

A GOLDEN NUGGET

TEXT LINAS ALSENAS PHOTO BREN DENDY

Welcome to Rutherfordton, North Carolina. It may appear to be a typical small American town, but dig a bit deeper and a rich history is revealed.



SMALL TOWNS in the United States hold a special place in the national imagination.

With their easy access to nature, charming main streets and quirky local traditions, they balance individual freedom and community spirit in a way that reflects American ideals. One such small town is Rutherfordton, North Carolina, located in the scenic foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains (where such films as *Dances with Wolves* and *Dirty Dancing* were filmed.)

Rutherfordton has only about 4,200 residents, but it has a long history. Founded in 1787, it was home to the first post office, school and newspaper in western North Carolina. More than 50 buildings, mostly in

Rutherfordton's downtown area, are listed in the US National Register of Historic Places. Perhaps the most notable chapter in the town's history centers on gold.

Many are surprised to learn that the first and longest gold rush in America took place in North Carolina around the turn of the 19th century, decades before the more famous 1849 gold rush in California.

In 1799, a boy living in Cabarrus County (an hour and half drive from Rutherfordton) brought home a heavy, shiny rock that he had found in a stream.

The family used it as a doorstop for three years before his father, a farm laborer, sold the rock to a local jeweler for three and a half dollars,

about a week's wages at the time. The 17-pound nugget of gold, the first documented gold find in the United States, was really worth a thousand times more.

It is believed the farmer, after realizing his mistake, eventually did get perhaps 1,000 dollars more from the jeweler, and he continued the gold search with two partners. In their first summer, a slave who had been set to work searching part-time discovered a 28-pound nugget.

THESE SPECTACULAR finds sparked "gold fever," and soon the region was flooded with migrants hoping to strike it rich. Large commercial mining operations were set up in parts of the state, but the gold hunt in

Trelleborg in the US

The US is the biggest country for Trelleborg in terms of net sales as well as number of employees. Trelleborg has some 20 manufacturing facilities in the country and even more market offices; from Boston, Massachusetts, in the east to El Segundo, California, in the west, from Portland, Oregon, in the north to Houston, Texas, in the south.

Trelleborg's structural activities are high and the most recent investment in the U.S. is in a production facility for agricultural tires in Spartanburg, South Carolina, which will give proximity to both existing global customers as well as a potential expanded customer base.

DAYTRIP PARADISE



"A lot of people underestimate this area," says **Lisa Cobb**, Quality Specialist at Trelleborg Coated Systems in Rutherford County. "But within a one or two hours' drive, you have everything you could want."



Cobb grew up just outside Rutherfordton. "Everybody knows everybody here," she says. "In fact, I went to high school with five people who work at Trelleborg with me."

Cobb lists some popular day-trip destinations:

- The Biltmore Estate, the spectacular late-19th-century country estate of the Vanderbilt family in Asheville, North Carolina
- Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort
- A number of world-class golf courses, such as Apple Valley Course and Bald Mountain Course
- Ski areas, such as the Appalachian Ski Mountain or Sugar Mountain resorts
- Charlotte, a city in southern North Carolina, about an hour away. Sports fans can watch the NFL Panthers or the NBA Hornets play, while racing enthusiasts can visit the NASCAR speedway or the National Hot Rod Association drag-racing strips. Cobb enjoys going to the US National Whitewater Center there, a facility where athletes train for the Olympics. "They have bike racing, zip lines, lots of outdoorsy activities," she says.

Rutherford County stayed small-scale, mostly by panning in local streams. It was difficult work, but it produced an astonishing quantity of gold.

The Bechtlers, an enterprising family of German immigrants, set up a private mint just outside Rutherfordton. Locals would bring their gold finds to the mint to be refined, paying the Bechtlers a small percentage of the value. Between 1831 and 1840, the mint produced almost 2.25 million dollars in gold coins and refined another several hundred thousand dollars' worth.

THE BECHTLERS ALSO had the distinction of being the first in the US to mint a one-dollar gold coin, 17 years before the federal government

created its own. In an area and a time when federal coins were rare, this local currency transformed the market from a barter system to a modern economy.

The Bechtlers' mint did not last, for a number of reasons. The men in the family died in rapid succession, possibly because of mercury exposure in the gold-refining process. Moreover, in 1835 the US government opened three federal mints, including one in North Carolina.

In truth, gold finds in North Carolina were becoming smaller and increasingly rare, although the state would continue to lead the nation in gold production until 1848, when the California gold rush began. Today there are still a number of mines in western North Carolina available for

tourists to visit and learn the process of panning for gold. But gold isn't the only treasure to be found in these hills; the Blue Ridge Mountains comprise a complex mixture of igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rock that contains rich deposits of gems.

TO FIND RUBIES, sapphires and garnets, the area around Franklin, North Carolina, is a good bet, while the Spruce Pine district in Mitchell County is known for emeralds and aquamarine.

A number of commercial gem mining operations are available for families to try their hand at sorting through "native" or "seeded" buckets of soil, and local artisans can turn rough finds into polished jewels. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION
keith.dye
@trelleborg.com