California State Parks

Video Transcript

New Helvetia—The Reality: A Tour of Sutter's Fort State Historic Park

My name is Steve Beck. I'm an archivist and park interpretive specialist here at Sutter's Fort State Historic Park. This was a fort that was in existence from 1839 to 1850, but played an incredibly important role in California history. Beyond these large gates, we'll be passing from the 21st century and into 1840s California.

The large building behind me is John Sutter's central administration building. Sutter was a Swiss immigrant who came here in 1839 looking for opportunity and to build an empire on the California frontier. At that time this was a part of Mexico, and the Mexican government was giving away large land grants to anyone who would develop the land. Sutter was the first to try to develop land in the interior of California, but because nothing was here, Sutter had to build his own manufacturing and agricultural center and acquire all the goods that were necessary, or make all the goods that were necessary, to start his empire. The first building was this.

Using Native American labor from the local Indian population, Sutter was able to make friends with the natives, and they in fact were the ones who constructed the building and showed Sutter how to make the mud brick from which it's constructed. About 90% of the brick in this building is the original brick, and about 80% of the supporting woodwork—so not the doors and the floors or the stairs, but the beams that are actually holding this building together date to at least the Gold Rush. Let's go up the stairs and see what's inside Sutter's administration building.

We're now inside the central building here at Sutter's Fort. We're in the dining area actually. We represent this with this large picnic table, but in fact there were so many people being fed on a daily basis at the fort that they probably ate in shifts or took their meals in the other rooms along the walls of the fort. During harvesting and planting seasons, Sutter's cooks were probably feeding as many as 500 people per day.

Let me point out some of the original woodwork that is inside this building. You'll notice the header above the archway, separating the east side room where the dining area is from the west side room where John Sutter's office is. This is some of the original woodwork, as was the doorway through which we passed coming into this room.

We're inside the surgeon's office, or the doctor's office, here at Sutter's Fort. Sutter had several doctors that he hired over the 10 years that the fort was in operation. Among them were men named Gildea, Bates, Townsend. Getting injured in the 1840s was serious business, but you'll notice that the surgical tools that were used—sometimes the cure might be

worse than the injury.

We're now walking into the clerk's office here at Sutter's Fort. This was one of the most important rooms in the fort, because it was here that all of the people who lived on Sutter's land had to come to acquire their supplies. There was very little opportunity to bring things with you if you came by wagon train or by mule, and all your supplies had to be purchased once you arrived in California.

We are now in John Sutter's private office. This is where he conducted the business of running what was essentially a feudal kingdom here in California—a land grant that encompassed nearly 75,000 square miles or nearly 50,000 acres. John Sutter had the legal authority of the Mexican government to issue passports, to grant land, and he was a captain in the Mexican military government. It was in this very room, standing on almost this very spot, that on January 28th, 1848, on a dark and stormy night, that James Marshall showed the metal flakes that had been found at the mill at Coloma for the first time to John Sutter. They then tested those small metal flakes and determined that they were in fact gold. So we could say that on that date, January 28th, 1848, in this very room, the Gold Rush began.

We're now leaving the central building, and we'll be examining the manufacturing and commercial interests here at Sutter's Fort, and the agriculture, but it is of interesting note that this building, during the days of the Gold Rush, changed from Sutter's administration building to something that was needed for people arriving here for the Gold Rush. This became a hotel. In fact, the top two floors became the first hotel operated anywhere in California, and this bottom floor, while in Sutter's time it had been an armory, became a bowling alley, billiard parlor, and card room. Yes, a bowling alley right here in Sutter's Fort in 1849.

We are now in one of the museum rooms at Sutter's Fort, and we're looking at a small doll that came here to California in 1846 as a member of the Donner Party. It's known as Patty Reed's doll. Books have been written about it, and it's studied by California 4th graders every single year—and 170,000 of them per year visit this fort. It was brought in the pocket of this young lady, Ms. Patty Reed. She was 10 years old when she came to California and was trapped at Truckee Lake, which we now call Donner Lake. But she and her family survived the travails of the overland migration, and she lived a very happy life here in California.

Now we're going to go to a room that we refer to as the Immigrant Room. It is a room that would have been set up by Sutter to house the people who came here destitute and hungry after a six-month wagon journey across the United States. This is a typical room that Sutter would have had prepared for the people who came here after the overland migration. This room tells the story of a family known as the Ritchie Family. They came the same year as the Donner Party—1846. In fact, in that year over 2,800 settlers came across country to settle in Northern California. What is interesting about the Ritchie Party, having come at the same time as the Donners, is that they weren't trapped in the mountains. They took the established roads and got here in enough time that Mr. Ritchie was actually able to participate in the first Donner rescue attempt. But Sutter had rooms set up to house the new arriving population.

We're now in the loom and spinning room at Sutter's Fort. These looms, these spinning wheels represented high manufacturing achievement to John Sutter. Of course, spinning and weaving was already important in Europe, and he was able to reestablish it, or bring it initially,

right here to California. The spinning wheels, the looms, everything that Sutter used here had to be manufactured from scratch, from raw lumber. Sutter trained the Native American people in how to operate the looms. Blankets were manufactured that were then sold to not just the Native Americans, but to settlers who were coming here to Sutter's land. You'll notice that the looms are located by windows, and that's true of all the rooms throughout the fort. That's because you get natural light. It would have been impractical and expensive to have operated strictly by candles, because candles also had to be manufactured right here at the fort. If it was used at Sutter's Fort, it was mostly made at Sutter's Fort.

We're standing at the east gate of Sutter's Fort. I've brought you here to show the difference between the present configuration of the fort and what it looked like in Sutter's time. And this is where the big difference happened, because in Sutter's time this gate was out about another 130 feet, so that the fort was about a third larger than the reconstructed model that you see. The reason for doing that was money. There was only so much available when the original building and the two city blocks around it were purchased, and in order to pay just the amount of money they had, they shrunk the size of the fort. Consequently, the reconstructed fort is smaller than the original fort was in Sutter's time. This east yard, where this gate was, this is where immigrants came into the fort and where the Native American laborers came into the fort and where some of the more unskilled labor was. But from here, we're going to pass now into the west yard, and in the west yard is where the skilled labor was, and where Sutter's bedroom was.

We're now in Sutter's bedroom. You'll notice it's a fine bed, draped with draperies to protect him from the cold in the winter. Sutter acquired the bed, the draperies, the sheets, the feather pillows when he purchased Fort Ross from the Russians in 1841. So while we were living on the pioneer frontier, not everything was austere as some of the other rooms in the fort. Sutter, after all, was the captain and commander.

We are now in the carpenter's room at Sutter's Fort. Just about everything that you see in the fort had to be manufactured here—the desks, the tables, the benches, the doors. And this was the room in which that work was done. Perhaps the most famous carpenter at Sutter's Fort was James Marshall. He was the one who actually manufactured the looms in the last room we came from, but of course why he's most famous was not for his manufacturing prowess, but for the fact that he was the one that discovered the metal that became known as gold at Coloma.

We're in the blacksmith shop at Sutter's Fort. Blacksmithing was probably the most important profession on the frontier. The blacksmith had to take the raw imported iron that Sutter acquired and turn it into locks, into wheels, into just about everything that was metal at the Fort. You'll notice that this is an operational blacksmith shop that's used several times a year at the fort. We have a large bellows to provide the air that generates the heat through the forge, and the blacksmith has a lot of specialty tools. Nails—think about how many nails there are holding this building, and all of the buildings of Sutter's Fort, together. All of those nails had to be manufactured right here in the blacksmith shop. Sutter had many blacksmiths that worked for him, and at times there were as many as five or six blacksmith shops in operation within the fort walls.

We've just left the blacksmith shop, and now we've walked into the gunsmith shop—another

very important position here at Sutter's Fort. As a matter of fact, Sutter took time to write that he found his gunsmith, Mr. McDowell, to be an extremely skilled laborer because he could accomplish in one day what other gunsmiths took three days to accomplish, maintaining the guns of Sutter's army. Sutter had his own personal army. They carried this gun right here, a 1777 model Charleville. Sutter had about 200 of these weapons that needed to be maintained, and that was the gunsmith's responsibility. But the other weapons you see behind me represent a wide range of guns that would have been carried on the frontier, including Hawken rifles, double-barrel shotguns. These would have been brought by the overland migration coming to California, and it was the gunsmith's job to maintain them.

But here at the fort, they actually manufactured guns from scratch. That begins with a block of wood—in this case a block of maple. Next you take a solid iron bar. The iron bar is then turned and rounded and put together, and it becomes a rifle. Here you can see a gun that is currently in the process of being manufactured. This one's in the vice. Next to go on this gun will be the lock mechanism. The lock in most cases was a flintlock, although at this time in the 1840s we were switching to a cap lock technology. The cap lock was important, because it was not necessary to keep the powder dry in the pan. Sutter's gunsmiths were manufacturing both types of guns here in this room.

We've been examining the manufacturing spots of Sutter's Fort because Sutter had to make anything before he could actually begin the business where he really expected to make money. Sutter was seeking gold—not the gold of the metal type that was found, but the gold of wheat. Agriculture was how Sutter expected to make money. He immediately began wheat production as soon as he could manufacture plows or acquire some plows. Then once the wheat had grown, it was turned into flour that was sold to settlers throughout the Sacramento Valley. And this is where all that took place.

These are the millstones, or what's known as a gristmill. What happens is wheat—raw wheat—is placed into the hopper. It falls through the hopper between the two stones, the bed stone on the bottom and the runner stone on top, and then mules or laborers would actually turn this stone, and the flour would fall out into the box around the stones. It was then put in bags and was either used to make bread here at the bakery or it was sold in the bags to settlers or people living on Sutter's property. There was so much demand for Sutter's wheat and for the flour that it produced, that this was usually kept going 24 hours a day.

Now we've just left the gristmill, but Sutter turned his grain into something besides flour. As a matter of fact, behind me what you see is a still. Sutter turned some of that grain into alcohol. As a matter of fact, the first employee that Sutter actually hired was a man from Germany who came over here with his still. There was, for whatever reason, great demand for alcohol on the frontier. Also behind me are wine vats, because when Sutter arrived, the native grapes were flourishing in August of 1839 and Sutter saw that he could make wine. Unfortunately, the native grapes did not produce a very good tasting wine, but Sutter took the bad tasting wine, distilled it, and turned it into a drinkable brandy. The brandy was sold all over California. It was known as *agua diente* or "water with a bite."

We're now in the kitchen at Sutter's Fort. Of course, this is where several cooks prepared the meals that needed to feed the hundreds of Sutter's laborers and the other skilled employees of the fort. This fireplace and these cooking utensils are still used on a regular basis several

times a year at Sutter's Fort.

This is the bake oven at Sutter's Fort. The Spanish name for this is an *horno*. Sutter probably had several of them because he was manufacturing ships' bread that he was selling commercially in San Francisco—a village then known as Yerba Buena. A fire is actually constructed directly inside this oven to heat the oven. Once it acquires the proper temperature, the fire is removed from the oven, placed into a pit and then bread is put in to bake. As the oven cools, other items are placed in that require less temperature, such as cakes, and finally a pot of beans might be placed into this oven to cook overnight. Behind me is the bakery room where the bread was prepared that was going to be sold to people purchasing just bread rounds or was actually going to be used in Sutter's dining room, which we visited earlier.

We've been talking about the agriculture and manufacturing aspects of Sutter's Fort, but this was a fort, Sutter's Fort, and by 1844 Sutter had more than 14 cannons mounted in and around the fort. This particular piece was one of the most important guns in all of California history. If we examine the back of the gun, which is known as the breach, we'll see there is some writing—funny-looking writing. It's Cyrillic or Russian, and it says St. Petersburg. This gun was originally manufactured in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1804 to be used against Napoleon. But the diminutive size of the gun made it ineffective against the much larger French guns. For that reason, it was decommissioned from the Russian army and sold as surplus to the Russian-American Fur Company. It found its way to Fort Ross, a Russian fur establishment about 65 miles north of San Francisco, in the mid-19th century. In 1841 John Sutter purchased the entirety of Fort Ross, deconstructed it, and brought it here to build his own fort. Included in that purchase was this gun. It became known to history as the Sutter Gun, or sometimes called Old Sutter.

What made this gun so important to history is that in the early 1840s, it was the only piece of artillery in California that could be moved. You'll see that this wheel is nearly as tall as I am. And unlike the other guns which are mounted along the walls and were ships' guns, this cannon could be hauled out to meet the enemy before the enemy ever got here. Perhaps that's one reason Sutter's Fort was never under attack. But it's not to say the guns weren't used. As a matter of fact, in 1844 this cannon was hauled all the way to Los Angeles to be fighting in a revolution fought there in January of 1845 that Sutter lost. And then the gun, in 1846, became the property of the United States Army. It fought in every major battle of the Mexican-American War in California. It was particularly important at the last battle of that war in California—the Battle of the Mesa. Sutter took great pride in how powerful this cannon was and how it upset the balance of power in his favor in California.

But the fort was also the staging area for the Bear Flag Revolt. When settlers living in and around the fort became dissatisfied with Mexican rule, they bound themselves together and they attacked the Mexican headquarters at Sonoma. And it was from this fort, using Sutter's guns and Sutter's army, that that action was generated.

We're now in the guard room at Sutter's Fort where the ready weapons were kept. Sutter had a standing army on duty within the fort walls of 40 men at any one time. When John C. Frémont, the famous American explorer, was here in 1844, he reported that Sutter had Native Americans dressed in Russian uniforms manning the gates of the fort and the guns along the

walls. Sutter also had a cavalry that accompanied him whenever he left the fort. They carried long lances like these that you see over here and were extremely proficient in their use. This was the primary weapon of the Mexican army, and at the Battle of San Pasqual fought in December of 1846, the American army was shredded with the use of these lances. The backup weapons and the gunpowder was stored beneath the central building. But in this room Sutter's soldiers could grab a gun and go out to defend the walls or stop people from raiding Sutter's cattle.

We are now in the Gold Rush Museum here at Sutter's Fort. It's impossible to separate the Gold Rush from the fort, because the fort became the initial destination of all the argonauts that came here looking for gold. They had to stop at the fort in order to purchase supplies. But even though that sounds like it might have been a good thing for Sutter, in fact it led to the destruction of his empire because when tens of thousands of people came rushing here, they trampled Sutter's wheat fields, they slaughtered his cattle, and they literally deconstructed his fort. In fact the walls were taken down and the bricks used to build downtown Sacramento.

Because of this destruction and because Sutter's empire suddenly fell apart, people have been led to believe that Sutter died a destitute pauper, and that is in fact not true. He certainly did not become the multi-millionaire he would have become by virtue of the land that he owned and the manufacturing that he was in charge of, but he did not die destitute. In fact, in 1850 he sold the fort and he lived comfortably at a plantation on the Feather River until 1865. In 1865 he and his wife, who he brought over in 1849 from Switzerland, along with the rest of the family, moved to a small village in Pennsylvania called Lititz. There they built the only three-story, the only brick, and the only house with hot and cold running water in Lancaster County, and Sutter lived comfortably the rest of his life until 1880. He was 77 years old, at that time a feat sort of remarkable for someone who had lived so much of his life on the frontier.

My name is Steve Beck. I'm the archivist and park interpretive specialist here at Sutter's Fort, and I'd like to thank you for joining me on the tour of the fort today. Please come and join us when all of the rooms you visited have activity going on in them. We have several special events that happen throughout the fort, where fort volunteers or docents actually live life as it would have been lived in the 1840s. And now, as a symbol of ringing us out and in with the new…

[Bell rings]

Thank you for coming to the fort.

Running Time: 25:04