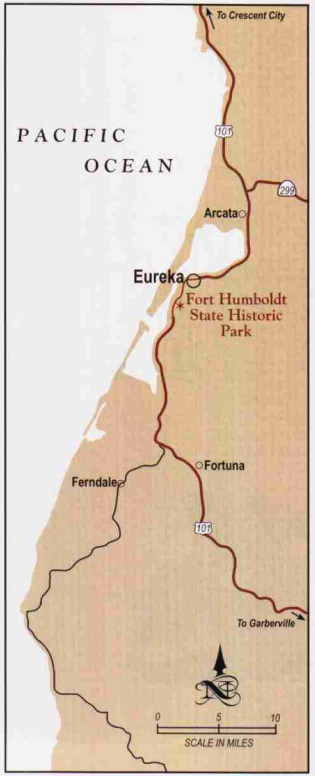

Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biologicial diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

GRAY DAVIS
Governor

MARY D. NICHOLS
Secretary for Resources

RUSTY AREIAS
Director, California State Parks

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Fort Humboldt
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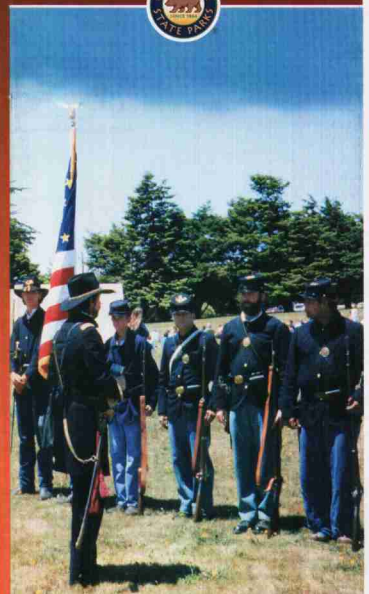


Drawing of the fort, circa 1854

California's romantic north coast region is a land of great natural beauty. Forests of coast redwoods march down the mountains to the very edge of the continent. Wild rivers make their way through the countryside—rivers with legendary names—the Smith, the Klamath, the Van Duzen, the Mad, the Trinity, and the Eel. Clouds, rain, wind and fog press in from the Pacific Ocean to the west in ever-changing patterns that give distinctive character and drama to a coastline that is varied and bold—a fitting border to this compelling landscape.

Native Americans lived here long before Europeans even dreamed of a new world. The Hoopas, the Yuroks, and the Wiyots fished the rivers, hunted the plentiful game, and maintained their unique blend of culture and tradition. Then, in May 1849, Major Pierson B. Reading discovered gold on the banks of the Trinity River, and their whole way of life was doomed to a bitter and bloody end.

The Discovery of Humboldt Bay

The gold diggings in the Trinity River country were rich but remote. Supplies had to be brought in from Sacramento on crude trails through steep-sided canyons, and seasonal flooding tended to make the Sacramento Valley impassable in winter. A possible solution to the transportation problem was the development of a trail through the mountains to the west, where a supply base might be established on the coast. In 1849, this idea inspired an expedition from Rich Bar in the Trinity mines, an expedition that led directly to the discovery of the large body of water now known as Humboldt Bay.

The shore of Humboldt Bay seemed an ideal place for a settlement that could serve as a supply base for the Trinity mines, and several ships were sent north from San Francisco to locate the seaward entrance to the bay. Credit for the actual discovery belongs to the expedition aboard the schooner *Laura Virginia*. On April 9, 1850, several crew members from that ship entered Humboldt Bay in small boats and crossed to its eastern side where they founded the settlement that came to be known as Humboldt City. Three other settlements followed almost immediately – Uniontown (present-day Arcata), Bucksport and Eureka.

Conflict

Word spread quickly about the new communities on Humboldt Bay, and hundreds of adventurous settlers flocked to the area, anxious to acquire land and establish themselves. Amid all the excitement they gave little or no consideration to the rights of the people who had lived here for centuries. Many settlers felt that the natives should simply move on. Conflict was therefore inevitable.

At first, the native people were eager to trade with the white men who were arriving in such large numbers. The settlers, however, were intent on their own pursuits. They took over village sites and hunting grounds and simply killed the natives (men, women, or children) who tried to defend their homes and families. Before long, the natives began to strike back according to their code – a life for a life – whether they attacked the innocent or the guilty.

Starting in 1850, the settlers made several desperate appeals to the government for help, and early in 1853 their appeals were at last answered.

The Establishment of Fort Humboldt

A company of U.S. Army soldiers under Brevet Lt. Colonel Robert C. Buchanan was assigned to protect the settlers on Humboldt Bay. Buchanan's orders were to establish a post in the vicinity of Uniontown. The troops arrived in late January 1853, and Buchanan quickly selected a barren 40-foot-high bluff near the town of Bucksport overlooking the east side of the bay as the best location for the military outpost.

By July 1854, Buchanan's men had constructed 14 buildings: seven small structures for officers' quarters, a building to house the enlisted men, a commissary, a hospital, a powder magazine, two laundry buildings and a guardhouse. These structures flanked a 260-foot-square parade ground that was left open to the bay on its west side. Buildings that were added to the basic complex later on included a blacksmith's shop, a stable and a bakehouse. The structures were all of crude plank construction, though most of them were plastered inside. A new hospital was built in 1863 to replace the original one, which had badly deteriorated.

Most of the furnishings for the living quarters were also rather crude, but some of the them reflected great ingenuity. For example, one of the officers made an easy chair out of a barrel, which he stuffed with moss and upholstered with calico. The finished product was said to be the envy and admiration of the entire garrison.

Culture Clash

During much of the time it was in operation, Fort Humboldt's main value to the settlers of the area was as a symbol of civilization in the wilderness. Trouble in the Humboldt region never took the form of all-out war; rather, it consisted mainly of isolated skirmishes and "incidents." As a result, the men stationed at the fort rarely participated in outright battles. Instead, they found themselves acting as negotiators and conciliators, trying to resolve conflicts and avoid violence, occasionally holding prisoners, generally offering whatever protection they could to both settlers and the native people.

In an effort to bring about a reliable peace, various treaties were made with the native groups that lived in the area between Clear Lake and the Trinity River. These agreements invariably failed, however, because the supplies and land promised did not materialize and because many settlers were simply determined to drive the natives from their homeland.

Colonel Buchanan had some competent peacemakers among his soldiers, including Captain Judah, whose greatest accomplishment was the resolution of a major conflict between the Red Cap tribe and the miners at Orleans Bar. If problems had been left in the hands of other equally wise and able men, all might have gone well. All too often, however, settlers decided to take matters into their own hands by styling themselves "volunteers" and slaughtering natives at random with little or no provocation.

Small-scale wars with various groups and isolated incidents of vengeance by the "volunteers" continued for several years. In response, attacks against whites also increased both in number and in intensity.

Several changes in the administration and staffing of Fort Humboldt occurred after the departure of Colonel Buchanan in 1855, but no matter who commanded the U.S. Army troops in the fort, the citizens of the Humboldt region were never satisfied with the efforts of the military in suppressing the native people. Groups of settlers were continually taking action on their own while at the same time pleading with the government to send in more troops.

Finally, in February 1863, Governor Leland Stanford issued a proclamation that called for the enlistment of six companies of volunteers to be known as the "Mountaineer Battalion," for the express purpose of controlling the hostile natives of the Humboldt region. These forces came under the command of one Colonel Black, who had already acquired a great deal of experience in dealing with natives through his earlier service with the California Volunteers, a group that had been formed some time earlier to assist in military operations. The decisive blows that were struck by Black's troops had a marked effect on the local tribes. Large numbers of them were killed outright, and the others soon surrendered themselves and their weapons and asked for peace.

The Hoopa Treaty, which gave Hoopa Valley to its people, was signed August 21, 1864. This treaty, combined with continued and very effective military action, soon led to similar treaties throughout the Humboldt Military District. Thus, the wars that had plagued the Humboldt region for so long finally came to a close.

Life at Fort Humboldt

Even today the Humboldt Bay region is relatively isolated from metropolitan life. The nearest large cities are San Francisco and Portland, Oregon, each more than 250 miles away. In the mid-1800s, however, Humboldt Bay was a truly remote outpost of civilization. The only practical means of communication with the rest of the state was by sea, and contact with the outside world was irregular at best. Supplies, mail, and even pay for the men at Fort Humboldt were often delayed for months at a time.

Most of the enlisted men found life at Fort Humboldt decidedly dreary. They awoke to bugle call in the morning and went to breakfast. This was followed by drill and guardmount and then more drill. After dinner at noon, there was still more drill, then the evening dress parade and the lowering of the flag. At this point the bugle would sound for supper, which was followed by taps. The only relief from the monotony of this routine was an occasional expedition up into the mountains—trips that were eagerly anticipated by every man at the post.

One welcome variation in the usual evening activities of card playing, reading, or writing letters home was the occasional "gutta-percha" banquet. Gutta-percha consisted of small mussels pickled in vinegar and served in a wide-mouthed bottle from which the little delicacies were retrieved with an iron fork.

Once in a while an old Indian fighter or mountain man would stop by the fort and entertain the soldiers with fantastic adventure stories. One favorite storyteller was the trapper, Seth Kinman, who was also much admired for his fiddle playing. Old Seth claimed to have made his fiddle partly from the forehead of his favorite mule, Dave, whose spirit he hoped "to meet in the great beyond."

Kinman's buckskin suit, also fashioned by his own hand, was as colorful as his stories. It was trimmed with red fringe from an old Army uniform. A huge pouch of bear skin decorated with bear's claws was slung around his waist. But Seth Kinman's cap was truly a wonder! It was made of black bear skin with a band of brown bear skin and a grizzly's tail looped across the top as an ornament.

Another welcome diversion for the officers at Fort Humboldt was an occasional social gathering arranged by Harriet Simpson, the wife of the Army surgeon who was stationed at the fort from 1854 to 1857. Mrs. Simpson apparently enjoyed playing the role of a gracious hostess. This is evident from a letter she wrote to her mother describing a New Year's Eve party:

"We invited all [officers and wives] in the garrison, making a party of eleven with ourselves....The turkey, nicely roasted and cold was placed at one end [of the table] before Dr. [Simpson]. A large bowl, filled with oyster soup stood before me. A large iced loaf of half fruit cake was placed near the center....Just back of the soup bowl I had a large form of charlotte russe....Then in the various spaces I had a form of jelly, a form of blanc mange, a plate of jelly cake, a plate of macaroons, a plate of figs and raisins. The decanter and wine glasses stood at one corner, but there was not enough wine taken to shock even such a teetotaller as you are....We watched the old year out and the New Year in, and exchanged New Year's greetings before we broke up."

But such pleasant occasions were rare. In the main, life at Fort Humboldt was insufferably dull for the men who were stationed here.

One of the lonely and dissatisfied soldiers at the fort was a young officer by the name of Ulysses S. Grant, who was stationed at Fort Humboldt for five months. He was quiet and withdrawn, much preoccupied by his longing to be reunited with his family. He associated very little with his fellow officers, evidently preferring to spend his leisure time in long, lonely rides into the wild country surrounding the fort. And, as was the case with many of the men at Fort Humboldt, he drank too much.

Grant's drinking did nothing to improve his relationship with his commanding officer, the redoubtable Colonel Buchanan—a relationship that was full of angry conflict from the very beginning. The Colonel finally demanded that Grant either resign from the Army or be tried on charges of drunkenness. The young officer chose resignation and returned to civilian life. When he left Eureka for the last time in May 1854, he is reported to have said, "Whoever hears of me in ten years will hear of a well-to-do old Missouri farmer."

Present-Day Fort Humboldt

Fort Humboldt was abandoned as a military post in August 1870. The land and the one remaining building—the hospital—were sold to W.S. Cooper in 1893 for $6,000. When Mr. Cooper died 35 years later, his wife donated the property to the City of Eureka. Title was transferred to the State of California in 1955, some additional land was acquired, and Fort Humboldt became a state historic park. The hospital building was restored and is used today as a museum.

A recent addition to Fort Humboldt is the Historic Garden. It was designed to represent a typical personal garden at the Fort in 1853-63. Gardens incorporated medicinal, edible and floral selections all in the same bed and surely provided great enrichment to lonely residents. The garden is a joint project between California State Parks and Master Gardeners, volunteers with the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program. During your visit, take a moment to enjoy the peaceful beauty of the garden.

An interesting exhibit of historical logging equipment is on display at Fort Humboldt State Historic Park. Interpretive panels and the equipment itself trace the history of redwood logging from its beginnings in the 1850s to the present day. The exhibit presents information about the kinds of equipment used in the redwood logging industry, the wood and its uses, and the life of the loggers.

A self-guided trail begins with an authentic, fully furnished logger's cabin. Although most of the men worked for logging companies and lived in camps, some were self-employed and lived in small cabins like the one on display.

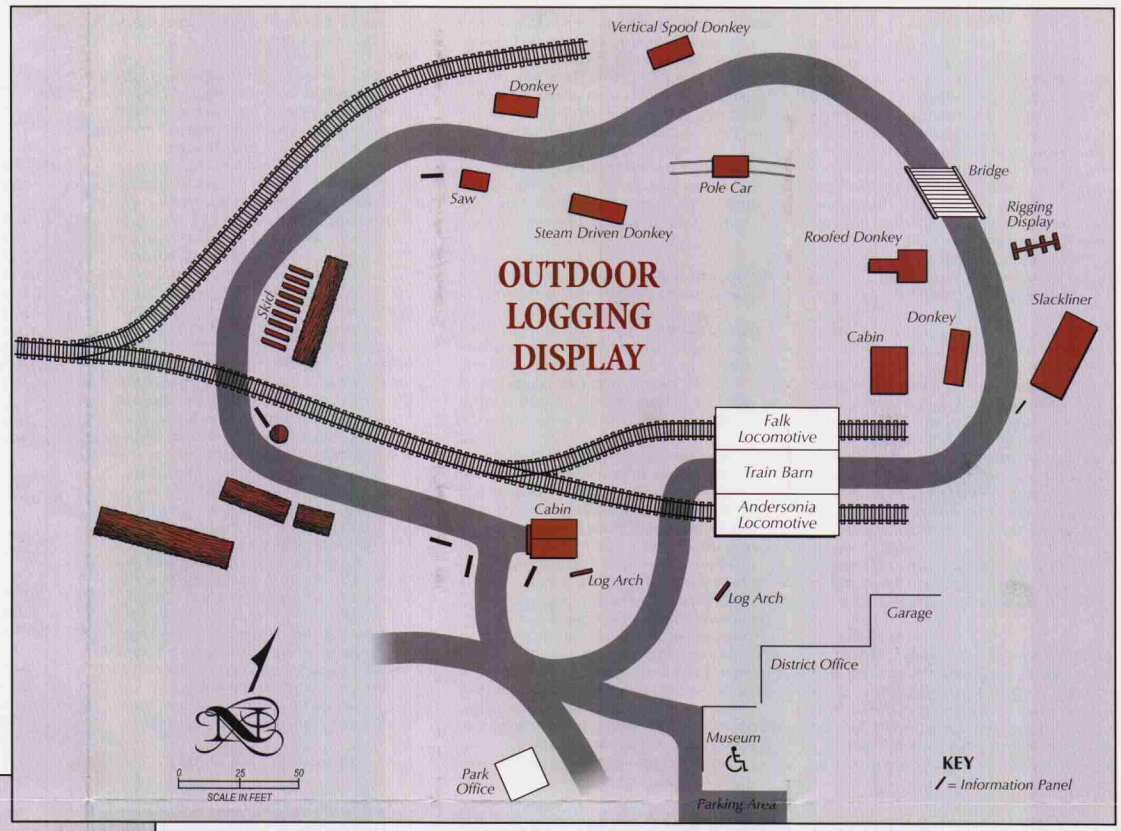
Visitors can also inspect several redwood log and stump specimens. These give some idea of the tremendous strength and ingenuity it took to get these trees out of the forest and cut into usable pieces. For example, there are two sections of redwood trees here that are six feet in diameter and 28 feet long. Each weighs approximately 21 tons.

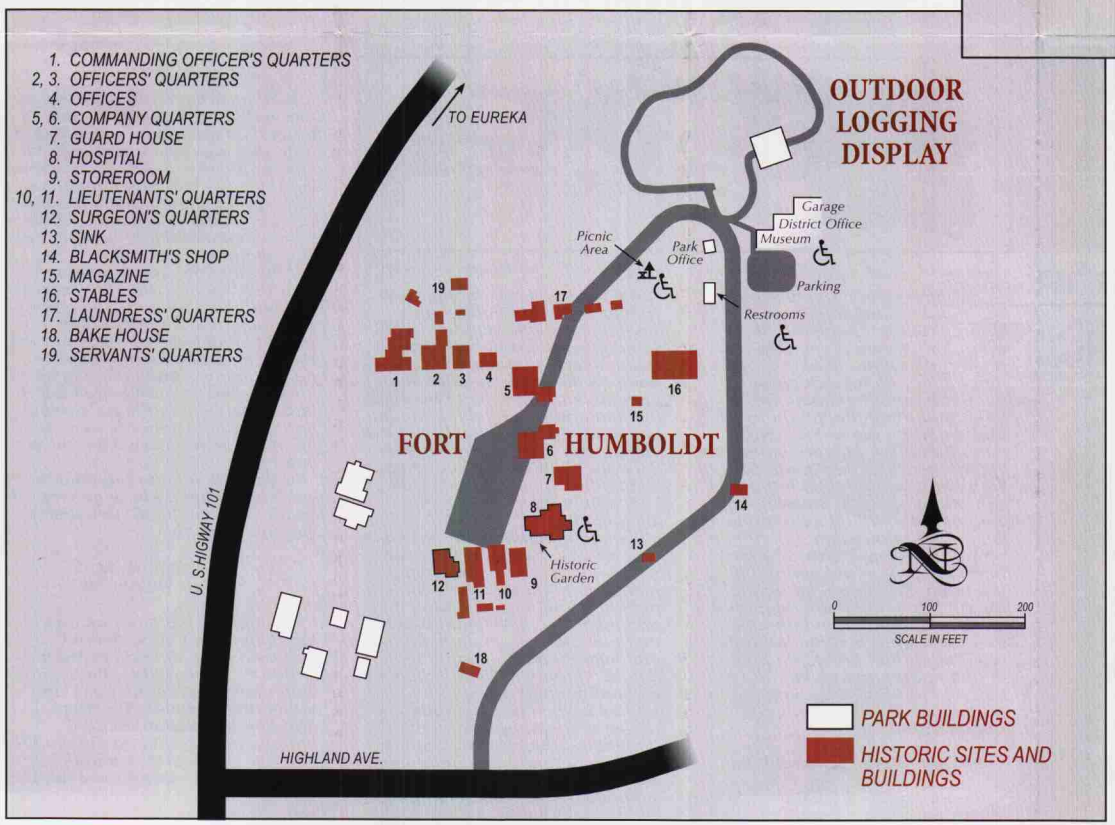
The exhibit also presents the story of steam power in the logging industry. The visitor will see the once "revolutionary" steam donkey, which could pull itself through the woods on cable and blocks and drag logs over the skid roads. This versatile engine, invented in 1882, eventually replaced the traditional ox teams that had been used to haul logs since the beginning of the industry.

A Washington slack-line steam donkey is also on display. This huge machine was used to haul logs over rough ground to a loading area.

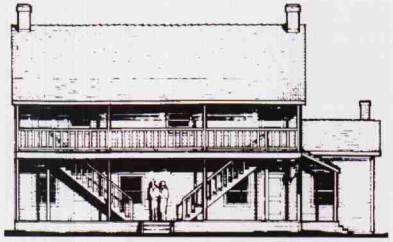
As tree felling operations moved deeper into the woods, railroads emerged as the best way to get the huge logs to the mill site. Track for these railroads soon penetrated deep into the forests. The logging "locos" varied in both type and size, but always made a colorful picture as they rumbled through the woods belching smoke and steam. A Falk locomotive and an Andersonia locomotive are part of the exhibit.

Visitors are encouraged to call ahead to arrange accessible tours.

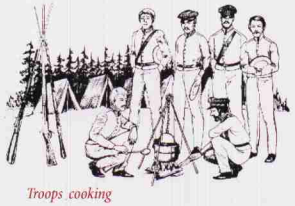




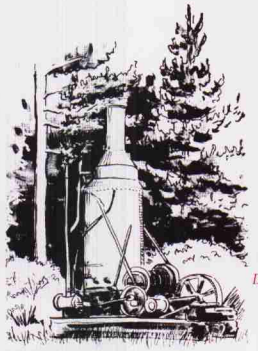
Long range plans for Fort Humboldt call for the reconstruction of other buildings that would return the fort to its original appearance.



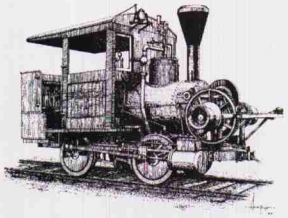
Company Quarters



Troops cooking



Dolbeer Steam Donkey



Steam Locomotive