



The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War

Leonard L. Richards

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It has always been understood that the 1848 discovery of gold in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada influenced the battle over the admission of California to the Union. But now, in this revelatory study, award-winning historian Leonard L. Richards makes clear the links between the Gold Rush and many of the regional crises in the lead-up to the Civil War.

Richards explains how Southerners envisioned California as a new market for slaves and saw themselves importing their own slaves to dig for gold, only to be frustrated by California's passage of a state constitution that prohibited slavery. Still, they schemed to tie California to the South with a southern-routed transcontinental railroad and worked to split off the southern half as a separate slave state. We see how the Gold Rush influenced the squabbling over the Gadsden Purchase, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and various attempts to take Cuba and Nicaragua. We meet David Broderick, a renegade New York Democrat who became a force in San Francisco politics in 1849, and his archrival William Gwin, a major Mississippi slaveholder and politician who arrived in California with the intent of making it a slave state and himself one of its first senators. Richards recounts the Washington battles involving Taylor, Clay, Calhoun, Douglas, Davis, Webster, Fillmore, and others, as well as the fiery California political battles, feuds, duels, and perhaps outright murder as the state came shockingly close to being divided in two.

When war did break out efforts were made to push California to secede, but there was little general enthusiasm for secession, and many prominent Southerners went off to join the Confederate Army. And with the South out of the Union, the Pacific Railroad Act passed, insuring a comfortably northern route.



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