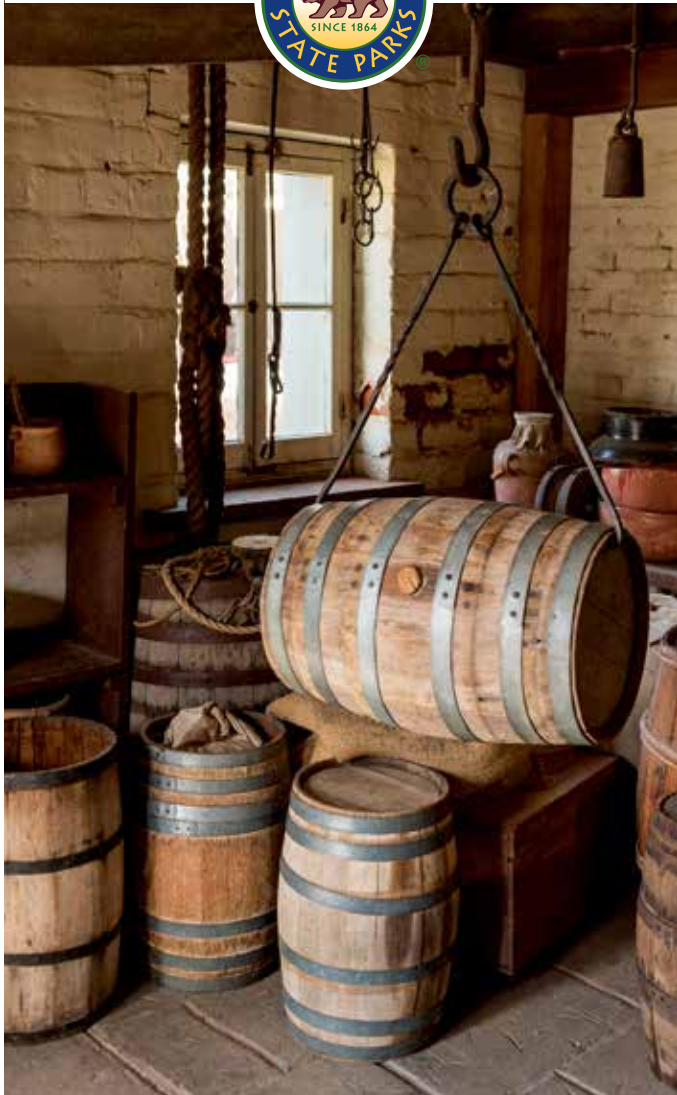


# Sutter's Fort

## 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.



California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at **(916) 445-4422**. If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact **interp@parks.ca.gov**.

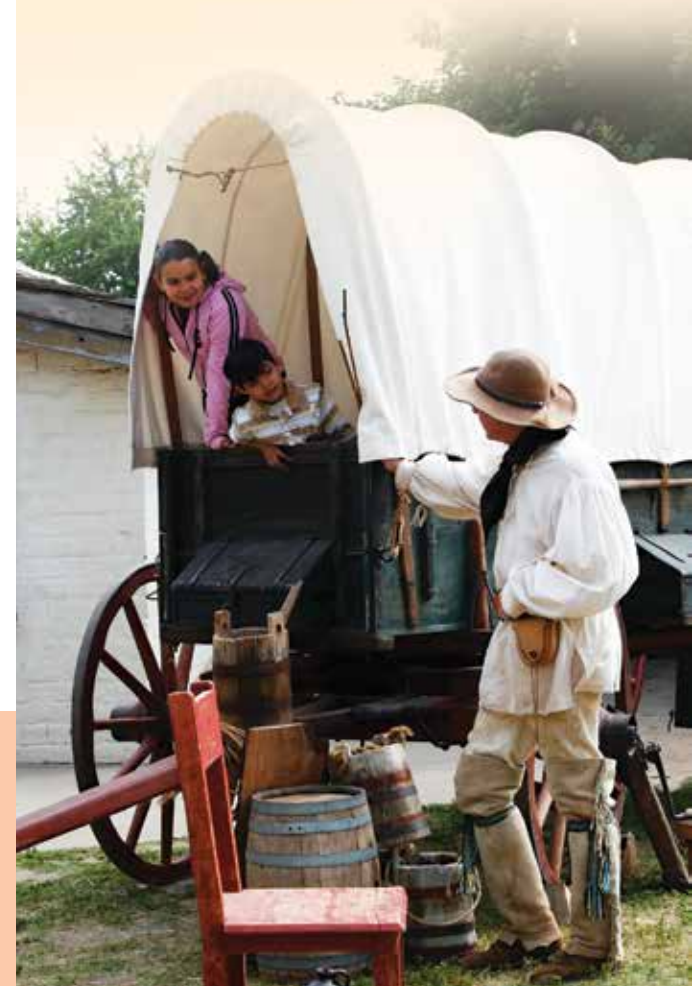
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**Sutter's Fort State Historic Park**  
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**(916) 445-4422**  
**[www.parks.ca.gov/suttersfort](http://www.parks.ca.gov/suttersfort)**

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*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.*



**S**tep back in time. Situated in the heart of midtown Sacramento, Sutter's Fort State Historic Park is a glimpse of 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, a trade store, period furnishings, and exhibits 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, Sutter fled Switzerland in 1834, leaving his wife and family behind and sailing to the United States. 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 coerced local Nisenan Indians to build the fort, along with the Hawaiian laborers he had brought with him. They erected an adobe compound, with walls 2.5 feet (0.75 meters) thick and 15-18 feet (4.5-5.5 meters) tall. Today's reconstructed compound is 312 feet by 156 feet (95 by 48 meters), slightly smaller than the original fort. Various sources claim that the compound was as wide as 425 by 175 feet, though the exact original measurements are unknown.

Within the fort walls were sleeping quarters, a gunsmith, distillery, bakery, grist mill, blanket factory, and carpenter and blacksmith shops.

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 (19,760-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 Micheltona 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 (77,295 hectares, or 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, Mexican General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and others were held prisoner at the fort.

### **LIFE AT THE FORT**

Sutter's Fort was a popular emigrant destination. The 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.

### **GOLD CHANGED EVERYTHING**

In late 1847, Sutter hired James Marshall to build a sawmill on the American River, 35 miles northeast 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, debtor, patriarch, victim, friend, yet also enemy, to the California Indians. He died in 1880 in Lititz, Pennsylvania, far from the vibrant community he helped to create.

### **SUTTER AND CALIFORNIA INDIANS**

Sutter's treatment of the Nisenan and other California Indians is controversial. He viewed himself as a patriarch and protector—a view not necessarily shared by California Indians 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 California Indians, Sutter's Fort could not have existed.

### **A FORT REBORN**

By the late 1850s, Sutter's Fort lay in ruins, but the central building remained intact; it had been used as a boarding house, a store, and a 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, and 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. Educational programs are offered for school groups.

For schedules and details, please visit [www.parks.ca.gov/suttersfort](http://www.parks.ca.gov/suttersfort).

### **SUTTER'S FORT TRADE STORE**

The trade store contains a wide variety of books, pioneer crafts, and unique gifts that help visitors connect with life at the fort. Operated by the Friends of Sutter's Fort, proceeds benefit interpretive and educational programs.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

- Sutter's cannon and other weapons were never fired to defend the fort.
- Generally, no more than 50 people stayed in the fort overnight.
- Sutter was in command of his fort from 1840-1849 except for a brief period during the Bear Flag revolt in 1846.
- In order to qualify for a land grant and build his fort, Sutter became a Mexican citizen.



## 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
- 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](http://www.parks.ca.gov/capitaldistrict).



*Books and Crafts for visitors at the trade store*

