

Sutter's Fort

State Historic Park



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.

Sutter's Fort was a gateway, a private kingdom, a symbol of both hope and oppression. Above all else, it represented a dream of what could be.

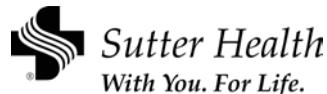
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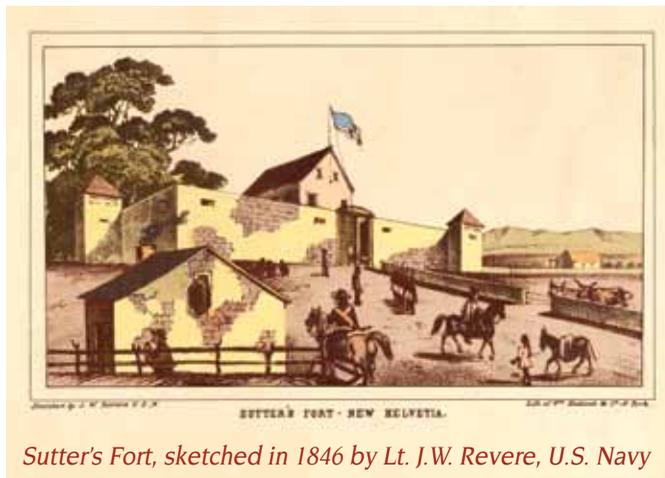
Step back in time. Situated in the heart of mid-town Sacramento, Sutter's Fort State Historic Park gives a glimpse into the very beginnings of Sacramento and California's development in the early 19th Century.

Today's fort is an oasis from the urban hustle beyond its gates, as well as a center for living history. Special events, period furnishings, a trade store and rich detail add to our understanding and experience of early California.

A LONG JOURNEY TO CALIFORNIA

Though he considered himself Swiss, Johann Augustus Sutter was born in 1803 at Kandern, Baden, Germany, close to the Swiss border. As a youth, Sutter was an apprentice in a publishing house in Basel, Switzerland. Later, he operated a dry goods and drapery shop.

To escape mounting debts and a rocky marriage, Sutter fled Switzerland in 1834. He left his wife and family behind, sailing to the United States to seek his fortune. Between 1835 and 1839, he borrowed and swindled his way across the west as a trader, reinventing himself along the way. After stops in Hawaii and Alaska, Sutter landed on the American River in 1839 with dreams of an agricultural empire.



Sutter's Fort, sketched in 1846 by Lt. J.W. Revere, U.S. Navy

BUILDING A FORT

Construction began on the fort in 1840. Sutter used local Nisenan Indians and the Hawaiians he had brought with him as his labor force. They erected an adobe compound, with walls 2.5 feet (0.75 meters) thick and 15-18 feet (4.5-5 meters) tall. Various sources claim that the compound was as wide as 425 by 175 feet, though the original measurements are unknown. Today's reconstructed compound area is 312 by 156 feet (95 by 47 meters), slightly smaller than the original fort.

Within the fort walls were sleeping quarters, carpenter and blacksmith shops, a gunsmith, distillery, bakery, grist mill and blanket factory. Sutter's office and living quarters were in the fort's central building. Outside the walls

stood dwellings, corrals and outbuildings. As many as 300 people may have worked at the fort during the day.

THE DREAM OF NEW HELVETIA

Sutter was granted Mexican citizenship in 1840. The 48,827-acre (19,670-hectare) New Helvetia land grant was given to him in 1841. In exchange, he was expected to maintain order among local Indian tribes. He was authorized to issue land grants and passports to American immigrants.

Sutter purchased Fort Ross from the Russian government in 1841. He offered \$30,000 on credit, payable over four years. This brought him necessary supplies, such as lumber, cannons and hardware.

Needing military support, Governor Manuel Micheltorena appointed Sutter "Captain of Sacramento troops" in 1845, giving him more land in exchange for his service. The vast agricultural empire Sutter now controlled was approximately 191,000 acres (nearly 300 square miles) between present-day Sacramento and Redding.

Though Sutter represented the Mexican government, he was friendly with Americans as well. During the Bear Flag revolt in June 1846, Sutter was briefly held prisoner by the Americans, but soon regained his freedom.





LIFE AT THE FORT

Sutter's Fort was a popular emigrant destination. Generous—sometimes to a fault—Sutter provided shelter and supplies to many weary settlers. Others became skilled workers at the fort.

Sutter and his employees helped rescue the Donner Party in 1847. Plagued by misfortune on the trail to California, the party was trapped in the Sierra by the worst snows on record. Sutter sent supplies and men to help rescue the survivors.

Wheat, barley, peas, beans, cotton, fur trading and a distillery provided Sutter with vital provisions and income. He exported wheat to Russian settlements in Alaska. Cattle and sheep ranching produced valuable hides and wool. A larger grist mill and a sawmill were planned to enhance Sutter's growing empire.

SUTTER AND NATIVE AMERICANS

Sutter's treatment of Native Americans is controversial. He viewed himself as a patriarch and protector—a view not necessarily shared by Native Americans and many others. This issue continues to engender debate.

Clearly, Indian labor was vital to the success of everything that Sutter did at the fort. Without the work done by Native Americans, Sutter's Fort could not have existed.

GOLD CHANGED EVERYTHING

In late 1847, Sutter hired James Marshall to build a sawmill on the American River, 50 miles east of the fort. On January 24, 1848, Marshall discovered a shiny nugget in the mill's tailrace. He brought the nugget to Sutter at the fort, where simple tests proved it to be gold.

News of the discovery caused the 1849 Gold Rush. The flood of miners overwhelmed Sutter, and he was cheated out of most of his property. As his debts mounted, Sutter transferred title to his remaining holdings to John A. Sutter, Jr.

Sutter's wife Anna and their other children also came to California in 1849. Sutter moved with his family to Hock Farm, near Marysville, and the fort was sold for \$7,000. Sutter never regained his empire.

He remains a perplexing figure. Sutter was a visionary, swindler, soldier, patriot and debtor, friend and foe to the Indians, patriarch and victim. Sutter died in 1880 in Lititz, Pennsylvania—far from the vibrant community he helped to create.

A FORT REBORN

By the late 1850s, Fort Sutter lay in ruins, but the central building remained intact; it had been used as a boarding house, store and warehouse.

The site was purchased by the Native Sons of the Golden West in 1891 and presented to the people of California. The fort was reconstructed between 1891 and 1893; it became part of the California State Park system in 1947.

EVENTS AT THE FORT

Sutter's Fort State Historic Park is alive with activity throughout the year. Regular living history events re-create life and activities of Sutter's time. "Hands-on History Days" feature costumed staff demonstrating the tools, skills, food and games of early Californians. Both daytime and evening special events are offered. Educational programs are presented for school groups.

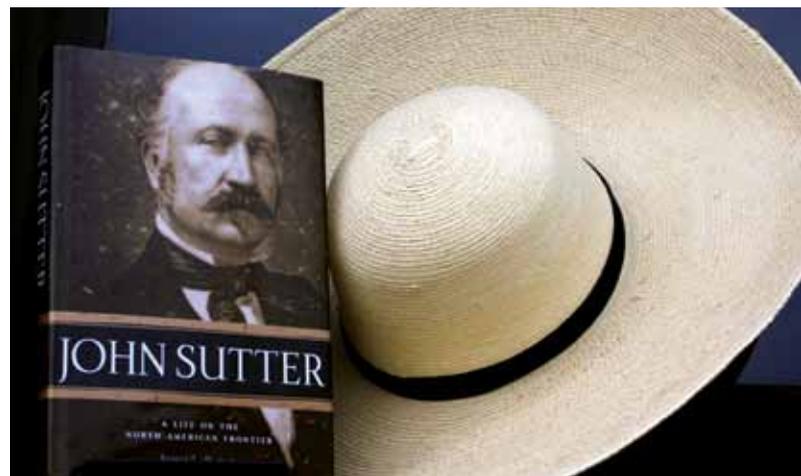
For schedules and details, please visit www.parks.ca.gov/suttersfort.

SUTTER'S FORT TRADE STORE

The trade store contains books, pioneer crafts and unique gifts. Operated by the Friends of Sutter's Fort, its proceeds benefit interpretive and educational programs.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Sutter's cannon and other weapons were never fired to defend the fort.
- Cowhides were so valuable in Sutter's time that they were often referred to as "California bank notes."
- Sutter was in command of his fort from 1840-1849, except for a brief period during the Bear Flag revolt in 1846.





- Patty Reed's doll, carried by her during the Donner party ordeal in 1846-47, is displayed at Sutter's Fort.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

The fort's level earth surfaces and unisex restroom are generally accessible. Historic doorways and the upper level

may limit access. A self-guided audio tour is available.

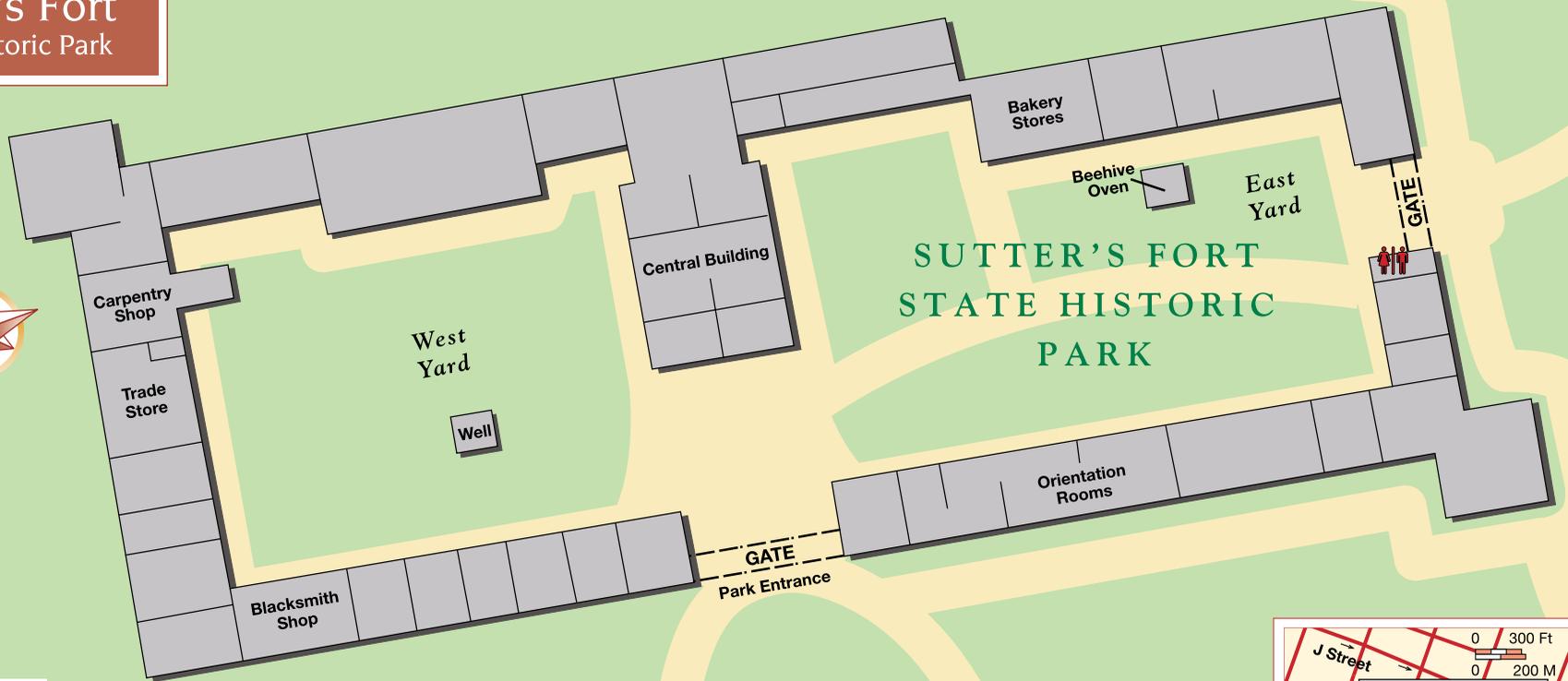
NEARBY STATE PARKS

- State Indian Museum, 2618 K Street, next to Sutter's Fort (916) 324-0971
- Governor's Mansion State Historic Park, 16th and H Streets (916) 323-3047
- California State Capitol Museum, Capitol Mall and 10th Street (916) 324-0333

- Leland Stanford Mansion State Historic Park, 800 N Street (916) 324-0575
- Old Sacramento State Historic Park, Front and I Streets, Old Sacramento (916) 445-6645 Information Line
- California State Railroad Museum, Second and I Streets, Old Sacramento, (916) 323-9280 Front Desk

Visit: www.parks.ca.gov/capitaldistrict

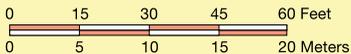
Sutter's Fort State Historic Park



Legend

-  Gate
-  Park Building
-  Restroom

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L Street (← one way)

This park receives support in part from a nonprofit organization. For information, contact Friends of Sutter's Fort, 2701 L St. Sacramento, CA 95816 (916) 323-7626 www.suttersfort.org

