

## RETROGRADE MINERAL EXPLORATION AND SETTLEMENT OF WESTERN AND CENTRAL MONTANA DURING THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

by  
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Montana's history of precious metal discovery and settlement were intimately connected. The history of major mining settlements follows a recurrent 3-stage pattern: 1) the initial gold rush sparked by placer gold discoveries with the spontaneous creation of tent and cabin settlements; 2) rapid exhaustion of the placers and migration of miners out of the area; and 3) a second "boom" created by underground mining of the placer's source, typically gold-bearing quartz veins, and the reestablishment of settlements. However, Montana's gold wealth was discovered late relative to other western gold-rushes and was largely an eastward migrating event, rather than the conventionally perceived westward migration of the American frontier.

Miners moved into Montana from the Idaho gold fields in 1862, late compared to California (1840s), Colorado (1859) and Idaho (1860). Gold was discovered in 1862 at Bannack by John White's party and later at Alder Gulch by Bill Fairweather's group. Soon, Virginia City was a booming, placer mining town, closely tied by stage connections to Idaho and Utah. In 1864 placer gold was discovered on the Butte Hill and at Last Chance Gulch. From there the prospectors fanned out across the central Montana plains and explored the Judith, Bears Paw, Highwood, Little Belt and Little Rocky Mountains. The southwest to northeast pattern of gold discovery and settlement was clearly established by 1870, as dictated by the distribution of placer and vein deposits within Montana's Cretaceous and Eocene magmatic belt.

The belated southwest to northeast migration and settlement pattern reflected a) the relative isolation of the Northern Rockies and Plains compared to development occurring along and near the transcontinental transportation corridor further south, and b) the presence of Indian populations across the Northern Rockies that remained beyond the direct control of the Federal Government. The gradual infilling of settlements in central and eastern Montana is vividly reflected in U.S. census records and in the opening of new post offices across the region. Patterns of local government, especially the creation and subsequent subdivision of counties, also reflects Montana's retrograding frontier as it moved eastward late in the 19th century.