Sutter's Fort State Historic Park

Transforming the Sutter's Fort Experience

Concept Plan June 2026



Project Overview

California State Parks (CSP) is transforming how history is shared at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park (SFSHP) as part of a broader effort to present a more accurate, inclusive, and complex understanding of the past. The 2024 Interpretation Master Plan (IMP), which was developed through collaboration with Tribal partners, stakeholders, and the public, set a new direction for storytelling at the Fort. The Transforming the Sutters Fort Experience Concept Plan provides the steppingstone from the vision established by the IMP to the development of new exhibits and experiences.

What is the Concept Plan?

The Concept Plan provides a framework for transforming the visitor experience at Sutter's Fort. By organizing the interior and exterior areas of the Fort into four distinct "zones" of experience, the plan provides a vision for where and how the stories and ideas from the IMP can be told throughout the park. It also provides an overall feel for the types of experiences visitors can expect and a set of recommendations for improving the site and helping visitors engage more deeply.

The Concept Plan will be implemented in phases, shaped by the priorities identified above, available funding, and a commitment to meaningful visitor experiences at every stage of implementation.



Priorities from Engagement

The Concept Plan was developed through robust engagement with Tribal partners and the public. As a result, it prioritizes the following:

- Centering Native American stories and conveying diverse voices and perspectives.
- Ensuring accurate and balanced history.
- Emphasizing interactive, hands-on, and multi-sensory experiences.
- Integrating thoughtfully designed reflection spaces for processing heavy topics.
- Elevating self-guided visitor experiences.
- Expanding interpretation beyond the Fort Walls and emphasizing connections between the State Indian Museum and Fort.
- Providing opportunities and resources for guests to do further research or engage more deeply with exhibit content, for example through access to digital archives.
- Expanding community programming.

Reflective Spaces

Engagement feedback emphasized the importance of including reflective spaces into the Fort experience, areas such as shaded seating and landscape plantings within the courtyard, research or resource rooms, and opportunities for visitors to share their thoughts.

While the Concept Plan suggests various areas where these spaces could be integrated, their final locations will be determined during the schematic development process.



Contents

Page 1 Project Overview

Page 2 Figure 1: Concept Plan for Fort Interior

Page 3 Figure 2: Concept Plan for Fort Exterior

Page 4 Descriptions of Zone 1 and 2

Page 5 Descriptions of Zone 3 and 4

Page 6 Stories to Feature in Zones 2 and 4



Sutter's Fort State Historic Park

Transforming the Sutter's Fort Experience

Figure 1: Fort Interior



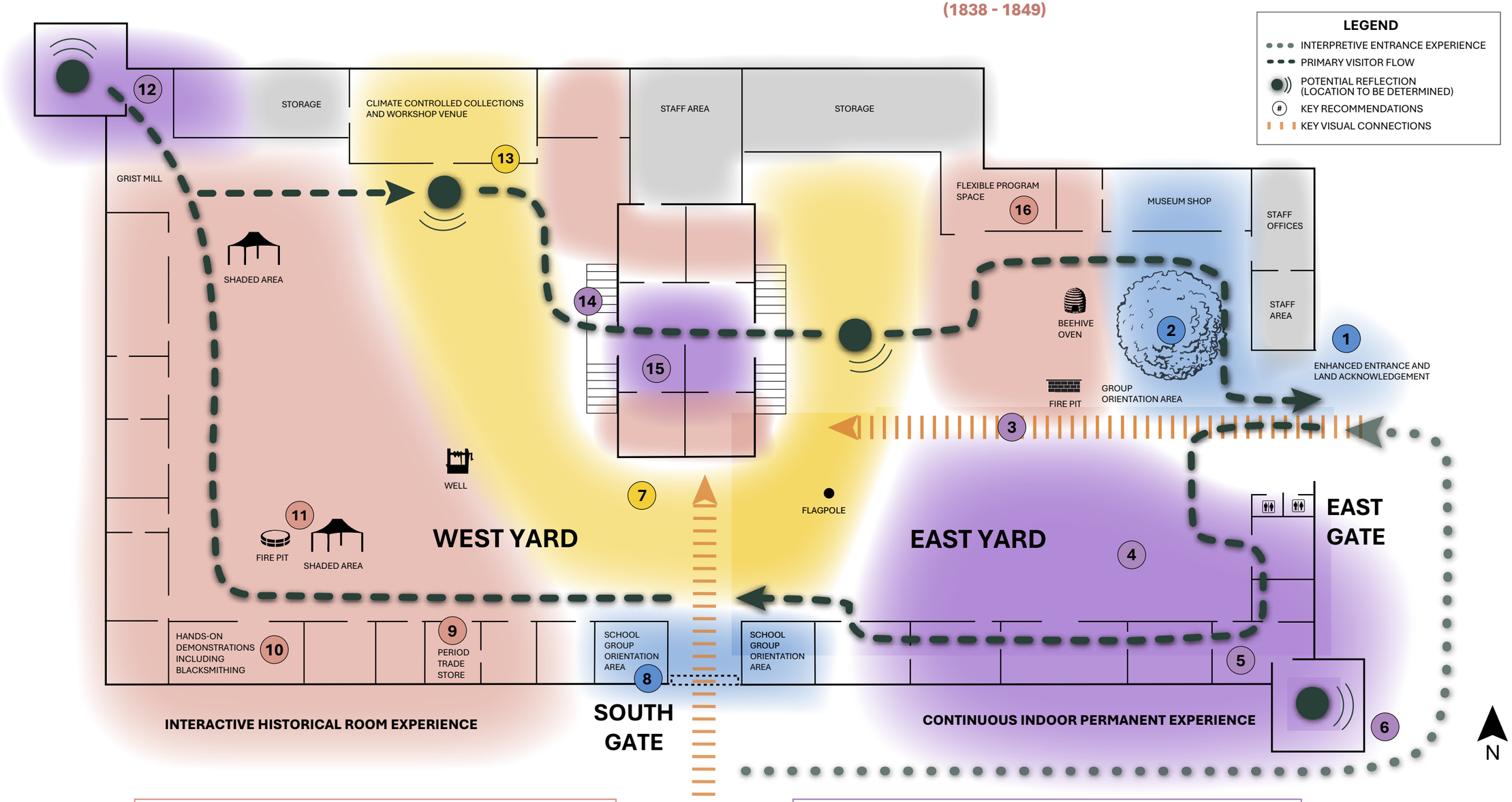
ZONE 1:
VISITOR ORIENTATION & SERVICES

ZONE 2:
PERMANENT EXHIBITS: EXAMINING THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

ZONE 3:
TEMPORARY PROGRAMS & EXHIBITS: DYNAMIC LEARNING

ZONE 4:
EXPERIENTIAL ROOMS: PERIOD INTERPRETATION (1838 - 1849)

ADMINISTRATIVE AREAS



Stories for interactive, hands-on learning include:
Trade and Commerce, Textiles and the Labor of Native Women, and the Miwok Militia. See page 6 for more themes.

Stories for permanent exhibits include:
Native Lifeways Before Disruption, Cultural Disruption and Genocide, and Westward Migration. See page 6 for more themes.

Figure 2: Exterior Grounds



ZONE 1:
VISITOR ORIENTATION & SERVICES

ZONE 2:
CONTEMPORARY FRAMING

ZONE 3:
PROGRAMMATIC LEARNING



LEGEND

- POTENTIAL REFLECTION (LOCATION TO BE DETERMINED)
- # KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
- KEY VIEWS

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. VISUAL ACCESS INTO FORT FROM SOUTH GATE
2. PROMINENT ENTRY SIGNAGE
3. PROTECTED CONGREGATION AREAS
4. WAYFINDING AND INTERPRETIVE PATH FROM SOUTH GATE TO EAST GATE
5. INTERPRETATION TO MARK ORIGINAL WALLS
6. UPDATED INTERPRETATION OF MEMORIAL PLANTINGS
7. COMMEMORATE OAK TREE AND HONOR ELDERS
8. INTERPRETIVE EXHIBIT CREATING CONCEPTUAL BRIDGE BETWEEN STATE INDIAN MUSEUM AND SUTTER'S FORT
9. EXTERIOR EXHIBITS FOCUSED ON WATER, LAND, AND TRADITIONAL ECOLOGIC KNOWLEDGE
10. ACTIVATE WEST WALL
11. ENHANCED INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Zone Descriptions



Zone 1. Visitor Orientation & Services

This zone welcomes visitors to Sutter's Fort and provides basic services to make their visits comfortable. The entry experience includes convenient ticketing, clear wayfinding, and easy access to the museum shop and bathrooms.

Two gathering areas are provided within the Fort, one near the entrance for the public and another near the south gate for school groups. Shaded gathering areas are also established outside of the Fort walls.

Other improvements to the overall Fort experience include opportunities for visitors to share their thoughts, resources for digging deeper into areas of interest, and reflective space for contemplating hard truths about the past and the possibilities for the future.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FORT INTERIOR

1 **Enhanced Entrance and Land Acknowledgement:** Improved signage and wayfinding guides visitors to the east gate for entry, ticketing, and self-guided tours. Prominent land acknowledgement on outer wall welcomes visitors to ancestral lands.

2 **Group Orientation Area (German Oak Tree):** As the only significant natural shade within the Fort's walls, the oak tree provides cover for group orientations. The addition of movable seating will support more effective gatherings here and elsewhere in the Fort.

8 **School Group Orientation Area:** Orienting school groups at the covered seating areas under the gun platforms will relieve some congestion near the oak tree and museum shop.



Mounting Tribal Land Acknowledgement signage at Sue-meg State Park in Humboldt County.
Source: Marnin Robbins, California State Parks



Students gather in designated orientation areas.
Source: www.wkassociates.net

Zone 2. Permanent Exhibits: Examining the Historical Legacy

This zone features a continuous, indoor, multi-room permanent exhibit and several smaller exhibits to help visitors understand the site's full history, from ancestral lands to present day.

Exhibits will be interactive and hands-on, featuring collection items as well as audio recordings, videos, and touchscreens for immersive learning that serves a variety of learning styles.

On the exterior grounds beyond the Fort walls, signage and installations interpret the land and times before Sutter's Fort.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FORT INTERIOR

3 **Visual Connection to Central Building:** Views of the Fort's only original architecture, the Central Building, are emphasized with walkways and landscaping.

4 **Landscaping to Frame Central Building and Primary Visitor Flow:** Native grasses and landscaping soften the experience while framing pathways to exhibits and views of the Central Building.

5 **Continuous Indoor, Permanent Exhibit Space:** Introduces visitors to the natural and cultural landscape that preceded the Fort as well as foundational Fort histories and legacies.

6 **Reflection on Challenging History:** Southeast bastion (tower) offers views of the original Fort extents as well as space for rest and reflection.

12 **Reflection on Challenging History:** Northwest bastion (tower) offers views of Burns Slough and the State Indian Museum, as well as space for rest and reflection.

14 **Accessible Central Building Experience:** Permanent exhibits in the Central Building are made more accessible by an exterior lift and/or multi-media exhibits.

15 **Laboratory of Learning:** Permanent exhibits and resource room in the Central Building interpret how myths about the Fort developed and how truthful histories are verified.



Truthful and complex histories being told through immersive exhibits and archival documents at the Native New York exhibit.
Source: www.americanindian.si.edu



Kids enjoy a digital interactive exhibit at the imagiNATIONS Activity Center at the National Museum of the American Indian.
Source: www.americanindian.si.edu

Zone Descriptions



Zone 3. Temporary Programs & Exhibits: Dynamic Learning

This zone provides both indoor and outdoor spaces for temporary exhibits, contemporary art, reflection, and current commentary. Concentrated around the Central Building, these areas keep the Fort experience fresh, diverse, and emotionally resonant.

Temporary exhibits and contemporary installations-including exhibits by California Native American Tribes-engage the senses and invite dialogue. A renovated workshop venue hosts seminars and special events and includes climate-controlled cases for exhibiting valuable or sensitive cultural materials. Outdoor areas serve as a transitional space where visitors can breathe, reflect and connect.

Outside the Fort walls, the western side of the Park is improved for community gathering and the western wall of the Fort becomes a canvas for temporary installations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FORT INTERIOR

7 **Temporary Art/Sculpture:** Public art brings diverse perspectives and thought-provoking experiences to the Fort. Changing displays of art, sculptures, and temporary installations give people ways to explore, learn, and reflect.

13 **Climate-Controlled Collections and Workshop Venue:** This renovated space offers the potential for displaying collections, presenting special exhibits by California Native American tribes, or hosting presentations by visiting artists and scholars.



Flower Piano at the San Francisco Botanic Garden.
Source: Secret San Francisco



Art Float-Riverside at Lake Evans in Fairmount Park.
Source: www.riversideartalliance.org



Photo from exhibit, The Life of Sally Hemings, at Thomas Jefferson's historic home.
Source: www.monticello.org



Professional development workshop at the Tenement Museum in New York.
Source: www.Tenement.org

Zone 4. Experiential Rooms: Period Interpretation 1838-1849

This zone engages visitors in mid-1800's history through hands-on exploration and programs. Historically accurate period rooms will present accurate stories from multiple perspectives.

Exhibits will be immersive and sensory, including demonstrations and participatory activities, to bring historic spaces and everyday work (e.g., blacksmithing, food preparation) to life. Character-driven storytelling will elevate Native perspectives and lesser-told first-hand perspectives. Themes and timelines will be integrated for site cohesion.

These experiential areas offer a concrete understanding of the Fort as a center of industry and settlement and a visceral appreciation for both the difficulty and skillfullness of Fort life.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FORT INTERIOR

9 **Hands-On Engagement in the Period Trade Store:** Improve historical accuracy of the trade store and allow visitors to enter and explore drawers and props in a more immersive way.

10 **Demonstrations in the Blacksmith Shop:** Improved ventilation and seating for visitors to watch blacksmithing and learn about dynamics of skilled labor at the Fort.

11 **Shaded Programming Areas:** Planting of native trees expands outdoor programming areas and creates educational opportunities.

16 **Flexible Space for Period Programs and Activities:** Multi-use space provides an indoor area for hands-on programs and activities.



Period room education signage at Thomas Jefferson's historic home.
Source: www.monticello.org



Reading true stories during the "Shared Journeys" program at the Tenement Museum in New York.
Source: www.tenement.org

Stories to Feature



The Concept Plan identifies potential stories to feature in specific Zones 2 and 4. Ideas that received the greatest interest and/or support from public feedback are identified with an asterisk (*).

Stories to be featured in Zone 2. Permanent Exhibits: Examining the Historical Legacy

STORIES TO FEATURE IN THE PERMANENT EXHIBIT

- On Native Land: Lifeways Before Disruption*
- Cultural Disruption and Genocide: Enduring Effects*
- Restoration of the Fort
- Reflections on State Indian Museum and Burns Slough
- Opportunity and Conflict: Sutter's Vision
- Westward Migration and a Changed Landscape*
- Struggles for Power in Alta California: Bear Flag Revolt and U.S. Military Occupation
- Exploitation and a New Economy
- Gold and California Statehood*
- Sutter's Fort and Myth-Making: Resistance and the Pursuit of Truth*
- Overland and Maritime Journeys to the Fort
- Diversity and Cultural Interface

* Greatest interest/support from public feedback

Stories to be featured in Zone 4. Period Interpretation 1838-1849

STORIES TO FEATURE IN THE EXPERIENTIAL ROOMS

- The Miwok Militia*
- Forts and Colonial Power*
- Gold Discovery in Coloma*
- The Fort as a Center of Trade and Commerce*
- Firearms and Coercion
- Agriculture and Native Labor*
- The Environmental Impact of Trade*
- Vaqueros
- Hierarchy: How People Were Fed
- The Skilled Labor of Blacksmithing
- Textiles and Labor of Native Women*
- Sutter's Story: Challenging False Narratives*

* Greatest interest/support from public feedback