



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell- Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

My name is Judy Crain, and I'd like to welcome you to Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park. We're standing on the last five acres of what at one time was a 26,000-acre ranch--Rancho del Arroyo Chico.

John Bidwell was an early California pioneer. He came to California in 1841 and he brought with him a dream. That dream was to become a farmer. He came with a group of pioneers who were with the first organized wagon train to come through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. After he arrived in California, he went to Sacramento to Sutter's Fort. He remained there for six years in the employ of John Sutter. Bidwell and Sutter were life long friends.

While he was there he had the occasion to come up into the northern part of the Sacramento Valley. While he was here, he realized that there was gold in the Feather River. So he spent two seasons panning for gold, and he used part of that money to buy the ranch.

By the 1860s this ranch was clearly the most diversified, best known, largest agricultural enterprise in California. John Bidwell loved agriculture, and he especially loved trees. As he worked around the ranch, he oftentimes took acorns in his pockets and he planted them as he worked his ranch.

Eventually, after having established the City of Chico, Chico was full of trees and now we call Chico the "City of Trees." John planted trees that exist even today. A beautiful example is this Southern Magnolia. John planted this tree in 1863. That was a couple of years before he started construction of the mansion.

Please join me as we step back in time for a visit to the social and cultural center of Northern California . . .

We're standing in the entrance hall of this Italianate villa. This house has 10,000 square feet, 26 rooms--four of them are special rooms. They're very high tech. I'm going to be showing you those rooms later on in the tour.

But, for now, I'd like you to direct your attention to the picture of John Bidwell. This picture was painted in 1903, three years after John died, by a woman artist. Her name was Alice Matilda Reading. She was a friend of Annie Bidwell's, and Mrs. Bidwell invited her to come here and stay in the mansion while she painted this picture. She used a technique called a "vanishing point perspective." That technique causes movement in the picture. And as you stroll up and

California State Parks Video Transcript

Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell—Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

down the hallway, in front of the picture, and watch him closely, you will notice that his eyes follow you as you go one way. And then, when you get to the end of the entrance hall, notice his feet--as you come back down the hallway, watch his feet turn and follow you. Actually, his head, his hands, his whole body will go with you as you go back and forth in front of the picture.

There are other interesting points about this picture--up in the right hand corner . . . John's beloved trees. And, obviously, he's standing right here in the mansion. The chair that he's leaning on is a chair that he favored. It was a gift to him from his father-in-law, whose name was Joseph Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy had received that chair from the Congressman Daniel Webster. Now, I like this chair a lot, specifically because the upholstery on that chair is woven from horsehair. Now, Victorians used a lot of horsehair in their furniture. Most of it was used as stuffing inside of the furniture, but this chair actually is covered with a piece of fabric that was woven from the hair of the horse.

The parlor is the room that the Bidwells used for their entertaining. Formal entertaining occurred in this house. Mrs. Bidwell was a member of the Suffragette Movement and the Temperance Movement, and she was a devout Presbyterian--so there would have been those kinds of meetings held here in the room. They also used this room for just pure social entertaining. One of the highlights of the room is the piano. This piano, a beautiful square grand piano made out of rosewood, was a gift to Mrs. Bidwell from John Bidwell. He bought it for her while they were on their honeymoon.

John met Annie in Washington, D.C., while he was serving a two-year term as congressman. He met her dad. Her dad was Joseph Kennedy, not part of the Kennedy family that we're familiar with, but a diplomat in Washington, D.C. He was the head of the Census Bureau there. Mr. Kennedy introduced John to his daughter, Annie. John just fell head over heels in love with her. She didn't feel quite the same about him at first. So, after asking her to marry him, and she declined, he finished his term as congressman, came back to Chico, and in the ensuing year or so, he and Miss Kennedy wrote letters back and forth. Eventually, she agreed to marry him. So he went back to Washington, D.C., in 1868, and they were married in her mom's parlor, a room that looked very much like this one.

After their wedding, they went to New York for a honeymoon. While they were there, they shopped for things for the house; and I hadn't mentioned to you that she had never seen this house until she got here because John actually planned the house and started construction of the house before he met Miss Kennedy. So here she is buying furniture for a house that she's never seen before.

The piano is one of the things that they bought. John wanted her to bring to Chico some of her culture, and the piano was the vehicle that they used. The piano traveled to California around the tip of South America to San Francisco, where it was put on a riverboat, and it came up the Sacramento River to Sacramento. Then it was placed on a short line railroad car that went to Marysville; and from Marysville it traveled the last leg of the trip to Chico by horse and wagon. Placed right here in the parlor until Mrs. Bidwell's death in 1918, the piano was an integral part of the entertaining that went on in this house. When they entertained, Mrs. Bidwell enjoyed decorating the house, and we have pictures that tell us the history of how she decorated. She

California State Parks Video Transcript

Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell—Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

would ask the gardener to come in and hang chicken wire around the arches, and then they would fill that chicken wire with fresh cut flowers and greens from the gardens.

She also enjoyed using the flags. This was very typical of this era, people were very patriotic, and they demonstrated that patriotism by hanging flags in and around the house. Mrs. Bidwell actually documented in her diaries that she decorated the house with the flags, so we continue in that tradition today by hanging the flags between the parlor and the dining room.

This was a real high tech house; very, very high tech. John was on the cutting edge of all kinds of modern things, not only for the house but for his ranch as well. In the house, the lighting was fueled with acetylene gas that was generated in the backyard and heated with eight fireplaces. Now, the fireplaces look like marble, but they're not. They're made out of slate; that slate was dipped in an enamel solution and then faux finished to look like marble.

Only about 30% of the furniture that you see in the house is original to the Bidwells. After Mrs. Bidwell died, because they had no children, the furnishings were distributed to nieces and nephews and to friends of the family.

If you had been a guest in the home of the Bidwells, certainly you would've been invited to dine. Dinner usually was at noon. And John loved to get up early in the morning and ask one of his managers to go out into the field and cut wheat and take that wheat over to the mill, which was located across the street, and have it ground into flour and then bring it back over to the chef to be cooked into biscuits. He called them Up-to-the-Minute-Biscuits. He loved to do that. The table would've been laden with all kinds of things that were grown or raised on the ranch. There would've been poultry, beef; perhaps you would've been served Peruvian potatoes, casaba melons, all kinds of fruits, all kinds of vegetables, all kinds of nuts.

John had this ranch divided into 20 different operations. He had a wheat mill, a flour mill, an olive oil processing plant, a vinegar plant, a cannery, and grew all kinds of fruits and vegetables here on the ranch. You would have had almost anything that your heart desired to eat here with the exception of one thing. And that one thing would have been wine. Mrs. Bidwell was part of the Temperance movement, she was a devout Presbyterian and a Temperance, and never was alcohol, nor tobacco, allowed in this house.

But there was one thing that went on in this dining room that was different from most Victorian homes. And that was not something that you ate, but the conversation that you participated in. Mrs. Bidwell was supported in all of her causes by John. He encouraged her and her female guests to participate in all different kinds of political and social conversations. After dinner was finished, unlike other Victorian homes, where the women would be relegated to one part of the house and the men to another, this couple invited their guests to stay together and to continue their conversations either in the parlor or perhaps in the library.

The library is the room that was used by the Bidwells for their informal entertaining and also for their leisure time. Both of these people enjoyed reading, and you can tell by looking at the bookcases that this was an extensive library for its time and place. Included in the bookcases, you'll see Native American baskets. Those baskets were gifts to Mrs. Bidwell from the Mechoopda Maidu Native Americans that were living here on the grounds when John bought this ranch. They remained here for 70 years. The men were laborers and the women

California State Parks Video Transcript

Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell—Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

eventually, some of them, worked in the mills and in the cannery. Mrs. Bidwell befriended the women and the children; taught them to read and to write and to sew.

The nursery, a small room that the Bidwells provided for the children of visiting families, was equipped with child-sized furniture and even the latest in children toys. The children's room is attached to the adult part of the suite by this walk-through closet. When John designed this house, he designed the closet so that the mom could tend to her children in the middle of the night without having to get completely clothed. During this period of time, women were not allowed in the public part of the house without being completely dressed. The closet allowed them to take care of their children without having to put on those fifty pounds of clothes that women traditionally wore.

This light and airy room is the room that was used primarily by Mrs. Bidwell's family when they came here to visit from the East Coast. When John and Annie married, one of her concerns was that she was going to be so far away from her family that she wouldn't get to see them. But the Transcontinental Railroad was completed shortly after their marriage and so her family was able to visit pretty often, and she in turn went back to the East Coast to visit them. They enjoyed this room a lot; it has very modern amenities--running water. Every room on this floor has a sink with running water in it. Not only that, but there are also bathrooms on this floor.

At the end of the century, electricity was added to the house. That caused some of the light fixtures to be changed from the old-fashioned gaslight fixtures to these new transitional fixtures. Electricity wasn't always dependable and it wasn't always available, so these transitional fixtures were dual system--the globes that point up are fueled by gas, and the globes that point down, by electricity.

This is the room that Mrs. Bidwell used for her sewing room, her craft room. She invited the Native American women to join her here, where she taught them to read and to write and to sew. She also ministered to their spiritual needs. She actually became a licensed Presbyterian minister.

As we walk down the hall, we come to Mrs. Bidwell's dressing room. I think you're going to be surprised when you see how small she was--she was only four-foot-eight. John was six-foot-one. Her size demonstrated by one of her original dresses on display in the dressing room.

Not only were John and Annie very different in their sizes, but they were different in other ways as well. He was 48 years old when they married and she was 28, there was 20 years difference in their ages. He was a California farmer and she was a socialite from Washington, D.C. So they were very different. But all indications show us that they lived together from the time they married until their respective deaths here in this house in a very happy and harmonious way.

John died in 1900; Mrs. Bidwell lived in this house for an additional, almost, 18 years. John was 80 when he died in 1900, and Mrs. Bidwell lived to be 78 years old.

Right next door is the guest bathroom. Bathrooms were very new. Even on the East Coast and in San Francisco they were just beginning to put inside plumbing in the houses. So this house, out here in the wilderness, was very, very high tech for its time.

California State Parks Video Transcript
Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell—Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

This is the largest of the guestrooms. This room was used to house the most very important guests that visited here at the ranch--people like Susan B. Anthony, John Muir, Peter Lassen. Probably the most distinguished guest that graced the ranch was the President of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes. He and his wife, Lucy, slept right here in this room.

Now if they had wanted a servant while they were here, they would have reached over and pulled the handle on this real modern, high tech communication system. This ringer is hooked by a copper wire that runs through the walls down to the kitchen area. And on the other end of it is a bell. Now, that doesn't sound terribly impressive but there are 12 of these in the house and each ringer is connected to a bell with a different sound. So the servants knew where they were to go just by the tone of the bell.

The second part of the modern communication system here in the house was this tube. This is called a speaking tube. If you wanted to talk to someone up on the third floor, you would just blow into the speaking tube and that creates a whistle and the person that you wanted to communicate with would just come over and speak back and forth through the speaking tube.

This is the master bedroom. Contrary to the popular practice of the time, Mr. and Mrs. Bidwell shared this room. Not only did they share this room, but they also shared the veranda. The veranda was a popular spot, and oftentimes in the summertimes they would actually pull their mattresses out on the veranda to sleep. As you step out onto the veranda, you'll notice the doors are a little unusual. No, there were no doors; actually people stepped out through the windows to get to the veranda.

As you look over the grounds, you can see what we now call Chico State University. That university is a result of John's donation of eight acres to the State of California for the creation of Chico Normal School. After Mrs. Bidwell died, she willed this house to the Presbyterian Church, and they eventually sold it to Chico State University. And Chico State University used this house for 40 years. In the 20s it was a women's dormitory, in the 30s it was a men's dormitory. In the 40s and 50s the house was used for classrooms and offices. In 1964, California State Parks took over the house and began the restoration of the mansion.

The third floor of the mansion is very typical of an Italianate villa--big room, normally used as a ballroom, but not in this house. Mrs. Bidwell was a Presbyterian and didn't believe in dancing, so this room was never used for a ballroom. But it was used for various activities during the many years that the Bidwells lived here.

The perimeter rooms were used as overflow guest rooms. Often times when VIPs traveled, they would bring an entourage of servants with them. The VIPs would be housed down on the second floor, and their servants would be housed in the bedrooms on this floor. This room was a small study that was used by Mr. Bidwell when he needed to escape the hustle and bustle of the lower floors. This room housed the water tank. We've added the acetylene generator to this room to protect it from the elements. Originally that generator would have been found in the backyard.

California State Parks Video Transcript

Rancho del Arroyo Chico of John and Annie Bidwell—Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

You have seen the rooms that would have been seen by the guests here at the ranch, but there are some rooms downstairs that you probably wouldn't have seen. We'd like to take you downstairs now to show you those behind-the-scene rooms . . .

This is the room that John used to conduct the business of the ranch. The ranch consisted of 26,000 acres. It ran from the Sacramento River, which is about five miles in that direction, all the way up to the foothills.

John not only was a farmer and a rancher, but he was also a mapmaker. He used this desk that he had constructed for himself as one of his working tools. Now this desk was not made to sit down and work, it was made to stand and lean over and work as you drew your maps.

After John had been here for a period of time, he decided he needed a city. He designed Chico proper by surveying streets downtown, planting trees, and then advertising all over California that if people would come here, work on his ranch, he would give them a lot to build their houses on. That's how the City of Chico came to be.

After he and Annie were married, they decided that they would protect a portion of the ranch that consisted of creek-front property. John and Annie enjoyed the creek and the creek-front property, and they planned together to donate that land to the City of Chico, more than 2,000 acres. And now in our hot Chico summers, we all enjoy relaxing and swimming in our beautiful Chico creek.

This is the last room behind the scenes that you'll see here in the mansion. Of course . . . the kitchen. The heart of the hospitality of the Bidwells. This is the room where the cook and the two maids prepared meals and ate. The maid's quarters are a half-story above this room. You can imagine how warm those servant rooms must have been.

As the servants worked around the first floor, when there were guests in the house, they might have heard . . .

[Bell rings]

. . . something like that.

[More bells ring]

Or that.

[Bells continue to ring]

If you were a maid in this house, do you think you'd be able to determine where you were needed just by the tone of the bells?

This concludes your tour of the Bidwell Mansion. We thank you for coming. As we exit the house out the back door, you'll be facing the carriage house. We invite you to enjoy the original Bidwell vehicles and enjoy the rest of your time here at Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park.

Running Time: 26:41

© California State Parks, 2004