisco did, captivated by Lola’s self-constructed identity, and from a desire to be entertained. While Yankee women, especially those without protectors, had to observe proprieties, those truly (or willfully) outside recognized eastern circles had relatively more freedom.

Lola Montez literally capitalized on that freedom, charging five dollars for the best seats in the San Francisco theater, as opposed to only a dollar in New York. From her perch onstage she carried on characteristic chats over the footlights with the front-row patrons, whether they cheered or jeered. Her California sojourn—including additional appearances in Sacramento and throughout the Mother Lode—was capped by a new marriage (she had already had two, and several lovers) and withdrawal to a cottage in Grass Valley after her three-month marital relationship fell apart.\textsuperscript{67} There she befriended another future star of the California stage, young Lotta Crabtree, whom Montez allegedly (but not very probably) taught to dance.\textsuperscript{68}

Lotta Crabtree was much more of a home-grown entertainer than the divine Montez, and appealed to a different side of the gold-rush culture. While Lola was
As famed for her numerous love affairs as for her talents an actress, Lola Montez met with enormous acclaim when in 1853 she burst onto the San Francisco stage. She caused a sensation with her spider dance, "married" a journalist, and retreated to the mining community of Grass Valley, where she encouraged the young, budding actress Lotta Crabtree. Her stay in California was brief, though, as was her life, and she made her farewell appearance in 1856. Courtesy Bancroft Library.
scandalous, Lotta reminded the miners of that little sister or daughter they had left at home. Lotta reportedly made one of her earliest appearances in *The Gaieties*, *Temple of Mirth and Song*, a “bit” theater managed by Rowena Granice, a hardworking wife saddled with a controlling, alcoholic husband and two young sons. That Granice was able to support her children, defend herself against her husband’s financial schemes and physical intimidation, and go on to a respectable career as California’s first novelist and as a journalist in Merced County says much for the variety of economic opportunities available to hardworking women of the era.69

In California, theater seemed a more natural environment for women than in more staid eastern America, opening another female occupational niche: theater manager. The first to adopt this employment, Sarah Kirby, took over the refurbished Eagle Theatre (renamed the Tehama) near Sacramento’s embarcadero. It had flooded out on Christmas Eve 1849, as miners first stood on the benches and then allegedly hung from the balcony to enjoy the performance as the waters rose. By March 1850, when Sarah Kirby took over, the emphasis was on classical plays for respectable women (and men), including *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *Don Caesar de Bazan*. She also sponsored benefit performances for such causes as the Odd Fellows and Masons Hospital, wedding the slightly shady world of the theater to objectives of good, feminine virtue. When a cholera epidemic closed the Tehama that November, Kirby and her partner, James Stark, traveled to San Francisco and assumed management of impresario Tom Maguire’s Jenny Lind Theater. She continued in both arenas despite the devastations of fire, marrying Stark after the death of her first husband, enjoying friendship and some rivalry with other theater managers, spending two theatrical interludes in Australia, and leaving California for good for the New York stage in 1869.70 Her activities paved the way for other women theater managers, including Laura Keene. Keene served her apprenticeship in Sacramento, Marysville, Stockton, and San Francisco, afterward making a national impact in New York, where she established a respectable niche for “lady managers” at the pinnacle of American theater.71

**RECOUROSE TO RESPECTABILITY**

The preoccupation with the “proper” role for respectable women that kept Mary Jane Megguier from guiltlessly viewing Lola Montez came partly from competitive motives. Since “exotics” could generally earn so much more ready money than “good” women (often with less effort), stressing virtues embedded in Yankee mores could help balance the scale. In such circumstances, respectable women carefully policed their own society.

Protected largely by her own respectability, widow Mary Ball, who first operated
a San Francisco boardinghouse, took umbrage when one of her boarders "invited a woman called Helen to dine here today. As she is not a respectable woman, I shall not submit to the insult, but go out to dinner." Ball went visiting that evening, and reported that "everyone commends my conduct in reference to Helen, but as it turned out, she did not come." Three days later her boarder and his friend were "still in high indignation at my daring to refuse to countenance a woman that neither would introduce as a companion to their wives." Yet, as will be shown, Ball knew from previous experience with would-be seducers the price exacted for moral laxity.

In a similar situation, highly respectable Sarah Royce had attended a Benevolent Society Ball, organized and "conducted by the ladies of different churches, of which there were, in the city, already four." Although the ladies were bent on diverting the Forty-niners, only wholesome diversions were allowed. Then arrived a "man, prominent for wealth and business-power, bearing upon his arm a splendidly-dressed woman, well known in the city as the disreputable companion of her wealthy escort." The good church ladies sent some "gentlemen" to invite them both to leave. "Of course," she concluded smugly, "there was nothing for him to do but comply; and all went on again pleasantly." Even in gold-rush San Francisco, the force of female moral suasion overruled the world of vice.

The churches to which Royce referred were all of Protestant denominations, led by the Presbyterians. They had organized in May 1849 with six members, including two women, the previously mentioned Sarah B. Gillespie of Hong Kong and Macao, and Ann Hodghton, of the missionary church at Valparaiso, Chile (evidently come to California to save a different sort of heathen). They were quickly followed by the Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Unitarians, involving women throughout. Just as the Gillespies had brought the first Chinese woman to California, the Episcopal minister brought the first woman of African descent, Annie Garrick (later Mrs. Peters), originally of St. Croix, in the Caribbean. Again religion superseded race, adding to gold-rush feminine diversity.

Although the Spanish-speaking Catholics of San Francisco had continued to worship at Mission Dolores, the influx of Irish and French Catholics, particularly the former, led to the establishment of the aptly named St. Patrick's Church in 1851. The attached school and orphanage came under the administration of five Sisters of Charity, led by Sister Frances Assisium McEnnis. While culturally marginalized, the Californios found some stability in religious continuity, supported by women's religious orders.

Despite the presence of Catholic congregations, eastern-based Protestantism became the dominant persuasion in gold-rush California. It prescribed a particular role for women, as noted by the first Presbyterian (and first Protestant) minister in San
German-speaking many California Francisco: “not till loved ones are here and the charms of ‘sweet, sweet home’ adorn the shores of our [San Francisco] bay . . . will men plant and cherish institutions for coming time, and live for the benefit of immediate and remote generations.” He need hardly have added that without feminine presence, any chance for “immediate and remote generations” was mighty scant.

While much of gold-rush society might have pined for Christian virtue, the Jewish Argonauts certainly did not. In common with other gold seekers, Jewish men greatly outnumbered Jewish women, but the establishment of religious institutions depended solely on them, the requisite gathering being ten adult males. They shared the common problem of providing future generations, however, and, in the local absence of Jewish females, a man had to send for a wife, “whom he knew only by reputation, or because her brother or friend recommended her, and he did not begrudge either the passage money or the costly outfit.” The Jewish women brought into this distinctive society then formed their own separate organizations and, in many cases, established their own institutions for themselves and their children. For example, in 1854, San Francisco supported a Jewish school with forty to fifty students. By 1855, San Francisco’s Jewish population had grown enough to support two female societies, the Ladies’ United Benevolent Society for so-called Polish Jews (mostly from the Prussian province of Posen) and Der Israelitische Frauenverein for German-speaking Jewish women. Both were allegedly organized to assist poor Hebrew women, but, as historian Rudolf Glanz noted, “It may be assumed that these societies were chiefly social, for . . . there were no Jewish women in want in San Francisco at that time and, indeed, few Jewish women.”

Since most of the Jews were merchants and observed a Saturday Sabbath, their stores remained open on Sunday. This practice prompted anti-Semitic rhetoric when a Sunday law for Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties passed the state assembly in 1855, a bill that reflected moral sensibilities of Protestant women. “There is a similar law in New York and some other Northern States,” noted Daniel Levy, probably the leading French Jew in gold-rush California, “but a special clause allows the Jews to keep their establishments open on Sunday, if they observe their Sabbath. The California law does not permit this exception, which at the very least would safeguard the principle of religious freedom.”

Disregarding this ideal, other Protestant women brought the Sunday-closing issue to the Mother Lode in 1856. In Columbia, where the Presbyterian minister had so far been ineffectual in this matter, women “passed around a petition and easily collected the signatures of a majority of merchants who promised to observe the [Christian] Sabbath.” Among those affected were probably Jewish merchant Benjamin F. Butterfield and his wife, Malvina, in nearby Jamestown. This couple, with their partner, Mr. Klein, must have felt doubly isolated as Protestant values crept deeper into formerly carefree California.
THE VALUE OF DOMESTICITY

Even outside of the churches, the entrenched notion of female purity gave respectable women increased power. Mary Ballou, in Negro Bar, wrote home of her actions when a fight took place in the store (evidently connected to the boardinghouse where she worked). She had never gone in there before, but when she saw one man draw a pistol on another, “I ran into the store and Beged and plead with him not to kill him for eight or ten minutes not to take his life for the sake of his wife and three little children.” That night at supper she learned of her own success, as the assailant grumbled that “if it had not been for what that Lady said to him Scheles would have been a dead man.”86 She also described how she earned her money: “the first week earnt 23 dollars sewing for the Spanish Ladies the second week earnt 26 dollars.”87 Eight months later she was given a “present” of a fifty-dollar gold piece for nursing “a French lady one week,” and then she went to work in a boardinghouse for one hundred dollars a month for five months. (Her husband made only seventy-five dollars a month at the same establishment.)88 A similar experience came to the attention of Sarah Royce, who during her 1849 stay in Weaverville was hailed by the only other woman in the camp: “[I]n quite an exultant mood [she] told me that the man who kept the boarding-house had offered her a hundred dollars a month to cook three meals a day for his boarders, that she was to do no dishwashing and was to have someone to help her all the time she was cooking. . . . Her husband, also, was highly pleased that his wife could earn so much.”89

This high value placed on chores that women did for free at home helped many to prosper, although married women who could count on a man to back them up sometimes did better than unmarried ones. Married Mary Jane Megquier wrote to her daughter about a typical day at her San Francisco boardinghouse. It started at “seven o’clock when I get up and fry the potatoes then broil three pounds of steak, and as much liver . . . ,” continuing with other great quantities of food for each meal including “lamb . . . beef, and pork, baked, turnips, beets, potatoes, radishes, sallad, and that everlasting soup. . . . [of which] I have cooked every mouthful that has been eaten excepting one day and a half that we were on a steamboat excursion.”90 She also made “six beds every day and do the washing and ironing,” although she had the help of another woman who swept, set the table, and washed “the dishes and carpets which have to be washed every day,” presumably for wages.91 By January of 1853, she reported, “[o]n the whole take more money in one month here than I could in the states in two years.”92

The widow Mary Ball, proprietress of a rival boardinghouse, was not so lucky. She experienced frequent difficulty in collecting debts from her boarders and worried about her reputation when some men (both single and married) made advances toward her and women gossiped about the results. “When I think of this mortifying
The artist-Argonaut Leonardo Barbieri painted Jane Bushton Allen while on a visit to Monterey in the early 1850s. A native of England who had gone to live in Australia, she arrived in 1850 at the old Pacific capital, where she supported herself and her children by running a boardinghouse, an occupation pursued by numerous women in California. It is not unlikely that Barbieri executed the portrait in exchange for room and board.

_Courtesy Colton Hall Museum, City of Monterey._

affair,” Ball lamented in one instance, “I am sick at heart, all the women keep as clear of my parlor as they would of the pest house. I shall never humble myself to them, for where there is no sin there should be no shame. If I had my money I would not be here to suffer as I do, and as I have, one month longer.”93 Still unable to collect some debts, she overcame the gossip and was again mixing socially when in February 1851 she assumed the position of manager at the partially completed Oriental Hotel. When her chambermaid, Bridget, left for a place in a private home, she wrote, “I am obliged to sew very late at night to get things for the beds, we have
many more arrivals and not half the necessaries to complete the house."94 Bridget returned a week later, seeking reinstatement through the good offices of Jane, Ball's assistant, but Ball refused. "Fortunately I got a chambermaid that very morning, so did not want her."95 Despite all these reported difficulties, at least three independent women were making a respectable living at the Oriental Hotel.

Domestic work offered even more poignant opportunities for African American women. Many of those who came west in the Gold Rush were slaves, although census records remain silent on exact numbers. By mutual agreement, slaveholders sometimes allowed slaves to purchase their "Freedom Papers," after laying up a tidy sum for an indolent master. For example, the slave George Dennis worked as a porter for his white master (and father) in the Eldorado Hotel, "a tent measuring 30 by 100 feet ... brought from New Orleans." This flimsy San Francisco establishment offered faro and monte tables by day and women by night. George swept up periodically, saving the sweepings, "and at the end of three months, he paid, in five and ten cent pieces, the sum of $1000" for his own bill of sale. When two of his father's gaming partners decided to bring cattle to California from Ohio and offered to fetch George's mother, he paid his father an additional $950 for her purchase. George "rented one of the [Eldorado] gambling tables at $40 per day for the privilege of his mother serving hot meals in the gambling house on it. Eggs were selling at $12 per dozen, apples 25 cents apiece, and a loaf of bread $1. While her expenses were heavy, she averaged $225 a day."96 One wonders what looks or words passed between her and the father of her son, their former master. The granddaughter of this enterprising woman, later Mrs. Margaret L. Dennis-Benston, became an honors high school graduate, "efficient in the Spanish and Chinese languages, and afterward taught in a private school for Chinese."97 Such racial intermingling, particularly among people of color, was one of the legacies of gold-rush California.

Domestic skills also benefited Mary Ellen Pleasant, probably the most famous free woman of African descent. She arrived in San Francisco in 1849 with inherited money from the death of her first husband and an enviable reputation as a cook. A group of men seeking to employ her crowded the dock, so she auctioned off her culinary services "with the stipulation that she should do no washing, not even dishwashing."The high bid was $500, "the highest wage paid to a cook, although several others received as much as three hundred dollars a month."98 She allegedly invested her savings with an accounting firm, West and Harper, and went on to much greater prosperity and influence.99

This firm proved particularly sympathetic to African Americans, as illustrated by the enslaved Mrs. Jane Elizabeth Whiting and her three children, brought to San Francisco in 1856. They accompanied their mistress, a Mrs. Thompson, who was going to meet her husband on his ranch in Petaluma, guided by their oldest son,
Howard. The Whitings maintained the fiction that they were free servants all the way across Panama (which would otherwise have granted manumission) but revealed their secret to abolitionists on board the boat steaming up the Pacific Coast. The abolitionists convinced them that since California was a free state, their arrival ensured freedom (a very problematic assertion, at best), and convinced them to be first to disembark. Mrs. Whiting and her children were then hustled to "a colored boarding house . . . which was known as the 'Harper & West Boarding House.' . . . The colored people in San Francisco held a mass meeting and decided to protect them in every way possible." They changed the family name from Whiting to Freeman, found work for the mother, and instructed the children to stay indoors with the shutters closed. But after many long weeks the children ventured outside to play. Another of the former steamer passengers recognized them as the escaped slaves and alerted their mistress, Mrs. Thompson, who had settled on her ranch in Petaluma. Interestingly, she never tried to reclaim them, and "fifteen years afterwards 'Aunt Jane' and her former mistress met on the streets of San Francisco, and recognized each other and talked together, learning that for five weeks, while Mrs. Thompson was in search of these slaves, that they were boarding within a short distance of them all the time."100

Other slave women obtained freedom in different ways. Mary Ann Harris worked as a "nurse girl" for a Dr. Ross, who was stationed with his family on Alcatraz Island. She was earning four dollars a month to pay for her freedom when "an old colored woman by the name of Aunt Lucy Evans stole her off the island" and freed her.101 The most famous of California's enslaved women, Biddy Mason, had to go to court to emancipate herself and her family. In 1850, she had walked all the way from Hancock, Mississippi, behind a caravan of three hundred wagons drawn by oxen (imagine the dust!), driving cattle while minding her own three daughters, Ellen, Ann, and Harriet. After four years of residence in San Bernardino, her owner decided to take his family and slave entourage to Texas, a slave state. They went westward to catch a ship, and had been gone only a few days "when the news reached Los Angeles, through a Mrs. Rowen, of San Bernardino, that these slaves were . . . going back into slavery." The sheriff of Los Angeles County arrested their master. Biddy Mason appeared at the trial not only with her own children but with six of the eight children of her fellow slave—a seventh being at work and the eighth, a newborn babe, lying by the side of her recovering mother. The judge freed all of them, and Mason went on to become a "confinement nurse." She bought property well outside the Los Angeles city limits, but, when the city boomed, sold parcels at a profit and used the proceeds for the good of her race and other downtrodden, including paying "taxes and all expenses on church property to hold it for her people."102 Her efforts not only ensured the uplift of her race, but added to the weight of Protestantism—no matter how segregated—in changing California.
A DIFFERENT PLACE

Despite the transplantation of so much of Yankee society, certain values were transformed under female direction, as befitted the keepers of the moral flame. Marriage itself became more fleeting, as women, much more often than men, sought to change partners to increase their financial well-being or to unload a vicious spouse. In part, California law allowed easier divorces, and women were not reticent about taking advantage of this opportunity. California joined a group of western states where the overwhelming majority of divorce cases were instigated by wives, and San Mateo and Santa Clara counties led the nation in divorces from 1850 to 1890.103

One sensational divorce case highlighted myriad societal changes spawned by the California Gold Rush. In 1899, Lucy Hite sued aging multimillionaire John Hite for divorce, claiming half his property as settlement. This case was unusual because Lucy was a southern Miwok, and Hite’s gold-rush fortune was apparently built on the care and goodwill of Lucy and her sister. As the story goes, Argonaut John Hite had survived a snowstorm under the protection of a southern Miwok named Maresa, who, after they became lovers, led him to the gold-bearing waters of the South Fork of the Merced River. When Maresa died, Hite married her sister, Lucy, according to Indian rites. They lived together continuously from 1871 until about 1886 while Hite’s fortune swelled. When in 1897 sixty-seven-year-old John Hite “quietly married” a thirty-six-year-old white widow, Lucy took John to court. Despite Lucy’s adoption of (out-of-date) American clothing and her long-term association with whites rather than Indians at John’s insistence, she was not accepted by most white Californians. With blue tattoos on her chin and forehead, Lucy hardly fit into the society that ate off porcelain plates on linen tablecloths. Although the trial court found for Lucy, the death of the judge led to a retrial and an out-of-court settlement. Lucy withdrew to Indian Peak Ranch above Mariposa in the southern Mother Lode, by then virtually deserted by miners. John died in San Francisco in 1906 on the morning of the earthquake. His remains were incinerated in the ensuing fire along with the funeral parlor that would have buried him, but his heirs haggled over his estate for years. Lucy benefited little and lived simply, returning to her Indian associations and older ways. She wove traditional baskets, some of which now belong to the National Park Service.104

The collection and preservation of Lucy Hite’s baskets illustrates not only the destruction of the Miwok in absolute numbers, but of much of the culture that they carried. Like other groups present in the California Gold Rush, they still persist, but in altered circumstances. On the coast, Indians had been succeeded by Californios, whose own traditional views and feelings differed widely from those portrayed in American pulp fiction. Both groups foundered under waves of Argonauts—male and female—from almost every continent on earth: adventurers and gamblers; slaves
seeking survival, then freedom; artistic nonconformists; hardworking individuals who sometimes chafed against the strait-laced society that they had transplanted to California. This tidal wave of settlement surged first over the Mother Lode, where Jenny Wimmer once sewed shirts for the natives. Indigenous peoples died or were displaced, and the Indian woman’s basket became a carefully preserved artifact rather than a utilitarian mining tool.

Women were forced into economic adaptation, as men, specifically Yankees from the eastern states, increasingly monopolized the gold. They ventured various strategies, partly using transplanted tactics, partly through innovation. Increasing numbers of respectable Yankee women stratified and hardened California’s once-fluid society based on their own religious and ethical standards, yet many changes could never be reversed. Throughout these events, women acted upon and responded to the Gold Rush in varied, subtle, and significant ways. Weaving women’s diversity, adversity, and opportunity into gold-rush California enriches our history even more than did Aunty Jenny’s gold.

NOTES

2. Paul, Discovery, 177, 46.
3. Ibid., 174.
4. The term “Yankee” is being used throughout this essay in preference to “Anglo” to refer to those who came from the eastern United States.
7. Quoted in Paul, Discovery, 73.
17. Quoted in Delilah Beasley, The Negro Trailblazers of California (Los Angeles, 1919), 68.
21. Quoted in Hurtado, Indian Survival, 176. Hurtado stresses the power of the antisouthern invective, but misses the overtones of racial miscegenation then associated with "degraded" southern society.
27. See Albert L. Hurtado, Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 134–36, for a discussion of the publicity and the event's interpretation by historian Hubert Howe Bancroft.
31. On the Bear Flaggers, see the views of Vallejo de Leese in Morton, “Excavating Mexican American Voice,” 83–84, 87–88; on fertility, see quotations from Dorotea Valdez and Isidora Filomena de Solano, quoted in ibid., 91, 96.
37. Ibid., 292.
38. Ibid., 276.
42. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 185.
47. Ibid., 74.
51. Ibid., 238.
59. Quoted in Yung, Unbound Feet, 33. Italics in the original.
61. Yung, Unbound Feet, 33; Levy, They Saw the Elephant, 166.
63. Albert Benard de Russailh, quoted in Yung, Unbound Feet, 33.
64. Tong, Un submissive Women, 14.
65. Ibid., 11–12.
68. Ibid., 62.
71. Ibid., 45, 51–76.
75. Ibid., 692–95. Sarah Gillespie shifted her allegiance from the Presbyterians to the Episcopalians as a result of her husband's Episcopal faith, which led to her confirmation, previously recounted. See Smith, "Gillespie Brothers," 28.
76. Beasley, Negro Trailblazers, 121.
77. Ibid., 697.
80. Glanz, Jews of California, 37.
81. Ibid., 35.
82. Ibid., 41.
85. Glanz, Jews of California, 51.
86. Ballou, "I Hear the Hogs in my Kitchen," 11.
87. Ibid., 6.
88. Ibid.
89. Royce, Frontier Lady, 83.
91. Ibid., 46–47.
92. Ibid., 69.
94. Ibid., 180.
95. Ibid., 181.
97. Ibid., 121.
101. Ibid., 91.