

Benicia Capitol State Historic Park



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Benicia Capitol State Historic Park

115 West G Street

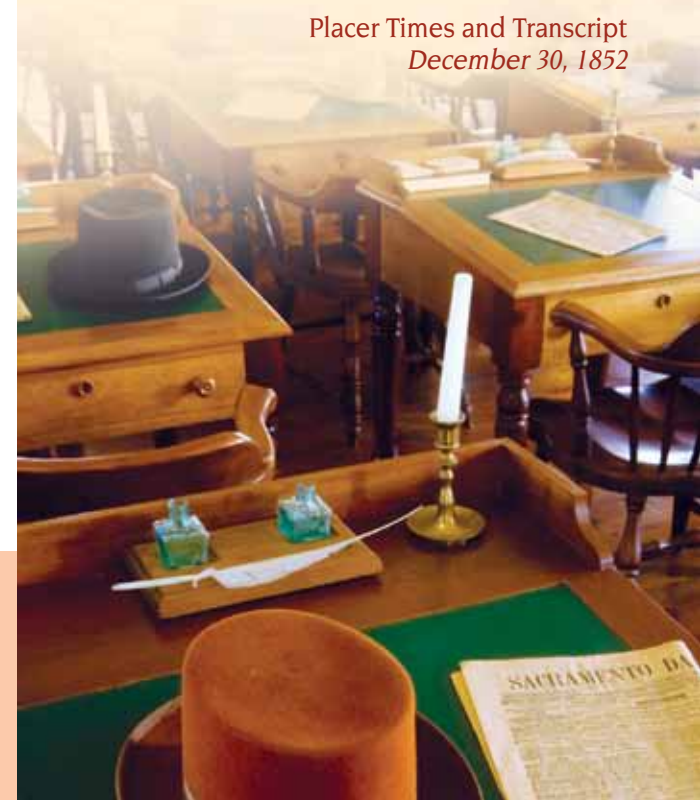
Benicia, CA 94510

(707) 745-3385

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*"This is one of the
finest public buildings
in the State, and as it
stands in commanding
position, presents a most
imposing appearance from
the bays and Straits
of Carquines."*

Placer Times and Transcript
December 30, 1852



Benicia Capitol State Historic Park is home to the oldest original California State House still standing. From 1853 to 1854, 90 lawmakers held part of California's fourth and fifth legislative sessions in this new building. Between February 9, 1853, and February 25, 1854, this august body of lawmakers moved quickly to enact several significant laws on the issues of the day.

PARK HISTORY

The Southern Patwin

Historians believe about 3,300 Southern Patwin, the southern branch of the Wintun people, hunted and gathered in today's Solano County about 1,000 years ago.



Benicia Capitol circa 1860

In the early 1800s, padres from Missions Dolores, San José and San Francisco Solano brought the Southern Patwin into servitude at the missions. In 1834, General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo used them as labor on his 175,000-acre land holdings.

By the early 20th century, about 200 Patwin people were left. Most had died from deprivation, forced labor and European diseases. Modern-day Patwin and Wintun descendants keep their cultures alive on or near several rancherias throughout Northern California.

California's Capitals

The first capital existed before statehood, under both Spanish and Mexican rule. From 1775 to 1846, Monterey was the capital of Alta California.

On July 7, 1846, Commodore John D. Sloat raised the American flag over Monterey. In 1849, the new constitution crafted at Monterey's Colton Hall made the city of San Jose the seat of California's first state government.

During San Jose's 1849-1851 session, the building's low ceilings, bad lighting and poor ventilation led the lawmakers to seek another location. Dubbed the "Legislature of a Thousand Drinks," for calls to close the session at the nearest saloon, this group was happy to accept General Mariano Vallejo's offer to build a new capitol in Vallejo at no cost to them.



*General Mariano
Guadalupe Vallejo*



*Francisca Benicia
Carrillo de Vallejo*

On January 5, 1852, they arrived to find total chaos. That day the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported: "The furniture, fixtures, etc., are not yet in their places; many of them have not yet arrived . . . no printing materials . . . music of the saw and hammer heard night and day."

There was almost no local housing, food or laundry service. Eleven days later, the legislators moved to Sacramento. On January 3, 1853, the fourth session began in Vallejo but moved mid-session—to the newly constructed city hall in Benicia.

The town, named for General Vallejo's wife, Doña Francisca Benicia Carrillo de Vallejo, offered them the structure that was to be their city hall. Its interior pillars were carved from the masts of salvaged ships abandoned in San Francisco Bay during the gold rush. The town's meager amenities, however, caused the legislators to leave in 1854 during the fifth session.

On March 4, the governor, the state officers and members of the legislature boarded the paddle-wheeler *Wilson G. Hunt* and headed upstream to Sacramento. At the confluence of the Sacramento and American rivers, Sacramento had had one brief tenure as California's capital. Despite its history of floods and fires, the Legislature again chose Sacramento as the state capital. Lawmakers held sessions at its county courthouse from 1854 to 1869.

Construction on today's Sacramento capitol began in 1860. Eager to meet in their own space, lawmakers moved into the present building in 1874, five years before it was completed.

Benicia's Old Capitol

Benicia's fast-moving, exciting days were over, but its fortunes would grow



Benicia Capitol; former wing attached at right was the first firehouse in Solano County



The Golden Era newspaper, April 2, 1854

in other directions. Benicia, a busy port city, was served by the international Pacific Mail Steamship Company. Later, the Southern Pacific Railroad created a terminal and ferry crossing there. Its many educational institutions earned Benicia the nickname “Athens of the West.”

After a short stint as the Solano County Courthouse, the building housed Episcopal church services and the Benicia Grammar School. Eventually a wing was built as the headquarters for Benicia's Fire

Department, and the public library also moved there. In 1951, the California Division of Beaches and Parks acquired the Benicia Capitol and restored the chambers to look as they might have appeared between January 1853 and February 1854. The State Park and Recreation Commission later reclassified the property as a State Historic Park.

Hours for the Benicia Capitol and the Fischer-Hanlon House may vary seasonally. For details, call (707) 745-3385 or visit www.parks.ca.gov/beniciacapitol. Call (707) 745-3670 in advance to arrange group tours.



LAWS PASSED IN BENICIA

While Benicia was California's capital, Governor John Bigler signed 180 new laws, including the following:

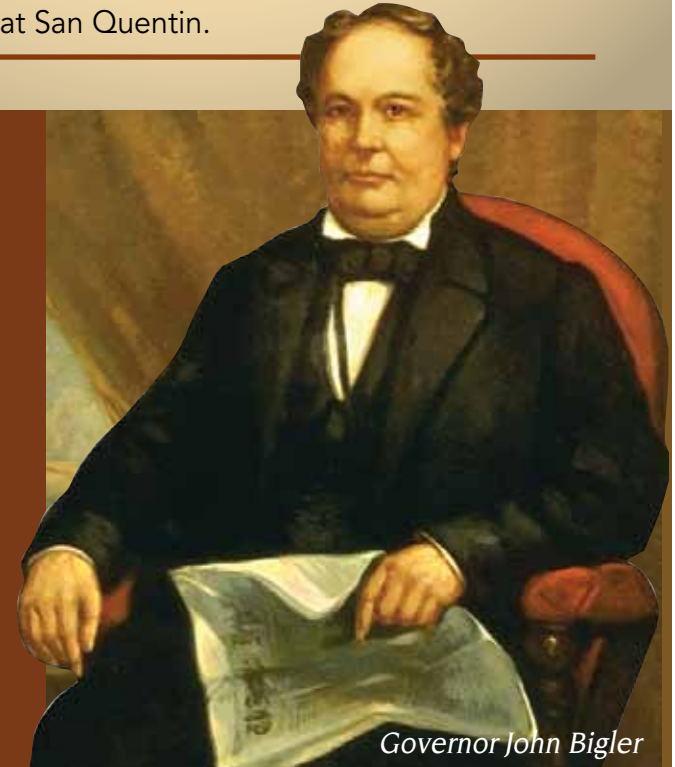
- Women were allowed to own property independent of their husbands.
- A new flour inspection system introduced the concept of "truth in advertising." It would regulate the branding of grades of flour (e.g. "superfine," "fine," etc.) and would also include penalties for dishonest labeling.
- The California State Department of Education was created.
- An asylum to house people judged insane would be built near Stockton and called the Stockton State Hospital.
- A board of prison commissioners was instituted and given the authority to contract for the construction of a state prison at San Quentin.

JOHN BIGLER, GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA, 1852-1856

When Benicia became the state capital, California's governor was John Bigler, a Pennsylvania-born attorney. Raised by his widowed mother, the fatherless Bigler had to educate both himself and his younger brother, William. By 1852, the two Bigler brothers were serving as state governors—John in California and William in Pennsylvania.

John Bigler had arrived in California in 1848, seeking a law practice to join, but he met with no success. After a series of odd jobs that included chopping wood and unloading freight from ships, Bigler heard that the state assembly had an election coming up. Figuring that he had nothing to lose, he threw his hat in the ring. In California's first general election since statehood, Bigler won a seat, representing the Sacramento district. His power in the assembly grew quickly; a year later Bigler was elected the first Speaker of the Assembly.

In 1852, John Bigler beat Major Pierson B. Reading—the Whig party's gubernatorial nominee—by little more than 1,000 votes, to become California's third governor.



Governor John Bigler

CALIFORNIA—A FREE OR A SLAVE STATE?

The Subject of Slavery

When the first California Constitutional Convention met in October 1849, the most controversial subject under debate was slavery. Southern emigrants from slave states—many of whom had settled in rural southern California counties—believed that it was only a matter of time before California would join the union. However, because the idea of slavery was not acceptable to the northern abolitionists now living in California, or to the miners who did not want to compete with slave labor in the goldfields, California had petitioned to be admitted as a free state.

Now, at Colton Hall in Monterey, the Southerners had arrived as convention delegates, hoping to convince the others to add slavery to the state's constitution. Among their concerns was that admission of another free state would throw off the existing—if uneasy—count of 15 slave states and 15 free states, leaving the slave states under-represented in the House and Senate. Until then, states had been admitted two at a time—one free and one slave—to keep the balance.

One of the most powerful of the transplanted Southerners was Tennessee native and Southern Democrat William M. Gwin, the Convention chairman. His supporters assumed that, as a slaveholder, he would introduce slavery into the new constitution. However, Gwin had a more important agenda: he sought control over California's Democratic Party. Shortly after he passed up the chance to add slavery to the new California Constitution, Gwin and war hero (and abolitionist) John C. Frémont became California's first United States Senators.

Another powerful delegate from the Democratic Party was former New Yorker and San Francisco "Boss," David C. Broderick. Attendees at the first meeting of the state

legislature were expected to pass a law banning free and slave black people from immigrating to California. However, two weeks later they rethought that idea, concerned that such a law might stand in the way of Congressional approval of California's new Constitution. When the immigration bill reached the Senate, State Senator Broderick moved to postpone it indefinitely, essentially killing it.

The Compromise of 1850

After nine southern states threatened to leave the Union if California were admitted as a free state, a compromise was reached. Among other things, the Compromise of 1850 allowed California's admission as a free state; but in return, a new fugitive slave law was created—permitting a slave owner to claim any black person, free or slave, as his "personal property" by merely signing a paper saying it was so.

Southern California Secession?

In the 1850s, emigrants from slave states living in California's sparsely populated southern counties hoped that seceding from the north would result in their half of the state favoring slavery. However, Broderick drafted a resolution that any decisions made during the constitutional convention must be approved by the voters.

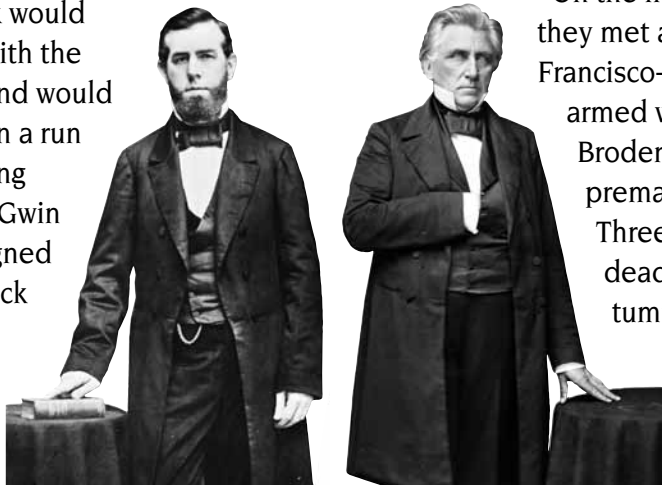
Talk of secession ended for good in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln became president. The secession of states from the U.S. took precedence over a few counties in Southern California separating from the northern part of the state.

TWO DEMOCRATIC RIVALS

Between 1852 and 1856, David Broderick had become one of San Francisco's most influential politicians. However, while his anti-slavery position was popular, his impulsive nature sometimes got in his way. He was not above physically brawling to make his point. Twice he was challenged to engage in duels.

Prior to his arrival in Washington, D.C. in 1857, Broderick was aware of William Gwin's reputation in national politics. The elite, well-educated Gwin was already established as a powerful, wealthy politician whose pro-slavery, pro-Confederacy stance was supported by fellow lawmakers from the southern states, called Chivalry Democrats.

However, Broderick had his eye on William Gwin's U.S. Senate seat, which was coming up for reelection soon. As Chairman of the California Democratic Party, Broderick demonstrated his political power when he and his rival supporting faction were able to block Gwin from being reelected after his term was up. For two years, that seat remained unfilled. When the other seat opened in 1857, Broderick offered Gwin a deal. Broderick would take the seat with the six-year term and would support Gwin in a run for the remaining four-year seat. Gwin agreed, and signed over to Broderick his promised



*Senator
David Broderick
circa 1850s*

*Senator
William M. Gwin
circa 1860s*

patronage (consisting of federal appointments) from President James Buchanan.

Hearing of Broderick's unsavory move, President Buchanan appointed only Chivalry Democrats to federal positions. Infuriated over his now weakened position in California politics, Broderick loudly and publicly denounced both President Buchanan and his fellow senator, William Gwin.

The Duel

The enmity between Gwin and Broderick had grown into personal hatred. In 1859 Broderick returned to California and found himself in bitter discussions with members of the Chivalry faction. The antagonism between Gwin's followers and Broderick's faction over slavery deepened.

Broderick also encountered Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court, David S. Terry. Once a valued friend of Broderick's (and now a Gwin ally), Terry verbally attacked Broderick, calling him "no longer a true Democrat." After Broderick called Terry a dishonest judge and a miserable wretch, Terry challenged him to a duel.

On the morning of September 13, 1859, they met at Lake Merced, south of San Francisco—two hair-trigger protagonists, armed with two hair-trigger pistols. Broderick's weapon discharged prematurely, but Terry's proved true. Three days later, Broderick was dead—further evidence of the state's tumultuous political beginnings.



The Broderick and Terry duel

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

The Capitol has a ramp up to the first floor only. The Fischer-Hanlon House has no ramp. Both buildings have stairs to a second floor. The garden has an uneven brick path in some areas. Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, please visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- Except for service animals, pets are not permitted inside historic buildings.
- Park features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Benicia State Recreation Area
1 State Park Road, Benicia 94510
(707) 648-1911
- Petaluma Adobe State Historic Park
3325 Adobe Road, Petaluma, 94954
(707) 762-4871
- Sonoma State Historic Park
363 Third Street West, Sonoma 95476
(707) 938-1519

THE FISCHER-HANLON HOUSE

Swiss immigrant Joseph Fischer moved to Benicia in 1849. Fischer owned a butcher shop, a ranch located between West 2nd and West 7th streets, and a sandstone quarry—source of stone for the Capitol building's lower portion.

The 14-room Fischer-Hanlon House next door to the Capitol had been a fire-damaged, gold-rush-era hotel. Fischer bought a salvageable portion of the hotel. Sometime after 1858, he moved it to 135 West G Street and converted it to a home for his family. Joseph and Catherine Fischer raised their three children—Elizabeth, Martha, and Joseph—in this home.



Hanlon sisters

In 1893, their daughter, Martha Fischer Quinn, inherited the house from her widowed mother. Martha lived here from the mid-1890s until 1938, adding another inside bathroom and a brick patio in the backyard, using bricks that had been ballast in ships abandoned during the gold rush.

After Martha's death in 1938, her sister Elizabeth's three unmarried daughters—Catherine, Marie Rose and Raphaelita Hanlon—inherited the home now known as the Fischer-Hanlon House. The three Hanlon sisters made few changes, but their lighting source was converted from kerosene to electrical. They planted a garden with cactus and succulents.

Shaded by many trees and shrubs planted more than 100 years ago, the Fischer-Hanlon House sits gracefully in its old-fashioned garden. The outdoor privy is still in the backyard, next to the servants' house. Now a museum, the house interprets the lives of its upper middle-class family residents from the mid-1800s through 1968. In that year, the family deeded the house with its original artifacts and furnishings to the State of California.

The house was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.



Joseph Xavier Fischer



Fischer-Hanlon House

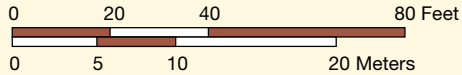
Benicia Capitol
State Historic Park



Legend

- Streets
- Pedestrian Path
- Historic Building
- Other Building
- Accessible Feature
- Picnic Area
- Restrooms

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This park receives support in part through the Benicia State Parks Association
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