

MINING THE AMERICAN WEST

A Bibliographical Guide to Printed Materials  
on American Mining Frontiers  
in the British Library

by

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## PREFACE

There are few geographical regions in the history of the United States that lack a mining frontier. Almost from its discovery, the image of America as a land of golden wealth has presented a powerful image to the world. America's extensive economic resources have led some historians to suggest that the abundance of the land and its use by her citizens and governments is a key factor in shaping the national character. From different angles both Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and David M. Potter's *People of Plenty* [1954] (Ac.2691.dw(26) show the key roles of mineral wealth in the American experience.

There are many reasons why students of American history cannot ignore the mining frontiers. The discovery of precious metals hurried the westward movement of the nation. The discovery of gold in California in January 1848 and the Gold Rush the next year is only the most prominent example. The early history of many western states, especially Nevada, Colorado, Idaho, Arizona, Montana, the Dakotas and Alaska are intimately tied up with mining activities. These were linked to politics and the issues of statehood which were in turn, welded to the growth of American nationalism, encouraging as they did the development of regional and national transportation and communication networks. The international flavour of the mining communities also warrants closer examination for students of comparative history.

American land and water laws are other examples of continuing connections to western mining history. The urban frontier reflecting the boom and bust cycles of

mining communities, remain a factor in American economic history. The hundreds of ghost towns in the West are the most silent reminders of this aspect of mining history.

The investment of European capital in American mining provides another reason for taking a closer look at this area. American labor history is particularly tied into mining history. Additionally, the importance of the science of mining technology, much of which was developed in the American West, provides an important chapter in the history of technology. This includes the history of exploration and the growth of geological knowledge. Other dimensions are less positive. The environmental impact has been significant and remained for later generations to address. And the effects of mining rushes on the original or reserved homes of Native Americans was devastating. Then too, the few who got rich compared with the loss and destruction of so many others, requires continuing research and evaluation.

Yet there is little doubt about the great impact that the discovery, extraction and use of mineral wealth had in American history. While we tend to think of gold and silver, we must also include coal, oil, copper, gas and other extractive minerals.

This bibliography provides a basic guide to the printed materials on this important topic in American History as reflected in the holdings of the British Library. It does not claim to be comprehensive, but it will provide the serious student with a window to the literature on Western American mining history. Included is a short bibliography of the larger topic of world mining frontiers.

David J. Whittaker

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