



Indian Diggins Marble

Did you know that the state's first marble quarry was right here in El Dorado County? The unique, blue-veined marble it produced was on par with imports from Italy or Vermont – and a lot closer.

For the first few years of the Gold Rush tombstones were carved from slabs of marble shipped from either Italy or Vermont, around the horn to San Francisco. It was then ferried to Sacramento, where early stone masons like Israel Luce plied their trade

The long journey was time consuming, perilous, and expensive. In 1851 a shipment was lost at sea but later recovered. Failed argonaut Luce picked it up as salvage and established "Luce and Loveland's Marble Works" in Sacramento. The following year Luce partnered with another former gold miner, Andrew Aitken, a gifted stone carver from Scotland with an unusual deformity: an extra thumb on his right hand. "Aitken & Luce Pioneer Marble Works" found success for the next 27 years carving commissioned architectural pieces, works of art, and increasingly elaborate headstones.

Early on, the cost and availability of marble limited their success. While waiting for a shipment to arrive in 1853, Luce scoured the foothills for a local source. He found it deep in the forest 25 miles southeast of Placerville, where hydraulic gold miners had uncovered a distinctive, blue-veined marble.

Native Americans first mined in the area with little success in 1850. The whites who followed named the place Indian Diggins. By 1853 it was a bustling town of 1,500 with a dozen stores, hotels, saloons, fraternal lodges and daily stages to Sacramento and Placerville. Indian Diggins represented the county in the state legislature numerous times. Like other gold rush towns, it suffered devastating fires in 1857 and again in 1860.

Distribution was always limited by high transportation costs. The marble traveled by wagon. Early wagon roads serving the area were rough. Prior to the railroad reaching Shingle Springs in 1863 it was often cheaper to ship marble from Italy as ballast than to wagon it from Indian Diggins to Sacramento.

Other sources of marble were subsequently discovered in the foothills, but none with the distinct Indian Diggins veining, which was very popular for the first several years of production. Purer white marble from less remote mines in Tuolumne and Placer Counties became increasingly affordable and eventually more popular in the late 19th century, diminishing demand and eventually spelling an end to the Indian Diggins quarry, but not the story.

The stone lives on in pioneer graveyards throughout the Mother Lode, where it is abundantly clear that not all Indian Diggins marble was created equal. Lower quality pieces have suffered moisture infiltration at the veins, shortening their life. In other pieces, the blue veins survive but the rest of the stone is failing, creating an eerie “varicose veins” appearance.

The quarry and town site are now locked behind gates. The nearby cemetery remains open to the public but can be hard to find. The cemetery is five miles south of Omo Ranch on the unpaved (and unforgiving) Indian Diggins Road. There, nestled among the pines west of the road, you’ll find spectacular examples of the local product.

Union Cemetery located at 650 Bee Street in Placerville, CA contains many examples of Indian Diggins marble, including the recently repaired Eva Zeiner headstone, located north of the fountain mausoleums in Section 28. Many larger examples can be found in Sacramento’s Old City Cemetery located at 1000 Broadway in Sacramento, CA.



Interpretation by Mike Roberts, 2023

SaveTheGravesElDorado.org

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