

THE GOLD RUSH AND THE TORTOISE

by **Cyler Conrad**

Three metres beneath the streets of downtown San Francisco lie the remains of a small inlet called Thompson's Cove, a thriving trading port that had its heyday in the middle of the 19th century during the California Gold Rush (1848-1855).

In 2011, I worked on the archeological analysis of this site. It was one of the first well-controlled and properly dated investigations of life in the early days of San Francisco. We uncovered thousands of objects – ceramic and glass bottles, part of a ship's mast and anchor chain, bricks and much more – but one of the most puzzling items was the forelimb of a Galapagos giant tortoise.

This bone was found in a cluster with several others, but it was strikingly distinct. At first, I thought it had to be from a sea mammal, perhaps a harbour seal. It was only after talking to a colleague specialising in Galapagos tortoise anatomy that I came up with a match. I began to research how and why a giant tortoise could have ended up in a major city, thousands of miles from its native home, more than 150 years ago.

The answer, I believe, is gold. In 1848, the discovery of this precious metal at Sutter's Mill in the nearby Sierra Nevada marked the beginning of the California Gold Rush. The news spread quickly. Between 1848 and 1849 alone over 20,000 people from all around the world travelled to the region. But with the transcontinental railroad yet to be built, many of the gold-seekers came by sea. Thompson's Cove and neighbouring coastal settlements became flooded with prospectors, new arrivals spilling into the vibrant and turbulent streets of San Francisco, drinking, gambling, shooting and shouting. This was the American Wild West.

Ships reached San Francisco from all round the world. The most popular passage from the Atlantic was round the tip of South America. Just like the whalers in the first half of the 19th



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Below: Archeologists busy excavating Thompson's Cove in 2011.

Far Right: Whalers collecting sea turtles in the early 1800s, just as Gold Rush entrepreneurs harvested giant tortoises from Galapagos en route to California.

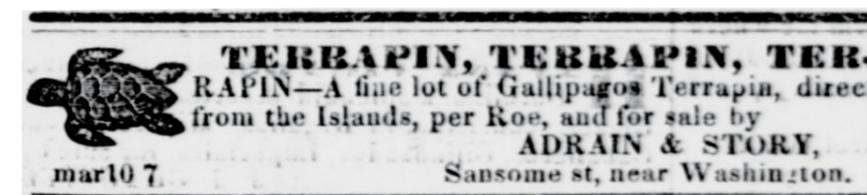
Bottom Right: Gold diggers in the Sierra Nevada, the site that sparked the Gold Rush in 1848.

Right: The Galapagos tortoise humerus excavated from Thompson's Cove.

Below Right: An advert in the Daily Alta California from 11 March 1851 for Galapagos tortoises imported into San Francisco.



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century, the travellers needed fresh food for their long maritime journeys and passed Galapagos on their voyage north. In the days before refrigeration, the hardy nature of a living Galapagos tortoise proved indispensable.

It soon became common practice for these vessels to stop in Galapagos and collect tortoises, colloquially referred to as 'terrapin'. It is not known how many thousands of tortoises were transported to northern California to feed the burgeoning human population, but accounts of more than 500 animals in a single vessel indicate the extent of this activity. According to an eyewitness on board the *Canton*, which passed through Galapagos in 1849, if passengers and crew were unable to take tortoises near the shore they were prepared to venture far inland. The *Canton* left Galapagos with a total of 60 large reptiles, a mixture of tortoises and sea turtles.

Once in California, the prospectors were able to sell the live animals for enormous sums. One man by the name of Franklin Mead reached San Francisco in 1849 and quickly sold 17 Galapagos tortoises for a fortune, roughly \$50,000 adjusting for inflation. Marine turtle racing became a popular pastime, with turtles being released from fenced enclosures behind restaurants onto the streets, providing the population

with entertainment and followed by a hearty meal. The insatiable demand drew these reptiles into cities closer to the gold fields and, for a time, Galapagos tortoises could be seen grazing along the banks of the Sacramento River while they were slowly consumed in Sacramento's saloons.

It was not until the California Academy of Sciences expedition to Galapagos in 1905 that the world began to realize the substantial impact of human activity on all aspects of life in the Islands and especially on the tortoises. It is now clear that the argonauts exploited giant tortoises as much as, if not more, than the whalers had done before them. Whilst whalers collected tortoises solely for their own consumption, commerce took the Gold Rush exploitation to a new extreme. It is only with future research that we will begin to understand just how abundant and damaging this process was to Galapagos during the mid-to-late nineteenth century.

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