Finding Aid to the John Augustus Sutter Collection MS.618

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http://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8qr4zfj
No online items
Title: John Augustus Sutter Collection
Identifier/Call Number: MS.618
Contributing Institution: Autry National Center, Braun Research Library
Language of Material: English
Physical Description: 0.2 linear feet (2 folders)
Date (inclusive): 1840-1841, 1939-1961
Abstract: John Augustus Sutter (1803-1880) was granted land in 1841 which he named New Helvetia, now part of Sacramento, and built Sutter's Fort. In 1848, Sutter discovered gold on his land, which marked the beginning of the Gold Rush in California. This is a collection of two pieces of correspondence from John Augustus Sutter, dated 1840 and 1841, and eleven newspaper clippings about Sutter, dated from 1939-1961. One of the letters from Sutter is in French, and includes a typed translation.
Language: English, French
creator: Sutter, John Augustus, 1803-1880
Preferred citation
John Augustus Sutter Collection, 1840-1841, 1939-1961, Braun Research Library Collection, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MS.618; [folder number] [folder title][date].
Processing history
Acquisition
Some of the newspaper clippings were donated by Frederick Webb Hodge, 1939-1940; H. R. Wagner, 1950 September; and M. R. Harrington, 1954 October.
Scope and Contents
This is a collection of two pieces of correspondence from John Augustus Sutter, dated 1840 and 1841, and eleven newspaper clippings about Sutter, dated from 1939-1961. One of the letters from Sutter is in French, and includes a typed translation.
Use
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Access
Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment please visit http://theautry.org/research/research-rules-and-application or contact library staff at rroom@theautry.org.
Biographical note
John Augustus Sutter (born 1803, died 1880) was born in Baden, Germany of Swiss parents. In 1834, faced with impossible debt, he decided to try his fortunes in America and set sail for New York. There he decided that the West offered him the best opportunity for success, and he moved to Missouri, where for three years he operated as a trader on the Santa Fe Trail.
By 1838, Sutter had determined that Mexican California held the promise of fulfilling his ambitious dreams, and he set off along the Oregon Trail, arriving at Fort Vancouver, near present-day Portland, Oregon, in hopes of finding a ship that would take him to San Francisco Bay. His journey involved detours to the Hawaiian Islands and to a Russian colony at Sitka, Alaska. When he finally arrived in California in 1839, Sutter met first with the provincial governor in Monterey and secured permission to establish a settlement east of San Francisco (then called Yerba Buena) along the Sacramento River, in an area then occupied only by Indians.
Sutter was granted nearly fifty thousand acres and authorized "to represent in the Establishment of New Helvetia [Sutter's Swiss-inspired name for his colony] all the laws of the country, to function as political authority and dispenser of justice, in order to prevent the robberies committed by adventurers from the United States, to stop the invasion of savage Indians and the hunting and trapping by companies from the Columbia." In other words, Sutter was to serve the California authorities as a bulwark against the assorted threats pressing in on them from American-controlled territories to the north and east.
As headquarters for his domain, Sutter chose a site on what he named the American River, at its junction with the Sacramento River and near the site of present-day Sacramento. Here, with the help of laborers he had brought with him from Hawaii, he built Sutter’s Fort, a massive adobe structure with walls eighteen feet high and three feet thick. Two years later, in 1841, Sutter expanded his settlement when the Russians abandoned Fort Ross, their outpost north of San Francisco, and offered to sell it to him for thirty thousand dollars. Paying with a note he never honored, Sutter practically dismantled the fort and moved its equipment, livestock and buildings to the Sacramento Valley.

Within just a few years, Sutter had achieved grand-scale success: acres of grain, a ten-acre orchard, a herd of thirteen thousand cattle, even two acres of Castile roses. His son came to share in his prosperity in 1844, and the rest of his family soon followed. At the same time, during these years Sutter’s Fort became a regular stop for the increasing number of Americans venturing into California, several of whom Sutter employed. Besides providing him with a profitable source of trade, this steady flow of immigrants provided Sutter with a network of relationships that offered some political protection when the United States seized control of California in 1846, at the outbreak of the Mexican War.

A week before the war’s end there occurred a chance event that would destroy all John Sutter’s achievements and yet at the same time link his name forever to one of the highpoints of American history. On the morning of January 24, 1848, a carpenter named James Marshall, who was building a sawmill for Sutter upstream on the American River near Coloma, looked into the mill’s tailrace to check that it was clear of silt and debris and saw at the water’s bottom nuggets of gold. Marshall took his discovery to Sutter, who consulted an encyclopedia to confirm it and then tried to pledge all his employees to secrecy. But within a few months, word had reached San Francisco and the gold rush was on.

Suddenly all of Sutter’s workmen abandoned him to seek their fortune in the gold fields. Squatters swarmed over his land, destroying crops and butchering his herds. “There is a saying that men will steal everything but a milestone and a millstone,” Sutter later recalled; “They stole my millstones.” By 1852, New Helvetia had been devastated and Sutter was bankrupt. He spent the rest of his life seeking compensation for his losses from the state and federal governments, and died of heart failure on a trip to Washington, D.C. in 1880.

Reference:

1. Ltr from Sutter to Wm Davis 22 Feb 1840
2. Ltr from Sutter to Antoine Suffol 5 Aug 1841 Original in French, and translation.
3. Article “Sir and Dear Compatriot”
4. Article “Discovery of gold proved ruin for fabulous Sutter”
5. Article “California’s stately hall of fame: J A S”
6. Article “The tragedy of Jno Sutter”
7. Article “Jno A Sutter”
8. Article “National capital suffers from failure to preserve historic buildings”
9. Article “Long ‘Lost’ plan of Sutter’s Fort is valuable aid in restoration project”
10. Article “Gold rush brought only tragedy etc”
11. Article “Gen Jno A Sutter, 1864”
12. Article “Sutter’s Hock Farm”
13. Article “Magnificent pioneering”

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Clippings
Correspondence
Gold mines and mining -- California
Sutter’s Fort (Sacramento, Calif.)