

ORIGINS OF THE NORTH GEORGIA GOLD RUSH

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On a crisp autumn day in 1828, young Benjamin Parks was returning home from a "lick log" on the western side of the Chestatee River where he and his friend, Lew Ralston, provided salt for their cattle. The deer were plentiful at that time of year in the mountains of northern Georgia and "Uncle Benny," as he was known to the locals in later years, strolled quietly through the woods hoping to catch sight of a supply of meat on the hoof. While engaged in thoughts of deer steak, he accidentally kicked up an unusual stone. The color of this otherwise common stone caught his attention and he paused for a closer look. As he knelt and held the rock in his hand, its true nature became clear to him. Years later, he would remember that the color was something like that of an egg yolk--a deep rich yellow hue. It was gold.¹

This has come to be the traditional view concerning the initiation of Georgia's great gold mining period and subsequent removal of the Cherokees. Popular works, such as Andrew Cain's *History of Lumpkin County*² and Lou Harshaw's *The Gold of Dahlonega*³, have tended to remain loyal to the legend over the years. However, while there may be some truth to the tale, it is by no means the whole story.

For all the popular interest in Georgia's gold rush, the "bibliography of the Georgia gold era is," as one historian recently put it, "thin indeed."⁴ E. Merton Coulter's work on the gold rush town of Auraria⁵, *The U.S. Branch Mint at Dahlonega* by Clair Birdsall⁶, and *The Neighborhood Mint* by Sylvia Head and Elizabeth Etheridge,⁷ are the only books to examine any aspect of this period in a scholarly fashion. These are joined by only two articles, "Georgia's Forgotten Industry" by Fletcher Green,⁸ and "The Southern Gold Rush" by Otis Young.⁹ All but Birdsall briefly address the question of how the gold rush actually began. However, they either perpetuate the Parks story or repeat the stories of a few writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who do not cite their sources, evidently relying upon legend and hearsay.

So the question remains, when and how did the gold rush begin? Is there evidence to support the Parks legend? And was it in fact the discovery of gold on Cherokee lands that led Georgia to declare her authority over the Indians in December of 1828? These are some of the questions to be addressed in searching for the "Origins of the North Georgia Gold Rush."

During the Colonial and Early National periods there was

sporadic excitement over the prospect of gold in Virginia and the Carolinas, but nowhere was there an influx of gold-fevered prospectors commonly referred to as a "gold rush." Then in the 1820s a series of discoveries from Maryland to Alabama resulted in a national excitement that led to the first gold rush in American history. The richest portion of the gold belt was located in northern Georgia, and it was to this area that most of the prospectors were attracted.

No one is certain when the first discovery of gold was made in Georgia. There are no contemporary sources that name a single individual as "first" discoverer, nor is there any firm indication of a date attached to such a find earlier than July of 1829. This is significant since some later claims to a first discovery fall between 1826 and 1828.

The earliest date for the discovery of gold in Georgia is given by James Mooney in his *Myths of the Cherokee*, published in 1900. According to the testimony of an old Cherokee named James Wafford, a Cherokee boy found the first Georgia nugget about the year 1815 while playing along the banks of the Chestatee River. However, there are no original sources to back up Wafford's claim.¹⁰ Another "first find" was announced in an article by W. H. Fluker entitled "Gold Mining in McDuffie County, Georgia," published in a 1903 issue of *Transactions of the American Institute of Mining Engineers*. According to Fluker, two English miners who were traveling as peddlers through McDuffie County in 1823 spotted a quartz vein rich in gold.¹¹ Although gold mining certainly occurred in McDuffie County, there is no original material to support the story. In any case, the McDuffie County gold area is an isolated geological formation 100 miles south of the main gold region that came to be known as the Dahlonega Gold Belt.

Another claim of a first discovery was made by Lucian Lamar Knight in his 1917 work, *A Standard History of Georgia and Georgians*. According to Knight, gold was discovered in 1826 near the town of Villa Rica. For a time, says Knight, this area became "a sort of Klondyke, to which argonauts of the period rushed with pick in hand to unearth the fortunes which they here expected to find."¹² However, Knight does not cite the source of this information, and there is no evidence to suggest that gold was mined in Carroll County prior to 1829.

Claims to discoveries farther north in the Dahlonega Belt, leading to Georgia's gold rush, are as unsubstantiated as they are numerous. In an 1896 issue of the Georgia Geologic Survey, Yeates, McCallie and King tell of a slave who found gold in a branch of the Nacoochee River in 1828.¹³ At about the same time, according to

Fletcher Green, another black man found gold on Bear Creek near the present site of Dahlonega.¹⁴ Another account tells of a man named Jesse Hogan who found gold on a branch of Ward's Creek, also near Dahlonega.¹⁵

Thomas Bowen is said to have made yet another discovery on Duke's Creek in what is today White County. According to Judge John Underwood, to whom Bowen related his story, "There came up a storm and blew down some tall timber along Duke's Creek . . . and in the roots of the timber Mr. Bowen found the first gold ever discovered . . . in Georgia."¹⁶ William Blake told of another Duke's Creek find in his 1860 report on the *Auraria Mines of Georgia*. According to Blake, a man named John Witheroods (A Dahlonega newspaper, the *Mountain Signal*, later gave the spelling as "Witherow."¹⁷), found a three ounce nugget in the little mountain stream in the year 1829.¹⁸ And Benjamin Parks, according to personal testimony, made his find in 1827 just east of the Chestatee River in what was then Hall County but would later become part of Lumpkin County.

These stories concerning the origins of Georgia's gold rush period have circulated for more than a century and a half. Some have even been cited in scholarly books and articles. Even so, not a single shred of solid contemporary documentation has been found to support any of these claims. The closest thing to such evidence for any of them comes from an 1833 article by Jacob Peck which appeared in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*. According to Peck,

The discovery of gold in Habersham county has been so recent, not more than two years since, that but little has been done to develop the metals concealed there. A gentleman of the name of Wilhero, made researches by comparing the face of the country and appearance of the branches and streams with the gold section in North Carolina, and found deposits of gold through Habersham and Hall counties, and then discovery followed discovery.¹⁹

It is possible, maybe even probable, that William Blake's "Witheroods" and the *Mountain Signal*'s "Witherow" represent later incarnations of Peck's "gentleman of the name of Wilhero," but since none of the writers cite their evidence, there is no way to be sure.

The most widely accepted claim of a first discovery is that of Benjamin Parks. As an old man of ninety-one, "Uncle Benny" told his story to a reporter from the *Atlanta Constitution* in July of 1894.

The article mentions the year 1827 as the time of discovery, but this could not have been the case since Parks went on to say that the area was being invaded by gold prospectors within a few days of his discovery. Furthermore, a conflicting story on this point comes to us fourth-hand from the testimony of friend of Parks who related the story to his daughter. A 1985 article by Larry Mitchell, which appeared in the *North Georgia Journal*, quotes Parks directly. "It was my birthday (October 27), so I'd ought to know," recalled the old man. "I was following a deer . . . hoping it wouldn't turn across the river, for late October is no time for fording. I wasn't walking good as common and was well'nigh tired down, for I wore some new birthday boots not yet broke in." Word of the discovery spread quickly and, according to the Mitchell article, Parks himself declared, "the to-do that followed was going full steam before ever 1829 was rung in."²⁰

The property on which Benjamin Parks made his find was owned by the Reverend Robert O'Barr, pastor of the Yellow Creek Baptist Church where Parks was a member. He asked O'Barr for a lease on the site and the good reverend, thinking the request a joke, laughed at the suggestion that gold might be mined on his land. But O'Barr finally agreed to a forty year lease whereby he would be paid one-fourth of the gold mined on the property. Parks took on a partner, Joel Stephens, and together they returned to the spot where young Benjamin first stumbled over the sparkling stone. They turned up a pan-full of dirt and to their amazement found it speckled with gold. Uncle Benny later recalled, "It was more than my eyes could believe."²¹

When O'Barr found that his property indeed contained gold he tried to buy back the lease he had sold to Parks, but Parks refused to sell. Exasperated, O'Barr sold the lot in January of 1830 for \$1600. This was not a bad price considering that he had bought the place only eighteen months earlier (July 1828) for one hundred dollars.²² Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell exactly when gold was found on the O'Barr lot during the time between July of 1828 and January of 1830.

Regardless of the exact date, and despite the popularity of the Parks legend, no firm evidence for gold in Georgia is found until 1 August 1829 when the *Georgia Journal*, a newspaper published in Georgia's capitol at Milledgeville, printed the following notice:

GOLD.--A gentleman of the first respectability in Habersham county, writes us thus under date of 22d July:

'Two gold mines have just been discovered in this county, and preparations are making to bring these hidden treasures of the earth to use.'

So it appears that what we long anticipated has come to pass at last, namely, that the gold region of North and South Carolina, would be found to extend into Georgia.

This is not to say that no gold had been found in Georgia prior to the summer of 1829. However, one may draw the conclusion that certainly no gold rush was underway prior to that time. The *Journal* and other Georgia newspapers ran articles telling of gold strikes in Virginia and the Carolinas throughout the middle to late 1820s. If such strikes in Georgia had been common knowledge before the summer of 1829, the state's newspapers would hardly have ignored them while reporting gold discoveries in other states.

In the autumn of 1829 articles describing the vast wealth of Georgia's gold region began appearing in newspapers throughout the state. By the end of that year the first genuine gold rush in American history was going full tilt. It is difficult to say how many gold-fevered prospectors were attracted to north Georgia in late 1829, but it is clear that they numbered in the thousands. Best estimates place the total number of these "29ers" at as many as ten thousand.²³ *Niles' Register* reported that there were at least four thousand miners washing the gold-rich sands on Yahoola Creek alone.²⁴

The greater part of this early mining activity took place illegally on Cherokee lands. The rush of prospectors into Cherokee territory was known even at the time as the "Great Intrusion." The general assumption seems to have been that the discovery of gold on Cherokee lands provided the primary motivation for Georgia's extension of authority over the Cherokees and was the ultimate cause of Cherokee removal. But in fact, Georgians had coveted the lands of the Cherokees long before they knew of gold in the region.

Georgia's first efforts at Indian removal came in 1802 when the state gave up its claims to the areas that are today Alabama and Mississippi in exchange for a promise from the federal government to remove all Indians from her remaining claims "as soon as the same can be peaceably obtained on reasonable terms."²⁵ Georgia's attention was directed first against the Creeks who inhabited the rich cotton land on the east bank on the Chattahoochee. By 1826 the fate of the Creeks was sealed with the Treaty of Washington, and Georgia

quickly turned its attention northward to the Cherokee Nation, bounded on the south by the Chattahoochee River and on the east by the Chestatee.

In December of 1826, nearly three years before the gold rush began, Georgia's senate passed a resolution requesting that the president of the United States take steps to initiate a treaty with the Cherokees, "the object of which shall be to extinguish the title to all or any part of the lands now in their possession within the limits of Georgia."²⁶ The federal government was reluctant to act on Georgia's request since it was bound by previous treaty obligation to protect the Cherokees from further white encroachment. Additionally, the 1802 agreement between Georgia and the federal government stipulated that Indian lands must be "peaceably obtained." However, the Cherokees made it clear that they had no intention of giving up their nation without a struggle.

Impatient with U. S. authorities and alarmed at the entrenchment of the Cherokees, Georgia took matters into her own hands. In December of 1828, the state legislature enacted a bill mandating the extension of Georgia's authority over Cherokee lands, to take effect on 1 June 1830. After that date all laws and customs of the Cherokee Nation would be null and void.²⁷ There is no indication that gold was generally known to exist on Cherokee lands, or anywhere else in Georgia, at the time this act was passed, and no contemporary source cites gold as a motivating factor for the act's passage. But when gold was discovered on Cherokee land, Georgia's lust for the territory became all the more intense. In December of 1828, however, that the Cherokees possessed land the state claimed was reason enough for Georgia to take it.

Within three years of Georgia's taking control of Cherokee lands, the area was surveyed and raffled off in a state lottery which barred the Indians themselves. Despite the Cherokees' continued protests and their victory in the famous case of *Worcester v. Georgia* whereby Georgia's position was declared unconstitutional, the Georgia Indians were rounded up and sent westward on the Trail of Tears. By 1839, the once mighty Cherokee Nation had vanished from the area that is today northern Georgia. There can be little doubt that the Cherokee's expulsion was hastened by the discovery of gold within their nation, but gold or no gold, Georgia was determined to have the land.

Details surrounding the origins of the north Georgia gold rush remain vague at best. Certainly by autumn of 1829 the Cherokee Nation and adjacent Georgia counties were being flooded with prospectors hungry for gold, but this is the most that can be stated

with any degree of accuracy. Although they are colorful and exciting, claims of "first" discoveries of gold in north Georgia remain unsubstantiated in spite of "Uncle Benny's" pronouncement nearly 100 years ago that he "turned up the first nuggets ever seen about here." "Other men may claim it," he said, "men will claim anything--but dog-my-cats if I ain't the one sure enough."²⁸ Benjamin Parks may indeed have the best claim to making the discovery that started the gold rush, if for no other reason than his is the only first-hand account. But the inconsistencies of his story and lack of supporting evidence must call the account into question. Still, the Parks legend, along with other tales of first discoveries, to a large degree provide the mystery around which the joy of historical inquiry is constructed. And who knows? There may come a day, however remote the possibility, when there is found in an attic or a courthouse basement a letter or document from the late 1820s linking the name of Benjamin Parks, or any of the other claimants, to the beginnings of the north Georgia gold rush.

NOTES

¹*Atlanta Constitution*, 15 July 1894; *Dahlonega Signal*, 17 November 1893, in Andrew W. Cain, *History of Lumpkin County for the First Hundred Years, 1832-1932* (Atlanta: Stein Printing Co., 1932; reprint ed., Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Co., 1984), 57, 92-94.

²See note number one for full citation.

³Lou Harshaw, *The Gold of Dahlonega* (Ashville, NC: Hexagon Company, 1976).

⁴Edward Cashin, review of *The Neighborhood Mint: Dahlonega in the Age of Jackson*, by Sylvia Gailey Head and Elizabeth W. Etheridge (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 51 (Fall 1987): 514.

⁵E. Merton Coulter, *Auraria: The Story of a Georgia Gold Mining Town* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1956).

⁶Clair M. Birdsall, *The United States Branch Mint at Dahlonega, Georgia: Its History and Coinage* (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1984).

⁷See note number four for full citation.

⁸Fletcher M. Green, "Georgia's Forgotten Industry: Gold Mining," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 19 (1935): 91-111, 210-28.

⁹Otis E. Young, Jr., "The Southern Gold Rush, 1828-1838," *Journal of Southern History* 48 (August 1982): 373-92.

¹⁰James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Nineteenth Annual Report*, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900), 116.

¹¹W. H. Fluker, "Gold Mining in McDuffie County, Georgia," *Transactions of the American Institute of Mining Engineers* 33 (1903): 119-134.

¹²Lucian Lamar Knight, *A Standard History of Georgia and Georgians* (Chicago and New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1917), 366-67.

¹³Yeates, McCallie and King, *Gold Deposits of Georgia*, 33.

¹⁴Green, "Georgia's Forgotten Industry," 99.

¹⁵*Dahlonega Signal*, July 1874, in Cain, *History of Lumpkin County*, 96.

¹⁶Lucian Lamar Knight Clipping Scrapbook, Georgia Department of Archives and History, 18: 142.

¹⁷*Mountain Signal*, July 1874, in Cain, *History of Lumpkin County*, p. 96.

¹⁸William P. Blake, *Report upon the Property of the Mining Company called the Auraria Mines of Georgia* (Boston: n. p., 1860), 5; *Dahlonega Signal*, July 1874, in Cain, *History of Lumpkin County*, 96; Yeates, McCallie and King, *Gold Deposits of Georgia*, 29.

¹⁹Peck, "Gold Region of Georgia," 3.

²⁰Larry E. Mitchell, "Benjamin Parks: A Really Golden Heritage," *North Georgia Journal* 2, no. 1 (1985): 23.

²¹*Atlanta Constitution*, 15 July 1894; Mitchell, "Benjamin Parks," 23.

²²Sherry Boatright, *The Calhoun Gold Mine: An Introductory Report on its Historical Significance*, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Atlanta (1974), a-11.

²³Green, "Georgia's Forgotten Industry," 101; George R. Gilmer, *Sketches of Some of the First Settlers of Upper Georgia, of the Cherokees, and the Author* (Americus, GA: Americus Book Co., 1926), 264.

²⁴*Niles' Register*, 5 June 1830.

²⁵Ulrich B. Phillips, *Georgia and States Rights* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 35.

²⁶*Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, ... 1826* (Milledgeville: Camak and Ragland, 1826), 208.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 88-89.

²⁸*Atlanta Constitution*, 15 July 1894.