California State Mining and Mineral Museum

Our Mission
The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

The specimens in today's collection include a gracefully curved sheet of natural copper, a platinum nugget, gold, precious gems, rocks, and mineral crystals from every continent on Earth.

California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at (209) 742-7625. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact interp@parks.ca.gov.

CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS
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www.parks.ca.gov
The California State Mining and Mineral Museum, situated along Highway 49 in the historic gold-rush town of Mariposa, houses, displays, and interprets the official California State Mineral Collection.

The museum, located at the Mariposa County fairgrounds, is dedicated to teaching the visiting public about the importance of mining and minerals to California’s history, environment, economy, and future.

The collection began in 1880; since then, visitors and researchers have been dazzled by the many exceptional specimens of California’s gemstones and minerals—such as gold, silver, copper, and platinum—in the museum. The remarkable items on display include original mining artifacts and historical documents, precious mineral and gem specimens from all over the world, minerals that glow in the dark, and even several “outer space” rocks (meteorites).

CALIFORNIA MINING HISTORY

Only small mining operations preceded California’s 1848 gold discovery in Coloma. Gems (precious or semi-precious stones) such as turquoise, garnets, and even diamonds had been found in Amador, Butte, El Dorado, Nevada, and Trinity counties. Silver, copper, mercury, and other minerals had previously been mined in California.

News of the 1848 gold discovery brought about 100,000 would-be millionaires from all over the world. Thinking that gold lay around underfoot, some had planned to fill their pockets and return home wealthy. Many gave up after realizing that not even a lot of hard work could make them rich overnight.

California State Mining Bureau

In 1880 State legislators established the California State Mining Bureau. A vital service offered by the new agency was classifying and identifying minerals found anywhere in California. Before long, the new bureau was inundated with specimens submitted for identification from all over the world.

Henry G. Hanks, the first California State Mineralogist, was hired to examine and classify specimens submitted to the Mining Bureau. Hanks was directed to make his findings available for scientific and educational purposes.

A Home for the Collection

The State’s initial collection—1,327 specimens donated by the California State Geological Society—was first displayed in the State Mining Bureau’s San Francisco offices. Ore specimens and donations were constantly added. Between 1880 and 1983, the collection moved five times. The Ferry Building on the Embarcadero housed the collection until 1983 when building renovations forced yet another move.

The Mariposa County Board of Supervisors requested that the specimens be moved to the town of Mariposa; in July 1983, the entire collection was packed and moved to a temporary location in the old Mariposa County Jail. The more valuable specimens were stored in a bank vault in Mariposa.

The collection was finally moved to its new home at the Mariposa County Fairgrounds in 1986, and the former Mining Council Building became the main exhibit area. The museum was transferred to California State Parks in 1999. At present, California State Mining and Mineral Museum is the only state park without any associated land.

The Collection Today

The museum collection has grown tenfold since its beginning and holds over 13,000 specimens, with about 350 rotating on display at any one time. Original historical documents include a map of John C. Frémont’s Mexican
Adjoining the building, a re-created “old mining tunnel,” complete with support timbers and “workers,” interprets the experience of hard-rock miners. In the mining gallery, displays include a full-size windlass (a hand-cranked device that lowered a bucket on a rope to remove mining debris), an ore cart, and a working scale model of a stamp mill, which pounds and crushes ore to extract minerals within it.

**Benitoite, the Official State Gemstone**

In 1906, benitoite (ben-ee-toe-ite)—an extremely rare stone whose crystals are typically blue—was discovered at the Benitoite Gem Mine in San Benito County. The mine, which is now closed, was the world’s only source of gem-quality stones. When displayed under short-wave ultraviolet light, the stone glows vivid, fluorescent blue.

**EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES**

Free children’s activities include the Junior Ranger program. School and group tours focusing on geology, rocks, minerals, and gold rush and mining history are available by reservation.

**SPECIAL EVENTS**

- The annual gem and mineral show in April has exhibits, speakers, children’s activities, and vendors.
- During the Mariposa County Fair on Labor Day weekend, the museum presents free mineral-related activities and crafts for children.
- The museum shop sells jewelry, mineral art and specimens, and books on rocks, minerals, mining, gold prospecting, and California history. Proceeds support the park’s nonprofit association, which funds educational and interpretive programs.

**ACCESSIBLE FEATURES**

The museum exhibits and the gift shop are accessible. Help is available to reach items on top shelves. Designated accessible parking is available, or passengers may be dropped off at the entrance. Some persons may need assistance on the entry ramp.

**PLEASE REMEMBER**

For current information, call the park in advance at (209) 742-7625 or visit [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov).

**NEARBY STATE PARKS**

- Wassama Round House State Historic Park
  Road 628, Ahwanee 93601
  (209) 742-7625  Information

- Columbia State Historic Park
  11255 Jackson St., Columbia 95310
  (209) 532-3184

- Railtown 1897 State Historic Park
  Highway 108 at 5th Avenue
  Jamestown 95327 (209) 984-3953

The legendary Fricot (free-co) Nugget—weighing 13.8 pounds—is the largest remaining intact mass of crystalline gold dating back to the California gold rush. The specimen of gold crystallized when hot gold-bearing quartz veinlets cooled in softer slate and schist rock.

This rare specimen was discovered in a mud pocket deep in the Grit Mine, near the American River’s middle fork, by William Russell Davis in August of 1864. In 1865, Grass Valley resident Jules Fricot purchased it from Davis and displayed it at the 1878 Paris Exposition. The nugget then spent more than 65 years stored in Fricot’s safe deposit box. In 1930, Fricot’s daughter donated the unique specimen to the Museum’s collection.

The Fricot Nugget

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This park receives support in part from a nonprofit organization. For more information, contact California State Mining and Mineral Museum Association P.O. Box 687, Mariposa, CA 95338
http://camineralmuseum.org

Photos courtesy of Jeffrey Scovil

Fluorite  Stibnite
Topaz       Aragonite  Gold
Elbaite