



California State Parks

Video Transcript



Stewards of the Mansion: A Tour of Governor's Mansion State Historic Park

MICHAEL TUCKER: The old Governor's Mansion in Sacramento was home to thirteen governors, from George Pardee in 1903 to Ronald Reagan in 1967. I'm the curator here at the old Governor's Mansion in Sacramento. I take care of the artifacts and the exhibits that you will be seeing on your tour. The Governor's Mansion was occupied by thirteen families until finally, when the Reagans were living here, the noise from 16th Street, which was the main thoroughfare through town, and the fact that the building was not fireproof helped make the decision that this should become a museum instead of the official residence of the governor. There has always been talk about building a new governor's mansion. And when this governor's mansion was no longer a residence, Virginia Knight suggested that it become a museum. It has been a museum since 1967, run by the Department of Parks and Recreation, and over two million visitors have come through these doors.

We are at a Victorian era house, known as the Second Empire style, built in 1877 by a wealthy hardware merchant named Albert Gallatin. In 1903 the house was sold as the governor's mansion for what would be the equivalent of about three million dollars today. A Victorian era mansion is divided up into three parts. The bottom floor is the ceremonial part. This is where the parlors are, the dining room, the music room. These are the public spaces. The second floor are the private dwelling spaces of the family. This is where the bedrooms are, and this is where the public is not allowed. In the basement and the top floors and around the southeast corner are the staff areas where the people who help the people living in the house make the ceremonial areas work and make the private living quarters area work.

Governors Pardee, Gillette, Richardson, Young, Warren, and Brown had families in residence. While Governors Olsen, Merriam, and Rolf held ceremonial events at the old Governor's Mansion but lived in the Sutter Club, Elk's Club, or in apartment houses. The exterior of the mansion did not really change from 1903 to 1967. While the exterior of the building did not change, the interior changed with the décor ideas of the time. There was a major remodeling in 1943 by Nina Warren, and most of the rooms that you will be seeing are rooms that are left from that era. So let's go now to the front door of the mansion. Including the mound the house is built on and the cupola, the mansion is approximately seven stories tall. There are a lot of similarities between this mansion and the State's capitol. It's painted white, like the Greek ideal. It has Greek and Roman style columns. You walk up an ascending staircase to great doors leading to the interior. You know that you are in an important place. So now, let's have one of our lead tour guides take you on a tour of the inside of the old Governor's Mansion.

JOE WOLFENDEN: The thirteen governors that lived here lived here at a time when the

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population of California grew from a rural population of only one million people to over 20 million people and primarily an urban population. The governors that lived in this house had a vision of what they thought California could be and a vision of how they thought they could lead the State to that point.

Some of these governors included: Governor George Pardee, the first governor to live here who lived here at the time of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 and was able to bring the State back from that devastating event; Governor Hiram Johnson, a member of the progressive movement, who is responsible for such things as the first child labor laws in this State, bringing the vote to women in California, passing the initiative process and the recall process; Governor Earl Warren who shepherded the state through the trying period of World War II and later became Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court; Governor Pat Brown, who was responsible for such things as the California Water Project and the development of the community college and university systems; and, finally, Ronald Reagan, the last governor to live in this house, who really helped develop the infrastructure that California still uses today for its expansion.

All of the governors that lived in this home were the stewards of what can be called the "vision" of the Golden State. Going through this home will give you a window through which to view the lives and the times of these men and their families. Let's go on into the home, where we can view some of these public and ceremonial rooms.

We're actually entering through the front door of the house. This would be called the grand ceremonial entrance, and most of the families never used this entrance. But if you were invited to the Governor's Mansion for a formal occasion, this would be the door that you would come through. Now many of the visitors to the Governor's Mansion are struck by several things as they walk in the house. For one thing, we get many comments that the home seems much larger on the inside than it appears to be from the street.

As the door opens, you're greeted with a view of a large reception hall and four very large formal rooms that run off of it. These rooms are wonderful for entertaining. They boast 14-foot ceilings, Italian marble fireplaces, fine oriental carpets, and there's a grand staircase with 26 stairs rising up to the second level. In the Victorian era, and while used by governors for formal occasions, these rooms would promote a sense of sumptuousness and stature that most visitors find impressive.

You know, many of the governors would use this as a stage from which to promote their visions of California's future and to solicit support for their cause from the legislators and other visitors that would come to the home. The flower arrangements are copies of arrangements that were produced by Mrs. Warren and her family when they lived in the home. The flowers would actually be flowers that were grown in Capitol Park and brought over by the State Gardener for the governor's wife and family to use in decorating the mansion.

The connecting formal and informal parlor run off the reception hall to the left. The formal parlor, which in the Victorian era was reserved for adults only—this is the only room where you'll really see the room has been furnished in Victorian furniture. These appear to be true antiques. These are reproduction pieces that were purchased by Earl Warren and his family when they lived here in the 1940s. Across the hall from the parlors is the music room. This

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room's actually changed the least over the years. And the plum colored furniture and draperies complement the Steinway piano that was purchased by George Pardee in 1903. One of the things to think about in this room is to imagine the governors and their guests retiring to this room following a dinner party, standing around this room while the governors or their guests would play the piano for them.

From this point, we'll be going back across the hall to visit the informal parlor; or as we call it today, the family room. The informal parlor—as I mentioned we would call it a family room today—was used in the Victorian era and by governors for family gatherings. Today, however, you can see that this room is setup for one of its other purposes and that would be for formal occasions where the First Lady would entertain guests at a tea party. Sharing of afternoon tea was always a ritual, whether it was two people or a hundred people. Governor Merriam's wife once served tea to Eleanor Roosevelt here in this room in 1938. Earl Warren's wife, Nina, was famous for her tea parties. She used to have an annual event to honor the wives of the new legislators, both the Assembly and the Senate members. There were hundreds of wives that would attend. In fact, they ended up having to have two separate seatings in order to accommodate everybody. During those tea parties, the wives of the current legislators would attend, but the new wives to come to Sacramento were considered the guests of honor.

In fact, it would be set up that serving tea and coffee at these tea parties was something that was set aside for the wife of the President Pro Tem of the Senate and for the wife of the Speaker or the Assembly, in order to ask the new wives to join their Sacramento society. Also assisting in these things would be some of the governor's staff, many of the women that worked for the staff. One of the people who would be most important of that would have been Betty Henderson, who was Mrs. Warren's secretary and who we'll hear more about later on in the tour.

You know, one of the things that has to be kept in mind, though, is even though this is a formal home set up for formal occasions, it still had to be a place where families would live. And in this room, hidden behind the tea table, you can see the black-and-white T.V. because most days this would be used as a family room. Now from here we're going to be going to the formal dining room, and we'll be looking at the dining room and the way it was set up when one of those family functions was held—going to be looking at a birthday party.

The formal dining room table is set for a dinner of 12 today, and this is the way it would be set when the family would have a birthday party or a special occasion for one of the members of the family. Actually, the china that you see here is fine Lenox china. In fact, the china, crystal, and silver would be the governor's finest china and dinnerware. This green china made by Lenox. Actually, the silverware that's on the table was hand-hammered sterling silver custom made to be the silver for the First Family. In fact, there's a walking bear pattern on each piece because, of course, the grizzly bear is the State Animal for California. Now from here, why don't you follow me on into the kitchen where we can see the place where they prepared for the family dinners, as well as the formal functions that would be held here at the Governor's Mansion.

Here we are in the heart of the home, the kitchen. Actually, you'll notice that there are four ovens and eight burners with these two stoves, certainly more than adequate to prepare a large family meal for twelve or for formal occasions. Now the way the kitchen looks, in

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general, is the way it looked after it was remodeled in 1955 when Goodwin Knight was governor. Virginia Knight's cook, Ellen Seagren, who'd actually been with her since she was eight years old, moved into the house with the First Lady, remodeled this kitchen in what she considered to be a Scandinavian style with the blue-green cabinets, the blue floor, and a Scandinavian strip of wallpaper around the ceiling. Mrs. Knight would cook special desserts for the dinners and banquets that she had when she was First Lady, and she'd give away the recipes for those desserts to the guests.

And then we get to Nina Warren. Nina Warren lived in this house with six children and her husband; and although the cook would prepare dinner every night, Mrs. Warren would actually prepare breakfast and lunch for all six children and her husband. Now can you imagine sandwiches for six children? There'd be times when the sandwiches would be piled up two feet high on the platter for Mrs. Warren's family. She also would bake angel food cakes. In fact, she was known to bake 200 angel food cakes every year. She'd often give them to local charities, she would have them here for the family to eat, and it was something she was very well known for through her days in Washington, D.C., when she was the wife of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Our next stop is actually going to be the breakfast room. This originally was not built to be the family dining room that you see today. Originally, this room was used as a home office for the governors that lived here. It wasn't until Governor C.C. Young came into office in the 1920s that he changed the use of this room. He actually purchased one of the first home air conditioners that was available on the market, installed it in his office, and it seems within a few weeks of that time, his family and he came to the conclusion they would rather use this as a private family dining room.

The way the table's set today, it's set with Syracuse china on maple furniture. Now the china's the same china that was used when Pat Brown lived here as governor of California. The furniture's been here since the '40s when Mrs. Nina Warren purchased this early American furniture so that her family could feel comfortable here in the family dining room. Although primarily used for family functions, it is the same room where visiting dignitaries would have their breakfast if they'd be spending the night here at the mansion. John Kennedy was sitting right here in this chair and the room looked just as it does today. Actually, he was here visiting Governor Pat Brown who, as governor of California, held a lot of sway over the voters here, and Kennedy was visiting Governor Brown just prior to the Democratic convention down in the south part of the state, and he was trying to see if he could get the governor's support for his run for the presidency.

So you've seen how the families will have breakfast in the breakfast room. And the kitchen, of course, is where they'd prepare all of the food in the house. Now of course they'd have the large family dinners and the large banquets. And what you can see today is where the kitchen is set up, preparing for one of the large ceremonial occasions that would take place here. They would often have big banquets and events at the house. There would often be tea parties with over 200 people at them. Most of the big banquets were really not sit down dinners in the normal sense, but rather there'd be a buffet for political and social gatherings. Sit down banquets were usually limited to 40 or a few more people.

When it came to having State dinners here at the Governor's Mansion, it would often be a

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situation where there would be small tables set up throughout the hall and the parlors. In fact, the dining room would often be set for a buffet. In this case, it's set to look the way it looked when there was a birthday party for Governor Goodwin Knight in December of 1957. If you look at the sample menu from that birthday party, you can see, of course, they were very patriotic towards California things. They served fresh crab, whole boneless California Cornish hens, and, of course, they had a Los Angeles salad with French dressing.

Now when it comes to the larger banquets, and the tables would be scattered throughout the house, one of the tricks that Governor Knight and his wife would use, they'd set the tables leaving one empty chair at each of the tables. The Governor and Mrs. Knight would often eat dinner in the kitchen prior to the guests arriving, and then they could circulate all evening, sitting at each of the empty seats so that all of the guests could sit at the table with the governor and his wife.

Well, we're back in the main hallway. And here we have a gallery of the portraits of the thirteen First Ladies that lived in this house. Now it's important to tell you about Mrs. Goodwin Knight. Virginia Knight was an avid historian and photographer, and she and her secretary, Betty Henderson, decided that a gift that they could leave with the Governor's Mansion was to collect the photographs, at least one photograph, of each of the First Ladies that lived in the house. And along this wall you can see those portraits.

While the first floor of the mansion is dedicated to ceremonial activities, the second floor of the mansion is reserved for private activities of the governors and their families. While we're up here, we're going to learn something about some of the duties of the First Ladies that lived here, as well as the activities of their children.

Well now we're on the second floor of the Governor's Mansion. These were actually the private quarters for the family. Actually, I've just walked past the entrance to the servant's quarters in the Governor's Mansion. The stairway here goes up to the third floor where there were additional bedrooms that were used by staff at different times. Now what you'll notice about this floor as we go through it is that all of the bedrooms that the family had access to on this floor are extremely large rooms. In fact, every one of the bedrooms has been used by a governor as a master bedroom at one time or another.

Another interesting fact, this was one of the first homes in the state of California to be built with an indoor bathroom, and that original bathroom is still here; although, today there's nine bathrooms in the home, which would certainly be more than adequate for any family. The first stop we're going to go to is the governor's bedroom, however. I'm standing in the doorway to the governor's bedroom; or I should say, at least, the bedroom that most of the governors used as their private bedroom. It happened to be the furthest from the street, and it was the quietest room.

Now before we take a look at the bedroom, I should mention that the second floor of the house, the family quarters, had actually been used very little from 1931 into the 1940s. During those years of the Depression, this whole entire area of the mansion had fallen into great disrepair. In fact, when Earl Warren became Governor of California and his wife, Nina, came to visit the mansion for the first time, she saw the condition of the home, walked out to the front porch, and was sitting on the stairs crying, feeling that she really didn't feel the house was in

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adequate condition to allow herself and her family with six children to move in. She got some extra money appropriated, and they were able to remodel the mansion in 1943.

This was the governor's bedroom, and throughout the late 1950s, when Pat Brown was Governor of California, this is the room that his children would come to to watch the family television. And you can see this 1950s black and white T.V., and it's so easy for me to imagine the governor's children sitting in bed with the governor watching those first space shots with people being shot into space. You know, can't you picture the governor's family sitting in this room and watching election returns to see if their candidate had won? And then, of course, also the more casual family times when the family might sit here and watch Ed Sullivan or some of the other popular T.V. shows of the time. Before the television was introduced to this home, a radio/record player was in this room. In fact, Goodwin and Virginia Knight could often be seen dancing in this room.

This green bathroom was originally a nursery. It was turned into a bathroom in 1910, and it was accessed directly from the room next door, which has been used as a guest room by many of the governors.

Although this room has served many purposes, it's commonly referred to as the guest room. And I think it's important to think about the type of people that would be guests here at the Governor's Mansion. Being the Governor's Mansion for a state as powerful as California, we'd assume a lot of prominent people have been visitors here. We know that many heads-of-state have stayed in this home. We know that Teddy Roosevelt was a guest in this house. John F. Kennedy was a guest in this house. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, was a guest here. King Gustaf of Sweden. Marshall Tito, the "President for Life" of Yugoslavia was a guest in this house, as well as many other famous people. Charles Lindbergh, the aviator stayed here, many heads of industry, and many movie stars over the years.

Virginia Knight, on the other hand, used this room as her dressing room. Now throughout the second floor of the mansion, you will see gowns that First Ladies wore for their inaugurations and other fancy parties. Over here, for example, we have a beaded gown that Mrs. Virginia Knight wore when she and her husband attended Dwight Eisenhower's presidential inauguration. Now from this room, we're going to be going on to what we call the red bedroom—many times it was the First Lady's bedroom. So, if you'll follow me.

The State had actually talked about building a new Governor's Mansion in 1960, and it's legislation that didn't pass. So in order to make the situation a little better for Bernice Brown, they gave her \$9,000 dollars to help spruce up the house. With some of that money, she redecorated this red bedroom for herself. Now when you're looking at the bedroom, you see it the way that it looked when Mrs. Knight was finished, but I'd like to point out the closets in this room that represent the way the house looked in 1958 when Goodwin Knight was governor. In 1958 the *Los Angeles Mirror* wrote an article about Mrs. Knight living in this house, and she mentioned her closets—one, lined with furs and suits, and another closet filled with fancy dresses and ball gowns.

This sun porch, or sleeping porch as it was called, actually is an addition to the red bedroom. It was added in the early of the century when it was thought that it was much healthier for people to sleep outside. In fact, Governor Gillett, the second governor to live here, had a son

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with asthma, and they had this screened-in room added for him to sleep in. Later they added windows, and it's been used as an extra bedroom and primarily as a home office for a number of the first ladies that lived in the house.

This is what we refer to as the children's room here at the Governor's Mansion; and although you might expect that, being a children's room, it would be the happier times, but really in this room we can tell one of the more dramatic stories of what happened with one of the governor's families. This has been actually used as a children's room by many of the governors, especially the later governors. This is the room that Kathleen Brown used as her bedroom when her father Pat Brown was governor. It's also the room that Ronald Reagan's youngest son, Skipper, used as his bedroom when he was living here as an eight-year-old. But the dramatic story really has to do with Earl Warren and his family.

Now, you should really understand, the Warren children were the classic American family—extremely athletic, very healthy, very outgoing children. In fact, they were the darling of the American media. It was November 7th, 1949. It was Election Day. Earl Warren was running for an unprecedented third term as Governor of California. He's at election headquarters, gets a call, his youngest daughter Honey Bear is at the hospital, and it appears she's been diagnosed with polio. Here Governor Warren gets the call that his youngest daughter has polio. He rushes home from the election center to stay with his daughter. In fact, he stayed with her for the rest of that evening at the hospital until he could find out what her final prognosis might be.

As it turns out, she was paralyzed from the waist down. There was quite a public response when Honey Bear came down with polio. She received over 20,000 get well notes from all over the world. Under her pillow she kept a telegram from President Truman and a letter from Dinah Shore. The letter of encouragement from Dinah said that she, too, had had polio and had fought the same uphill battle, and she had won. And her recuperation period took well over six months. She would come into this room with her sister, and you can see that they practiced music together on the violin. She'd be able to sit in the window and look at cars driving by on the busy highway outside. It certainly was a change for a girl who had been quite an equestrian, who had been very athletic for all of her life.

Well, her parents told her, in order to motivate her, that if and when she was able to walk down that grand staircase to the first floor on her own, they'd buy her a new car. So she'd sit here looking out the window at the cars driving by, trying to decide what car she wanted to buy for herself. She decided a red Chevy convertible would be the most fun. Well, after a seven-month period, she was able to walk down the stairs on her own. Her parents did buy her the car, and she was able to drive it to her own high school graduation. Later when she went to college at UCLA, she majored in physical therapy, something that she was always able to relate to, having been a polio victim herself and somebody who had gone through many physical therapy sessions. She wrote letters and visited children who were in hospitals. These children had been struck with polio, and she gave them encouragement and gave them an example of someone else who could beat the dreaded disease.

From this point we're going to be going back out into the hall and looking at some of the other features in the mansion. Here in the servant's quarters for the mansion, you'll see that there are two doorways right next to each other that lead to the same room. Actually, in reality, at

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one time these were two separate rooms for two separate servants, and there was a wall down the center dividing these two rooms in half. Well, in the 1940s when Earl Warren's family moved in with their six children, the kids all wanted their own bedrooms. To accommodate six children and six bedrooms, one of the things they did was to move the servants from this area to the top floor of the mansion, and at that time they took out the connecting wall, opening this up into a very large room in which Earl Warren, Jr., stayed when he lived here.

This bedroom, built on the second floor of the addition over the carriage entrance, was added in 1905, and it was used as a bedroom for many years. But, in the 1940s, Nina Warren found that her personal correspondence and the amount of work that she had to do as First Lady really outstripped her ability to do it on her own. So that's when Betty Henderson was hired to work with Mrs. Warren as her personal secretary. Later Betty Henderson also worked with Virginia Knight when she lived in this house.

Betty would help Mrs. Knight procure photographs for the First Ladies to later put in the great hall's display. She also took numerous snapshots of teas and banquets using her Kodak Bantam Camera and a goodly supply of flashbulbs. This is how we know today what the floral arrangements and about the personal lives of the governor's families that lived in the home. Later, after retiring, Betty Henderson wrote a book about the the families in the mansion. She wrote it for the Sacramento Historical Society and contributed to the book *Mansions and Capitols of America*. In fact, soon after this home became a museum, Betty helped the Sacramento area state parks form a volunteer association, our State Parks Docent Council. This organization still provides volunteers for staffing at the Mansion.

You know, what were some of the duties of the governor's wife that required a secretary? When Edmond Brown became governor, Mrs. Knight had left a list for Bernice Brown, which included such things as invitation, acceptance and declining, gift thank you letters, private thank you letters, recipes, requests, baby congratulations, condolence letters, get well letters, flower thank you letters, Christmas card lists, honorary memberships, autographed photographs, the governor's calendar, governor's letters, copies to you of menus, green copies of all correspondence to the Office of General Services. Actually, the list goes on and on. They had to keep a telephone log of all the calls that were made from here. In fact, Mrs. Knight's correspondence alone filled over four drawers in a file cabinet.

Looking at Nina Warren's portrait, it reminds us that this tour is not just about the governors, but the experience of the families and staff, as well. You know, perhaps it can best be summarized by a letter from Nina Warren to her former secretary, Betty Henderson. The letter was written 21 years after the family had left the mansion.

Dearest Betty, it's been my good fortune to receive many very pleasant surprises, but none that pleased me more than the beautiful white album filled with color pictures taken at my teas in the Mansion. Oh, they're precious and priceless. I can't find words to express my thanks and appreciation for your generosity and thoughtfulness. Your gift brought back many, many happy memories of some of the happiest days of my life. I'm grateful. If you hadn't taken these pictures at my teas, there wouldn't have been a single remembrance of these occasions. Again, many thanks, Betty, dear, for your thoughtfulness, the lovely album, and for remembering me in your busy days. Do take care of yourself. Affectionately, Nina Warren.

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MICHAEL TUCKER: On your tour today you've seen Nina Warren's formal teas, Virginia Knight's formal dinners. You've seen how Honey Bear courageously fought polio. And you've seen how Betty Henderson was secretary to the governors' wives, helping with protocol and ceremony. We hope you've enjoyed today's tour.

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