

### ***American Gulch Placer Workings*** ***Site 5ST1170***

American Gulch was the scene of intense placer mining from 1860 through 1903. The entire gulch has been recorded as a historic resource because it constitutes a placer mining landscape created by three successive companies. Due to the gulch's massive size and paucity of intact feature complexes, the gulch was recorded in a cursory manner.

The gulch descends northeast through Farncomb Hill's northeast flank, and its head is approximately 11,000 feet in elevation while its mouth is 10,040 feet in elevation. The gulch is narrow and steep, the walls abrupt, and the flanks forested with second-growth lodgepole pines. A number of historic resources were recorded within the gulch, including three miners' cabin ruins (5ST1171 to 5ST1173), a placer prospect shaft (5ST1174), a workers' housing complex (5ST1242), the Gold Flake Mine (5ST373), the Fair Tunnel (5ST1162), and the Victoria Mill (5ST1169). See the Wapiti Mining Company Sites index map (Figure 2.59) for site boundaries.

American Gulch Placer Workings History

American Gulch holds a place of great importance in Colorado mining. Its history is covered briefly here and discussed in greater depth under both the Wapiti Mining Company above and Chapter 7 (History of the Upper Blue River Drainage).

In 1860, neighboring American, Georgia, and Dry gulches hosted the first major gold rush on the west side of the Continental Divide. The event, known as the Parkville rush, drew thousands of miners who established the cosmopolitan town of Parkville at the confluence of the gulches. The rush became a foundation for additional gold discoveries in Summit County.

American Gulch continued to yield placer gold for decades after the Parkville rush ended. During the early 1870s, several outfits sluiced the gravel deposits by hand, and in 1876, the Fuller Placer Mining Company acquired American, Georgia, and Dry gulches and engaged in a massive and systematic operation. For five years, the company employed a combination of hand-sluicing, booming, and hydraulic monitors to literally scour the gulches from bottom to top. In 1887, the Victoria Mining Company purchased the Fuller assets and resumed production. Seven years later, the Wapiti Mining Company assumed operations and maintained activity until around 1904.

#### American Gulch Placer Workings Description

As a historic resource, American Gulch can be divided into three large segments, each with its own character. The segments are described below in ascending order.

##### Lower Segment

The lower segment is approximately 1,100 feet long and ascends southwest from the Parkville area. Few if any placer workings are left from the Parkville rush of 1860. Instead, the gulch floor is blanketed with gravel and slate sediments deposited by hydraulic mining. Between the 1870s and the late 1890s, the successive Fuller, Victoria, and Wapiti companies worked higher portions of the gulch and their effluent buried the gulch's lower segment. The gravel and slate formed bars, fans, and braided channels that are currently vegetated. This and the segment's broad, gently sloped floor form the defining characteristics.

A dam is the most prominent feature in the lower segment. The dam extends across the gulch floor and is approximately 10 feet high, 25 feet thick, and 80 feet long. The associated reservoir, currently revegetated, was probably intended to impound placer mining effluent.

### Middle Segment

The middle segment is approximately 1,600 feet long and curves from southwest to west. The mouths of Dry and Monitor gulches open along the segment's southeast side.

Several topographical characteristics define the middle segment as different from the lower segment. First, the gradient is significantly steeper and increases in pitch with ascent. Second, the width constricts. Because these characteristics were conducive to high-energy water flows, fine sediments and tailings were unable to settle out and form braided channels as in the lower segment. Placer tailings that washed down from upper hydraulic workings did, however, accumulate. They formed bars, banks, and mounds of gravel and cobbles. The high-energy environment also encouraged flowing water to incise channels and beds into the segment's floor. Two principal drainage channels descend through the segment.

A number of historical attributes also define the middle segment as different from the lower segment. First, the segment features distinct cut-banks as high as twenty-two feet. These were created by a combination of hand-mining and hydraulic operations, and while some may remain from the Parkville rush, most were created by hydraulic operations during the 1880s and 1890s. A lack of clear evidence renders a firm date impossible.

Second, the segment's northwest side features piles and rows of tailings. The piles consist of cobbles that miners sorted out of the cut-banks by hand in advance of sluicing. The purpose of sorting was to expose fine sediment for washing and prevent the cobbles from clogging the sluices.

Third, the northwest side of the segment features a small cluster of relatively intact workings. The area is approximately 400 feet long and extends from the gulch center to the cut-bank. The workings feature distinct piles and rows of cobbles, several channels that may have been for sluices, a catchment basin that directed effluent into a sluice, and depressions worked for pocket gold. The area along the cut-bank where important features were located was bulldozed. Despite this, the workings retain integrity as a landscape but offer few small features capable of conveying the mining process.

### Upper Segment

The upper segment, approximately 1,500 feet long, begins where the gulch constricts and changes again in character. The segment curves from west back to southwest, and it is steep and increases in pitch with ascent. On the southeastern edge, high volumes of runoff incised a channel approximately eight feet deep into soft slate bedrock. The sides feature irregular and scalloped cut-banks as high as twenty feet, and the floor has braided channels in coarse outwash gravel.

The upper segment lost most of its obvious placer mining character to several developments. First, the Victoria Mining Company sited the Fair Tunnel and the Victoria Mill in the segment's lower portion, and the Gold Flake Mine near the segment's head. The development of these properties had a significant impact. Second, much of the

segment, including the above sites, was bulldozed as part of recent mining. The operator bulldozed settling ponds, catchment basins, and roads, and exposed areas for gravel processing. This erased nearly all historical attributes in the segment.

### Artifact Assemblage

As is typical of hydraulic mines, the artifact assemblage is relatively limited. Many items were buried or destroyed both by the effluent of continued hydraulic operations and the recent mining. The artifact assemblage increases in variety and density from the gulch's head down to its middle section, although nowhere was there a significant concentration of items. The potential for buried materials is low. Artifacts include structural debris, pipes and lengths of cable, and domestic refuse such hole-in-cap cans, vent-hole cans, and sanitary cans. The hole-in-cap cans fall within the Victoria and Wapiti company timeframes, and the vent-hole and sanitary cans probably were left from 1930s mining.

### American Gulch Placer Workings Significance

American Gulch holds a place of great importance in Colorado's history. In 1860, neighboring American, Georgia, and Dry gulches hosted the first major gold rush on the west side of the Continental Divide. The event, known as the Parkville rush, drew thousands of miners who established the cosmopolitan town of Parkville at the confluence of the gulches. The rush became a foundation for additional gold discoveries in Summit County.

American Gulch continued to yield placer gold for decades after the Parkville rush ended. During the early 1870s, several outfits sluiced the gravel deposits by hand, and in 1876, the Fuller Placer Mining Company acquired American, Georgia, and Dry gulches and engaged in a massive and systematic operation. For five years, the company employed a combination of hand-sluicing, booming, and hydraulic monitors to literally scour the gulches from bottom to top. In 1887, the Victoria Mining Company purchased the Fuller assets and resumed production. Seven years later, the Wapiti Mining Company assumed operations and maintained activity until around 1904. Under the above companies, the workings and associated infrastructure attained the status of one of the most advanced placer mines in the Rocky Mountain west.

American Gulch is a historic landscape created by sustained and intense placer mining. The gulch hosted Colorado's first gold rush on the west side of the Continental Divide, which occurred during the early 1860s. The gulch's importance, however, lies in later events, which the current level of historical integrity dictates. The gulch's integrity must be perceived in terms of the three segments described above.

All the segments suffered modern intrusions to some degree. One road was bulldozed up through the lower segment, two roads ascend the middle segment, and a third road was bulldozed through the intact placer workings in the middle segment. When the disturbance caused by the roads is considered within the scale of the segments, the disturbance is relatively minor. Most of the upper segment was altered by recent mining and is no longer a contributing element of the gulch.

Hydraulic mining conducted by the Victoria and Wapiti companies had the greatest impact on the lower and middle segments. Given this, the segments constitute a landscape that represents a massive hydraulic mining operation active during the 1880s and 1890s. The environmental results of such mining are also clearly conveyed by the landscape. The resource's integrity is on a landscape level because the mining operations erased most feature systems that clearly depict the hydraulic and sluice infrastructures. The hydraulic operations also erased most

evidence of the Parkville rush of 1860, and so the gulch retains little integrity relative to this important event. The middle and lower segments retain ambiance relative to hydraulic placer mining and lie in an unaltered, subalpine, mountain setting.

As a landscape, American Gulch is recommended eligible for the NRHP and SRHP under Criteria A and C. In terms of Criterion A, American Gulch is a direct manifestation mostly of the hydraulic mining conducted by the Victoria and Wapiti companies. Given this, the site is associated with some of the contributions that these companies made. First, both companies were major employers and contributed heavily to the local economy. The companies also developed a massive infrastructure that benefited the Breckenridge area by offering lumber, water, and regional development. Second, the companies contributed to Colorado's economy through their voluminous gold production. In addition, recognition that the operation was one of the most advanced in the Rocky Mountain west contributed to Colorado's reputation as an important mining center. This fostered a sense of confidence among both the greater mining industry and its investors. Third, the success of the mining operation had national implications because it served as a model for engineers elsewhere to follow. They took notice of the infrastructure, organized prospecting, mining methods, placer workings, and the coordination of workers and supplies. Last, the companies contributed to the development of Colorado water law. Beginning with the Fuller company, the mining operation was the focus of a complex system of water rights acquisitions, water collection and distribution infrastructures, and points of use and consumption. The workings in American Gulch were a direct product of this important trend.

In terms of Criterion C, American Gulch constitutes a landscape that clearly represents a massive hydraulic mining operation and its environmental results. As noted, the gulch's lower portions feature gravel outwash fans, channels, and hydraulic workings that contrast abruptly with the surrounding natural character. The upper workings, however, have been bulldozed and no longer retain integrity. For this reason, they are recommended as a noncontributing element of the site.

### American Gulch Placer Workings Management Recommendations

Management recommendations suggest several actions for the gulch's middle and lower portions. First, the segments should be preserved. Currently, off-road vehicles use the two-track roads that pass through the gulch, and such traffic has been proven to accelerate the decline of historic resources in the area. Further, vehicle use is destroying the gulch's steep roads and rendering them untenable for foot, bicycle, and equestrian traffic. Given this, the middle and lower portions of the gulch should be closed to motorized use. The gulch's upper portion, which retains little integrity, should also be closed to preserve other historic sites around its margins.

Second, the gulch should be developed as a heritage resource. The roads currently in the gulch can be developed as an interpretive trail network. The gulch offers numerous vantage points and features that can be used to educate the public regarding hydraulic mining, the various companies, and area history. In addition, the trail can be linked to other important historic sites associated with the mining operation, such as the Wapiti Mining Company Office, the Victoria Mining Company Workers' Housing, the Fountain Tunnel, and several miners' cabin ruins. This collection of sites, including American Gulch, should be developed as a self-guided tour with signage and pamphlets, and the Wapiti office can serve as a trailhead.