

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Sutter Family In New World

One of the most pleasing and educational exhibits in the Pioneer Gallery at Sutter's Fort in Sacramento which we visited recently, is the three-dimensional scene done to scale and depicting an historic incident in the story of the fort. This was the arrival of Lt. John C. Fremont and his guide, Kit Carson, in March, 1844. With members of their exploring party, mounted on tired horses, they are shown being welcomed at the main gate by Sutter. This beautifully modeled diorama is the work of the late Joe Mora, widely known artist-sculptor of Pebble Beach.

Early descriptions of Sutter's Fort vary in details, but Sutter himself later recalled: "I built one large building and surrounded it with walls 18 feet high and bastions. The walls enclosed about five acres. They were of adobe brick about two and a half feet thick, bastions five feet thick, and under the bastions the prisons. I then erected other buildings, bakery, mill, blanket factory, all inside. A tannery was built on the spot where I had first landed ... There were several other outhouses for vaqueros, etc. ... Four years were occupied in building the fort. ..."

Carroll Hall, the compiler of the booklet, "Sutter Fort" for the Division of Beaches and Parks has accomplished much in his research into the history of the builder and the construction of the fort itself. He writes that one of the best contemporary accounts of the fort is that of Edwin Bryant, who came overland in 1846, when the American conquest of California was under way, and who afterwards wrote a book, "What I saw in California," which was published in 1848.

"Riding up to the front gate I saw two Indian sentinels pacing to and fro before it, and several Americans, or "foreigners" (as all who are not Californians by birth are here called), sitting in the gateway dressed in buckskin pantaloons and blue sailors' shirts, with white stars worked on the collars. I inquired if Captain Sutter was in the fort. A very small man, with a peculiarly sharp red face and a most voluble tongue, gave the response. He was probably a Corporal. He said, in substance, that perhaps I was not aware of the great changes which had recently taken place in California – that the fort belonged to the United States, and that Captain Sutter, although he was in the fort, had no control over it. ..."

Sutter became a naturalized Mexican citizen Aug. 29, 1841, received from Gov. Alvarado title to 11 leagues which had been surveyed by Jean Jacques Vioget of Yerba Buena (San Francisco). The grant which Sutter named New Helvetia (after his homeland), extended to the Buttes beyond the present City of Marysville, and contained 48,278 acres – about 76 square miles. This grant was approved by the U.S. courts June 5, 1865.

The American Flag was raised over Sutter's Fort about July 11, 1846, and Fremont's men were placed temporarily in charge. Near the end of that year, a group of men set out from Sutter's Fort to give first relief to the tragic Donner Party of emigrants, who were trapped in the snow near the summit of the Sierra Nevada at what is now known as Donner Lake. Survivors were brought to the fort the following spring.

One of the most interesting exhibits in the Pioneer Gallery at the fort is the tiny wooden doll which survived the Donner Party's hardships in that winter of 1846-47. This doll was one of the exhibits shown here during the Centennial celebration in 1949.

Sutter was a member of the Monterey convention which drew up the State Constitution in 1849. In January, 1850, he was joined by Mrs. Sutter, his daughter Eliza and his sons, Emil Victor and William Alphonse, whom he had left in Switzerland in 1834. John A. Sutter Jr., left California in 1850 for Mexico, where he was married and became U.S. Consul at Acapulco. Sutter's daughter, Eliza, moved to Mexico with her husband, Dr. Franz Link. Emil Sutter became a notary public and an official of a savings association in San Francisco and died in Europe, according to Carroll Hall's findings. Another son, Alphonse died in Nevada City in 1863. He left a widow and one son.

Sutter took his family to Hock Farm on the Feather River near Marysville. His home, valuable records, and historical objects were destroyed by fire in 1864. The California legislature voted Sutter \$15,000 as a pension in 1864, to be paid in monthly installments of \$250 for five years.

Sutter died on June 18, 1880 in his room at the Mades Hotel, near the Capitol, in Washington, D.C. He was buried at Lititz in a secluded corner of the Moravian Brotherhood's Cemetery, as was his wife, who died in 1881.