

## **Gold Mines of Plymouth and Bridgewater**

Gold! Vermont hardly seems a place that would have had a gold rush, but for a while in Bridgewater and Plymouth this was the case, and there were many gold mining companies competing for the “big find” from roughly 1851 to 1903. The amount of gold actually recovered is not known, with only a few of the mines producing any gold, many others dug in vain, but the promise of gold kept local people in “agitation” for a long time. More gold mining was done in Bridgewater and Plymouth than anywhere else in the state.

Gold found in stream sediment is referred to as “placer gold,” having washed from the surrounding rocks. Otherwise it was mined from ore, and in Vermont that rock was primarily quartz. Two methods used to recover gold were panning and sluicing, panning being the simplest method. Any pan would do, shoveling in a small amount of sediment and swirling the pan so that the lighter material was washed out. The problem with this method is obvious—it was very time consuming for very little results. A sluice was made of boards about 20 inches wide and 6 to 10 inches deep. “Riffles” were often used in the bottom. These were removable parallel slats with cleats of strip iron nailed 1/4 inch apart. Other sluices were lined on the bottom with a layer of felt or carpet. By adjusting the water flow, fine dirt was washed away leaving only pebbles and the gold which fell to the bottom due to specific gravity—gold being heavier would fall under the lighter material. At the end of the day, the riffles were removed and the gold-laden sand was placed in a “rocker,” similar to a cradle. It was sloshed back and forth to further purify the ore. In the end, hand panning, which required the most skill, was necessary to separate the “black sand” or fine iron particles from the small particles of gold. It is said that “outsiders” almost always found the gold because the local farmers lacked knowledge of the behavior of gold under various conditions.

In 1851 gold was first discovered by Matthew Kennedy in quartz that crossed the talcose slate in Bridgewater. The exact location is unknown but probably at Daily Hollow. “Yellow fever” broke out in the local community continuing until the property was sold to Ira Payson, Charles Kane, and Simeon Johnson who formed the Vermont Gold Mining Company in 1854. They erected a crushing mill with crushers, stampers and washers, experimenting with how to separate the gold from the quartz matrix. Many conflicting reports continued as to how much gold was being mined by that company, and as the stock of the company declined, the property was abandoned. However, by virtue of a mortgage, Mr. Kennedy again got the land back (originally the Thompson farm) but in 1859 he sold it to Abraham Taggert who formed the Taggert Mining company. (In 1879 Taggert sold

the Green Mountain Gold Mining Company.) In many accounts, it seems the value of the gold was exaggerated, especially in out-of-state and big-city newspapers with hopes of getting more stockholders to pay for the continuing expensive extraction process. Locally the claims seemed unreliable. Certainly more money was expended in mill-building and equipment than was secured from the treated ore.

The veins in Bridgewater were in a north-south line all belonging to one general system across the western part of the town. The southernmost was the Ottauquechee River immediately west of Bridgewater Corners. That produced about \$800 from one very rich pocket but then nothing else was ever found. Next was the Taggert vein. Four mills were constructed at various times and there were a few rich veins found, but again any profit was lost because of the expense of the process. Farther north was the Chatauguay group of claims which were, according to George Perkins (Vermont State Geologist) report of 1927-28, "Where very little ore was actually treated and the whole project was a fraudulent scheme."

In 1855, just over the town line of Plymouth in Bridgewater, where the brook that drains the Five Corners area enters the township, gold was also discovered by William Hankerson. (Even in 1978 the stream sediment in the Plymouth Five Corners area still yielded gold but in tiny quantities.) Overall, more gold was discovered in Plymouth than in Bridgewater. There are many accounts in the *Vermont Standard* from 1863 on until 1904, listing partners in various mines. Some other company names were: Springfield Mining, Ottauquechee Mining, Quartz Hill and Pioneer Gold Mining, Northeastern Mining, A.L. Allen & Co., New England Gold Mining Co., New York & Vermont Mining Co., and Rooks Mining.

At another nearby location, a brook running through the farm of Amos Pollard came to be called "Gold Brook." A "canny" old "forty-niner" named Virgil Woodcock was among the first people washing for gold there. After most of the others who began panning had given up, he entered into an agreement with farmer Pollard and put in a log dam. Washing until then had been done by hand in pans and basins. With his sluice over a half-mile long, he achieved a twenty-foot drop which allowed him to greatly increase the amount of gravel he could wash. It was estimated that he took about \$2,000 worth of gold from the brook in one year, but again several reports indicate it was much lower than this. Both Pollard and Woodcock died soon after this, and it was several years before anyone with experience worked the claim. Accounts are confusing, but it also appears that Matthew Kennedy held the mortgage on some land in the Five Corners area which

he sold to the Plymouth Mining Company in 1858 to which William Hankerson returned and took a claim. By hand digging two square rods, he took out \$4000 worth. Encouraged by this, he invested in a water wheel to run machinery to drain the old mine, causing the water to pass through a sluice into which he threw the gold-bearing earth.

I'll focus on the Rooks Mining Company in the southern part of Plymouth since they were considered the most "successful," yet like all the others ended with nothing as the cost far exceeded the returns. A motley assortment of men formed the company in 1882. They included a shoe salesman from New York, a government agent (Charles Rooks) and the assayer Henry Fox, who had no experience but great faith, which endured even after everyone else gave up. The shaft they dug extended 300 feet into the mountainside. Rollers were turned by an engine which crushed the roasted ore, and quicksilver and sulfuric acid were used to extract the gold. (Today there remains a rusted turntable and some warped iron rails used for the tiny cars that brought the ore out of the mountain.) In 1883, operations were on an ambitious scale—a bustling mining town developed and the first gold ingot was produced. There was speculation that the ingots may have been faked, although other accounts insist they were real, but at any rate, it was over-promoted. As with many of the other mines, stock was sold and speculation continued until the board of directors decided to quadruple the capacity of the mine with new equipment. The old machinery was taken down in anticipation and Mr. Fox waited in vain for over three years, but nothing further happened. For the next thirty years, he lived alone in the one remaining house, selling off the property and always searching. He finally became ill, and in 1919 was taken forcibly to a doctor in Ludlow. Insane and suffering from Bright's Disease, he was taken to the Brattleboro Retreat where he died a pauper a few weeks later.

The *Vermont Standard* of November, 1871 says: "At the time the gold panic raged in Bridgewater all the saw and grist mills in the vicinity of the mines were purchased by gold companies and constructed into mills for crushing quartz rock. But the gold speculation is played out,... and the freshet of 1869 swept off the crushers leaving excellent water privileges and as the mountains are densely wooded with spruce and hemlock it is hoped some enterprising person will soon build mills that we do much need." Again the *Standard* of October 1898 says: "Nearly every Bridgewaterite and every gold miner who has prospected there believe that somebody with good luck and proper methods will strike great fortune in gold there and we hope, as we ever have, that this last strike may indicate the long sought spot." The report of the Vermont State Geologist of 1903-1904 states: "It is plain to anyone who knows the facts that some of the good people of

Vermont have been greatly cheated by so-called assayers.” Many people could have saved themselves a great deal of time and money if they had simply consulted the state department of geology who would perform assays free of charge.

In the *Vermont State Geologist's Report* of 1919-1920, George Perkins cites the 1861 report saying that given the labor and expense for the profit, not one in ten who engaged in the process made more than if they'd continued to work their farms. Further if all the gold washed in Plymouth in 1858 were put together and from it deducted the expense of erecting dams, sluices, water wheels and pumps, the remainder, divided equally would not have paid fifty cents a day to each hand.

From all the material I read, it seems that overall the metallic content in the quartz is at a very low percentage and very irregular in distribution. Perkins goes on to say, “There seems to be something about mining that fascinates even sensible people as well as many who are not and, apparently, it will be a long time before unwise investment of money in some sort of mine has ceased.”

Written by Rose Mroszczyk  
July, 2003

Sources: Adams, Gladys, ed., *Bridgewater Vermont, 1779-1976*.  
Hager, Albert, *Gold in Bridgewater*, 1869.  
Hoyt, Coleman, “Stake Your Claim for the Gold!” for WHS, 1991.  
Perkins, George, *Reports of the State Geologist*, VT. Dept. of Min. Inds. and Geology, 1903-1904, 1919-1920, 1927-1928.  
Smith, Beth, “The Plymouth Gold Rush,” *Vermont Life Magazine*, 1951-1952.  
“Mineral Collecting in Vermont,” 1978.