

Russian American Company Outpost

Fort Ross Historic Park Has Surprises for Visitors

JENNER – Many visitors to Fort Ross State Historic Park, 12 miles north of Jenner on Highway One, are surprised that Russians, along with Native Alaskans, established a place for themselves in California history.

The park is one of the first five state parks in the California State Park system and was known as Settlement Ross when it was established by the Russian American Company, a commercial hunting and trading venture chartered by the tsarist government. Ivan Alexandrovich Kuskov established this colony in California as a food source for Alaska and to hunt profitable sea otters. Kuskov arrived at Ross in March of 1812 with a party of 25 Russians, many of them craftsmen, and 80 native Alaskans from Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands.

For thirty years the company hunted sea otter, set up working farms, established relations with local Native Californians, traded with Spanish Californians and later the Mexican government as well as merchants who traveled to the North Pacific for the fur trade. The Russian American Company remained at Fort Ross until the sea otter trade was no longer profitable. The holdings were sold in 1841 to John Sutter, who later became famous when gold was discovered at his saw mill in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

The Russian settlement and Russian American Company was responsible for a number of “firsts:”

- The Russian American company at Settlement Ross in California was first to establish a widely used commercial trade port in California.
 - The Russians were first to build ships on the west coast of North America. Four ships were constructed at the Ross colony in Fort Ross Cove.
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- Settlement Ross was the first to have a full-time blacksmith (and, at times, two) in California.
 - The Russians had a vineyard established at one of their local ranches with over 2000 vines. This was the first vineyard north of San Francisco.
 - The State Wildflower, the California poppy, is tied to Fort Ross. In 1816, two well-known naturalists Johan Friedrich Eschscholtz and Ludovick de Chamisso, traveling on the ship Riurik, paid a visit to Colony Ross. Chamisso decided to name the plant after his good friend and colleague calling it Eschholtzia Californica.

- Some of the first weather statistics in Northern California come from Fort Ross.
- The oldest surviving building north of San Francisco is at Fort Ross. The Rotchev House, about 170 years old, is in the original location with most of the original timbers. It is thought to be the oldest building between San Francisco and Alaska in its original location. This building is a National Historic Landmark.

Several buildings in the park have been reconstructed, including the first Russian Orthodox chapel south of Alaska, the stockade, and four other buildings. The park has a visitor center and bookstore that features one of the largest Russian History libraries in the north state.

Fort Ross Staff Interpreters run quality educational programs hosting over 5000 children each year. An active volunteer program is host to many living history events. Visitors from Russia are a daily occurrence along with many travelers from around the world. They enjoy not only the history of the Russian American Company, but also the natural resources like hiking, diving, and camping at the nearby Reef campground.

For more information visit the Fort Ross award winning web page at www.mcn.org/1/rrparks/fortross

And for information about other California State Parks, visit www.parks.ca.gov

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