

# The El Dorado County Historical Museum & Research Room

THE EL DORADO COUNTY Historical Museum is located in the historic town of Placerville, California. Eight miles away, gold was discovered in January 1848 in what is now Coloma when James Marshall and others were building a sawmill for John Sutter. This discovery launched the California gold rush, with many hopeful miners arriving in El Dorado County, one of the original twenty-seven counties established with California statehood in September 1850.

The El Dorado County Historical Museum was founded by the County Board of Supervisors in 1973. However, the people of El Dorado County valued their unique history before that. As early as 1921, a museum dedicated to the “discoverer of gold,” James Marshall, was opened by Margaret Kelly in Kelsey, a town about six miles from Placerville. In 1939 the newly formed El Dorado County Historical Society partnered with the Chamber of Commerce to collect artifacts and documents from the county’s past and place them on display in an old stone building just off Placerville’s Main Street. In 1968, Stella Ralston Tracy left as a bequest to the society her home and its contents of beautiful antiques. Mrs. Tracy had long been a supporter of preserving the county’s history, and with this generous gift, the society lobbied the County Board of Supervisors to create and build a county museum. With the oversight of the Historic Museum Commission and the assistance of the society’s volunteers, the El Dorado County Historical Museum opened its doors to offer exhibits, tours, and a research facility.

The mission of the museum is to exhibit and interpret the heritage of the county in a current, accurate, and engaging manner; to be a valuable historical resource to the community through its well-organized research facility, historical exhibits, and educational programs; to collect, document, and preserve artifacts and records significant to the history of El Dorado County using the highest standards of scholarship and professional museum and archival practices; and to provide a rewarding experience for volunteers and enhance the museum’s significance to the community.

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In carrying out this mission, the museum depends on volunteers for its day-to-day operations. The exhibits are open five days a week, with tours offered by docents. There is a schedule of rotating exhibits, all designed to highlight an aspect of El Dorado County history. Our most recent exhibit showcases artifacts from the collection focused on the contributions El Dorado County made to World War I, both at home and abroad.

The museum's research facility has been actively collecting documents, photographs, maps, records, and ephemera related to the county's history since it first opened to the public. The museum's Research Room is generally open five days a week and is staffed by knowledgeable volunteers. The Research Room staff work with researchers to get their questions answered using the collection housed at the museum. This dynamic collection is being sorted and catalogued; most items are not yet available online. The public is welcome to utilize the Research Room's resources in person, by email, by telephone, or by U.S. Mail. What follows is a brief description of the collection.

Currently, more than 27,000 historical images are available to view in binders arranged by geographic location or by last name. The images are of El Dorado County places, buildings, mines, communities, people, and events. All images have been digitized at high resolution and are available for purchase.

Through generous donations from the public, private family collections, and the vigilance of volunteers who search out images on the web and at photo shows, we continue to expand the collection. Please let us know if you would like to share your El Dorado County photographs with us. We will return the original to you and add the image to the museum's collection, which will be made available to the public.

Many people come to the Research Room hoping to learn more about their pioneer ancestors. We have obituaries, notices of births and marriages, family genealogies, funeral notices, and an in-house genealogy database.

With statehood and the first constitution, the infrastructure for county government was established, along with the need for records. In the 1970s, forward-thinking volunteers began to collect historical records that were being thrown away due to their preservation on other media. These volunteers recognized the value of records for historical research. What has survived are probate files (1850–1970), civil and criminal court cases (1880–1951), court minutes and judgments (1849–1950), great registers (voting registration), census records, marriage applications (1910–1981), burial permits (1910–2011), school records, Board of Supervisors minutes (1850–1960), and naturalization records (1910–1950).

Historical records allow us to track the movement of people over time and the growth of communities. The collection contains diaries, letters, and journals; files on historical subjects and people; local newspapers; cemetery indexes; telephone and business directories; railroad and logging company records; and historical mining resources: photographs, maps, newspaper excerpts, mining surveys, mining reports, and artifacts.

Because our county was the site of the original gold discovery, information on mines and mining is eagerly sought by researchers, as well as information regarding water conveyance systems. Property ownership, transportation routes, historical buildings, and a plethora of other information can be found in the museum's historical map collection.

The Research Room has its own non-circulating reference library with publications covering El Dorado County local community histories, family histories, logging and railroad histories, artifact references, oral history transcriptions, and cultural resource reports.

The museum's bookstore offers books on El Dorado County history by local authors, including *Placerville Reflections*, *A Glittering Pot of Gold*, *El Dorado County—A Pictorial History*, *Placerville Then & Now*, *How About That*, biographies of local historical figures such as the Goat Doctor and Snowshoe Thompson, guides to local historical trails, and histories of local communities, plus many more.

Artifacts in the collection are an important resource for the study of the material culture of the people living and working in the county since before the gold rush. Native American baskets and stone tools, historical textiles, mining tools and equipment, household furnishings, narrow-gauge railroad equipment, wagons and carriages, agricultural tools and equipment, and community and local business artifacts are displayed in exhibits illustrating different aspects of the county's history.

One of the more unique artifacts in the El Dorado County Historical Museum is an old wheelbarrow. This wheelbarrow is special because it was made by John M. Studebaker in the 1850s. Young John Studebaker came to Placerville in 1853 as part of the gold rush, hoping to make a fortune by finding gold. However, a local blacksmith was looking for someone to make wheelbarrows for him, which could be sold for \$10 each. Studebaker, having worked in his family's wagon business in South Bend, Indiana, offered to give it a try. After a couple of false starts, he came up with a design to produce a sturdy wheelbarrow that miners wanted. After five years, Studebaker returned home to South Bend with \$10,000 to invest in his



family's business, which thrived. Many years later, in 1912, he returned to Placerville as president of the Studebaker Automobile Company, driving into town in one of his newest Studebaker automobiles. The town threw him a big party at Ohio House, an upscale hotel with a restaurant, and he became reacquainted with what he called the "old cronies" that he had known almost sixty years earlier. To commemorate the event, the photograph reproduced here was taken on the porch of Ohio House, with John Studebaker seen fifth from the left in the front row.

One of the residents of Placerville showed Studebaker an old wheelbarrow that he still had and asked if it was one that Studebaker had made all those years ago. Studebaker confirmed that it was indeed one of his. A few years later, that same wheelbarrow was given to the Historical Society for inclusion in the special history exhibit at the old Chamber of Commerce. When the museum was built in 1973, the wheelbarrow was given a place of honor, and to this day it continues to attract attention as a unique gold-rush artifact.

The museum's exhibits are open Wednesdays through Sundays, with tours available from docents who enjoy sharing the county's history. The Research Room is open when staffed by volunteers every Tuesday from 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M.; and most Wednesdays through Saturdays from 10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. Email or call to confirm Research Room open hours or to make an appointment. The Research Room is closed every Sunday and Monday.

All costs associated with the Research Room support the preservation and maintenance of its collections. There is no charge for research, although donations are always welcome. Photocopies are 25 cents per copy; digital photographs are \$12 per image, with prints starting at \$25. Photographs for publication require an additional use fee. Historical maps are available for sale on CD: Historical County Maps (\$50), Historical Mining Maps (\$35), and Historical Town Maps (\$50). We generally do not scan and email documents,



photos, or maps. Please contact us if you require something sent by email. Cultural resource professionals are asked to visit the Research Room in person, where they will be assisted by a volunteer.

The El Dorado County Historical Museum is located at 104 Placerville Drive (next to the fairgrounds) in Placerville, California. Contact us by phone at (530) 621-5865 or by email at [museum@edcgov.us](mailto:museum@edcgov.us). The museum's website is at <http://museum.edcgov.us>.