

First, there was Carolina gold rush

■ Benjamin Haile's mine became major source of S.C. treasure

Everyone is familiar with the California gold rush of 1849, but few know that there was a Carolina gold rush several decades earlier.

The first gold discovered in America was in North Carolina in 1804, and North Carolina produced all of the gold in America until 1828. In that year, Benjamin Haile, who lived about 3 miles north of where Kershaw now stands in Lancaster County, after hearing about the N.C. gold, decided to investigate the stream on his father's plantation.

After swishing the sand in a pan, young Haile found gold flecks in the bottom. The next year, he sent the first shipment of domestic gold from South Carolina to the Philadelphia mint. The Haile gold mine was destined to produce more gold than any mine east of the Rocky Mountains.

The gold-bearing ore on the Haile property extended up the side of a hill with distinctive veins of gold. For 20 years, Col. Benjamin Haile, the father of the discoverer, leased areas of 50 square feet to outsiders who mined the surface. For Haile and others, the usual rule was that two-thirds of the gold went to the owners as "rent." The deepest hole on the Haile property reached 25 feet.

After 1837, a five-stamp mill successfully extracted gold until the Civil War. Other mines were later discovered. Lancaster and York districts were spotted with small operations, but very few of them made much profit.

The state of South Carolina, from 1826 on, commissioned geologic surveys on a regular basis.



4/25/93
Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

Intended primarily to locate deposits of limestone, marl and other minerals that would benefit agriculture, the surveys nevertheless included information on deposits of gold, as well as lead, iron, copper, granite, slate, etc.

An extensive report prepared in 1848 by M. Tuomey devoted a number of pages to the mines of York and Lancaster districts (Chester had only a few mines, and those were of little consequence).

Tuomey found that York District's mines (48 mines have been recorded) were along a line he called the "iron and limestone belt." The gold was generally associated with iron ore and veined quartz rock. In contrast, in Lancaster District, gold was generally found in streams and closely associated with slate outcroppings.

The gold formation of the mines in the Indian Land area of Lancaster District did cross into York District at one point, at a place called Turkey Head, or Turkey Point, an old Catawba Indian village on the river in back of present-day Indian Land High School.

Tuomey commented that at Belair, the Cureton and Ezell mines on the N.C. line were quite promising.

"At the latter (Ezell's) mine I found as fine hand specimens as I have seen anywhere." (The old Ezell mine is now the site of the Charlotte Rifle and Pistol Club firing range.)

Tuomey wrote, "South and west of the village of Lancaster nearly one-third of the District is covered with the slates of the gold formation, and mines are dotted along the ridges in various directions."

Gradually surface mining of gold played out. By the time of the Civil War, there were only three mines operating in South Carolina: the Haile in Lancaster District, the Martin in York District and the Brewer in Chesterfield District. Then, Confederate authorities took over and mined for copper, which, for the war effort, turned out to be more valuable than gold. Gen. William T. Sherman sent a detachment of troops to the Haile mine to destroy the machinery when he came through South Carolina.

The Haile gold mine, which was sold to Northern interests in the 1880s and has gone through a number of ownerships and changes of name since then, is still in operation.

The Piedmont Mining Co., based in Charlotte, owns the mine. The company reports that the gold at the old Haile site is 96 to 98% pure (22 carat). It takes about 18 tons of rock to produce one ounce of the precious metal.

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Sundays.