

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Suitable Site for a Sawmill

When General Fremont first visited California in 1844, he was the guest for a time of General John A. Sutter at Sutter's Fort in Sacramento. One morning during breakfast, so the story goes, he was urged to remain a while and go to the coast to see, among other points of interest, a very large redwood tree (*Sequoia sempervirens*) near Santa Cruz, or rather a cluster of trees, forming apparently a single trunk which was said to be 72 feet in circumference.

John Bidwell, a pioneer Californian of 1841, who was also a guest of Sutter, added to the story of the trees and told Fremont of the big tree he had seen in the Sierra Nevada in October of the year he arrived in the west. He afterward verified it as one of the fallen big trees in Calaveras Grove. Ever after Bidwell claimed to have been the first white man to see the mammoth trees of California, the only place in which they are found. The *Sequoia gigantea*, or mammoth tree, is found only on the slope of the Sierra Nevada – nowhere farther north than latitude 38 (degrees) -30'.

Sutter's Fort was an important point from the very beginning of the colony. The building of the fort and all subsequent colonists added to its importance, for that was the first point of destination to those who came to California by way of Oregon or direct across the plains. The fort was begun in 1842 and finished two years later. There was no town of Sacramento until after the Gold Rush, when it became a bustling, buzzing center for merchants, traders, miners, etc., and every available room was in demand.

In 1849 Sacramento was laid out on the river two miles west of the fort, and the town grew up at once as a city. The first town was laid out by Hastings and Bidwell in January, 1846, about three or four miles below the mouth of the American River, and called Sutterville. The Mexican war, the excitement of the gold discovery and the lull after these two events prevented the town from growing. Sutter always called his colony and fort "New Helvetia." At the present time the city of Sacramento surrounds the fort and the entire territory has taken that name.

Another well known man of the gold rush days in California was James W. Marshall. He also was

associated with Sutter at the fort. It was Marshall who searched the mountains for a suitable site for a sawmill on the Sacramento River, at the request of Sutter, and it was Marshall who is credited with the discovery of gold. Marshall came across the plains to Oregon in 1844, and thence to California the next year. He was a wheelwright by trade, but being very ingenious, he could turn his hand to almost anything. So he acted as carpenter for Sutter, and did many other things, among which could be mentioned making wheels for spinning wool, and looms, reeds, and shuttles for weaving yarn into coarse blankets for the Indians, who did the carding, spinning, weaving, and all other labor.

In 1846 Marshall went through the war to its close as a private. Besides his ingenuity as a mechanic, he had most singular traits. Almost everyone pronounced him half crazy or harebrained. He was certainly eccentric, and perhaps somewhat flighty, according to Bidwell's report. He was, however, never quarrelsome nor vicious. He had great, almost overwhelming confidence in his ability to do everything as a mechanic.

Bidwell wrote the contract between Sutter and Marshall to build the mill, on the site which Marshall had selected. Sutter was to furnish the means, Marshall was to build and run the mill and have a share of the lumber for his compensation. His idea was to haul the lumber part way and raft it down the American river to Sacramento, and thence, his part of it down the Sacramento through Suisun and San Pablo bays to San Francisco. Certainly, wrote Bidwell, no other man than Marshall would have ever entertained such a wild scheme as that of rafting sawed lumber down the canons of the American River, and no other man than Sutter would have been so confiding.

The discovery of gold at this very mill is another story.