"Truth and the marvelous go hand in hand when young America finds a good gold patch."

Montana Dredge, 1864

Mining has always been the main attraction at Bannack. Even since John White and his fellow prospectors found gold on the Greely Creek in 1862, gold has lured more men to Bannack than anything else. By the same token, Bannack fed more men to gold—because gold lured men to new strikes such as Alder Gulch at Virginia City and Nevada City. Last Chance Gulch at Helena, to the mines at Selverson, Idaho and even to the Yukon and Alaska.

At first men came with picks and shovels and panned for gold, which is placer mining at its most rudimentary. If the diggings looked promising, miners constructed roasters fashioned after baby cradles. The rectangular roaster had sides two feet high, which held the gravel. For gold-bearing gravel then was panned and the gold extracted.

Miners also set up sluice boxes, boarded troughs with crescents called riffles in the bottom. A stream of water washed gravel through the sluice, with the much heavier gold sliding to the bottom and being trapped by the riffles.

Another common form of mining used at Bannack—even today—is hydraulic mining. High-pressure hose washes dirt and gravel from hillsides to sluice boxes below, and the gravel then is sluiced for gold. Much evidence of hydraulic mining is seen above and below Bannack—deep cuts in the hillside that look as though flash floods came through the area.

One of the most productive forms of mining at Bannack was dredging, which lasted from 1895 until approximately 10 years later. A total of five dredge boats worked Greely Creek and dug as deep as 40 feet looking for gold. Since bedrock was known to be deep in Greely Gulch, no one was sure that even a dredge could reach it until H.J. Roding of Chicago, and others, organized the Golden Dredging Company and built the first boat, the Fiddling L. Greaves, in 1895. It was the first electric dredge in the world.

The dredge’s machinery was built by the Buena Vista Shovel and Dredge Company of Milwaukee, and moved by a spur line of the Union Pacific, the Utah and Northern Railroad, to Red Rock, Montana. The machinery was then hauled by team and wagon for 60 miles to Bannack, and the first was constrained on Bannack’s east end at a cost of about $35,000.

Water was run more than 30 miles by the Grauer-Greeter ditch to power the hydroelectric plant on the banks of Greely Creek. 350 feet below the ditch, this plant powered the F.L. Greaves for seven years that it worked Greely Creek.

The dredge was launched May 13, 1895 with a large celebration culminating with the wife of the Gold Dredging Company’s president breaking a bottle of champagne on in bow and christening the boat after one of Bannack’s pioneering merchant. P.J. Greaves immediately began operation, its crew of pilots, mechanics and deckhand working six months of the year—the normal dredging season, determined by ice on the creek. The corporation purchased over two miles of the Greely Creek’s bed for the dredge to work.

Boats, each weighing 1,500 pounds and holding five cubic feet of gravel, dumped their loads into a sluice box on the dredge itself. Water was then run through the sluice, leaving gold-bearing dirt caught in the riffles. At the end of the run, the gravel was removed and panned, yielding between $800 and $700 per week clear profit. The largest dredge recorded was $22,000 and $50,000 in two successive weeks’ work. The dredge operated until 1902 when it “ran out of ammunition gold.” Its remains still are visible west of Bannack on the Greely Creek, where it was moored in 1902.