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The Extraordinary Life of John Sutter

by Nicholas Ferraro

The story of John August Sutter is an account of an ambitious individual who was motivated by opportunity, blinded by optimism and damned by destiny. John Sutter was trapped in an endless cycle of great triumph and failure throughout his life. As a Swiss immigrant to North America, Sutter was an influential figure in the history of the American Frontier, Mexican California, and the California Gold Rush. He was the quintessential foreign-born pioneer of the American West. Despite the antagonistic social, geographical, and legal forces, Sutter never lost his determination. Although he was one of the central agents in the start of the California Gold Rush, he was ultimately unable to capitalize on his findings. Ironically, the unearthing of gold at Sutter’s Mill was the origin of his tragic downfall. Nevertheless, his position is undisputable: he was a giant of the American West.

Johann Augustus Sutter’s birth on February 15, 1803, in Kandern, Germany, was the start of the extraordinary and unprecedented history of the American West. Born to Johann Jakob Sutter and his wife, Christine Wilhemine, John August Sutter (as he would be referred to in America) was blessed with incredible advantages, despite his modest upbringing. His childhood home was located above a paper mill his father operated. In this home, Sutter gained a passion for reading and writing through his literate and semi-educated mother, who was the daughter of a German pastor. From an early age, John Sutter learned of a universe beyond the mountain barriers of his hometown. He had a vision beyond Kandern’s social and physical confines. As a result of his mother’s persistence and his father’s encouragement, he surpassed the small-town mentality and Bernese Alps that sought to limit him.1

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The military culture of Napoleon Bonaparte in Europe during Sutter’s formative years expanded his aspirations:

Some of my earliest memories are of Napoleon’s soldiers marching across the nearby bridges, as the French extended their hegemony over Switzerland, and the uniforms and the cavalry with their plumes, and the cannons firing—it was very exciting for a young man.2

Perhaps he dreamed of military grandeur, travelling the continent in search of adventure, power, and admiration. Regardless, he undoubtedly wanted more than Kandern had to offer. During his teenage years, Sutter discovered that the papermaking industry was not for him. Unlike other men in his circumstances, Sutter left his hometown to satisfy his quest for affluence and prosperity. He moved to Neuchâtel, Switzerland, where he pursued higher education.3 In 1819, after a year of enrollment at Neuchâtel, the young man used his father’s business connections to obtain an apprenticeship with Emanuel Thurneysen, a distinguished book printer, publisher, and distributor, in the city of Basel.4 As nothing more than a book clerk, Sutter benefited greatly. He was surrounded by a plethora of knowledge, although his job did not furnish luxuries he desired. When his apprenticeship was not renewed, he became incredibly poor and was forced to move multiple times before following a young woman to Burgdorf, Switzerland.5

Annette Dubeld was a physically and fiscally attractive “aristocratic-looking”6 woman who lived with her wealthy, widowed mother. She assisted with the family bakery and restaurant in her hometown. For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, she was united in Holy Matrimony in 1826 in Burgdorf to John Sutter, a handsome, sharply dressed, foreign-born grocery clerk. Merely hours after their wedding, Mr. and Mrs. Sutter gave birth to their first child, a son, named after his father.

Considering the circumstances in which Sutter found himself prior to his arrangement with Annette, he was much better off after their

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5 Dillon, Fool’s Gold: The Decline and Fall of Captain John Sutter of California, p. 22.
marriage. Under the monetary control of his mother-in-law, Frau Rosina Dubeld, John Sutter bought a home for his family, opened Johann Augustus Sutter & Company, a dry-goods and drapery shop, and worked extremely hard to provide for his family.\(^7\) Two years after his marriage, Sutter’s marital status and business ventures were in jeopardy. Sutter viewed this as an opportunity and joined the reserve corps for the Canton of Berne in 1828. As a member of the armed forces, Sutter received the recognition, respectability, and status he longed for. Likewise, he believed that his military acquaintances would help him in his business as well.\(^8\)

Ultimately, his military experience did not save the business or his marriage. His domestic life consisted of an overbearing mother-in-law, five children, and thousands of dollars of debt: “Sutter swore that he would never see the inside of a debtor’s cell. He had been in a jail of sorts for too long already.” After a warrant was put out for his arrest in 1834, John Sutter shocked the humble Swiss town and headed west over night. In his mind he was more than a dry-goods salesmen; he was heading to the New World.

With overwhelming debt and Sutter & Company’s collapse, the aspiring pioneer was determined to seek his fortunes elsewhere. He was heading to America. Sutter packed up his fine clothes, trading goods, and several books, leaving behind his debt, wife, and five children. He reached New York in 1834, although he feared that the width of the Atlantic was still within the reach of Swiss law, causing him to place his sights on the western frontier.\(^9\) During this period, the Missouri country was “a land of bright promise to the thousands of young men all over central Europe.”\(^10\) Sutter was the prototypical European entrepreneur to venture to Missouri: optimistic, ambitious, and cunning. When he arrived in Missouri, he worked as an innkeeper and merchant for several years, although he understood his occupations there to be temporary; he dreamed of establishing his own empire further west.

In 1835, Sutter joined a clan of German and French expatriates on an expedition to Santa Fe, New Mexico.\(^11\) Despite becoming ill on the

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\(^7\) Dillon, Fool’s Gold: The Decline and Fall of Captain John Sutter of California, p. 23.

\(^8\) Hurtado, John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier, p. 12.


\(^10\) Ibid., p. 7.

\(^11\) Ibid., p. 7.
trip, Sutter managed to turn an admirable profit with very little investment. This mission served as his introduction to the West. Naturally, with his success, it inspired him to embark on further trading journeys. With the wine, mules, and money he earned, Sutter developed a larger-than-life persona: "the visionary frontier entrepreneur." He became known as Captain Sutter, a reassuring Swiss officer who entertained many men and seduced many women. He promised the world to anyone who would lend him a dollar and his magnetic personality was irresistible to deny. His luck would run dry on many occasions, but as long as the West was filled with naïve, enthusiastic, and spirited young men, Sutter was in luck. While his trading enterprises brought him to New Mexico and elsewhere on the frontier, he was determined to get to where he perceived to be the promised land: California.

Three years later in 1838, Captain Sutter and several loyal followers were eager to reach the Golden State. At this time, Sutter joined a fur trapping party exploring the Pacific Northwest along the Columbia River. In October, he arrived at the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Pacific headquarters at Fort Vancouver and was well received by the community and the chief trader, James Douglas. Douglas was an educated man and an incredibly successful trader. Sutter respected and valued Douglas’s advice, as Douglas had persuaded Sutter not to cross the Siskiyou Mountains into the Sacramento Valley during the treacherous winter. Instead, Douglas suggested that Sutter board his company’s supply ship, the Columbia, and transfer once she reached the Sandwich Islands. The vessel left Fort Vancouver on November 11, 1838, and landed at Honolulu in early December.

When he arrived in Hawaii, Sutter was fortunate enough to meet Captain John Blinn. Sutter’s pleasant demeanor and positive outlook enticed Captain Blinn to allow Sutter to join his crew on the Clementine, a Russian trading ship bound for the Russian colony of New Archangel, Alaska. Sutter set sail on the Clementine and grew fond of the Russian social life, although his ambition to inhabit California was steadfast. On July 1, 1839, the Clementine and John Sutter shored in Yerba Buena, an

12 Dillon, Fool’s Gold: The Decline and Fall of Captain John Sutter of California, p. 29.
13 Hurtado, John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier, p. 23
14 Dillon, Fool’s Gold: The Decline and Fall of Captain John Sutter of California, p. 65.
15 Ibid., p. 66.
island in the San Francisco Bay. Sutter had finally reached California. Everything was about to change.

Upon his arrival, it became clear that Captain Sutter had not accurately assessed Californian law. He assumed that he would be able to claim land as his own and build his empire free of regulation. Four days after landing in the San Francisco Bay, Sutter met with Governor Alvarado to discuss his plans for settlement in California. In his typical persona, Sutter boldly stated to the governor that he wanted to be an empresario de colonizacion. Startled by his daring plans, Governor Alvarado could not immediately accept Sutter’s aspirations. However, the governor offered a proposal to Sutter: become a naturalized Mexican citizen and he would give Sutter a generous land grant. Mexican citizenship required residence in California for twelve months. Accepting the offer, Sutter spent the next year exploring the Sacramento Valley for desirable land.

On August 29, 1840, John Sutter became a Mexican citizen and was subsequently granted nearly fifty thousand acres of land from Governor Alvarado. Sutter accomplished what he had wanted. He had governmental power over a vast amount of land and absolute control over its civil, judicial, and military authority. Captain Sutter could now fulfill his dreams of establishing an empire.

With a mix of diplomacy and force, Sutter was able to disarm the Indians and use them to build his empire. When Captain Sutter first encountered the Indians, he greeted them unarmed. After they observed that Sutter and his exploration party did not want to harm them, Sutter “fired a salute, showing the Indians the effects of powder and ball. They did not care to have it tried on them.” Furthermore, Sutter paid the Indians an appropriate wage for their labor. He fed and clothed them, although he admitted, “sometimes they were in rags—it looked very bad to visitors.” Sutter used Native labor at his Fort in the Sacramento Valley and at his sawmill along the American River near Coloma. His dreams were made into reality because of the low labor costs.

16 Hurtado, John Sutter; A Life on the North American Frontier, p. 55.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 56.
20 Ibid.
Once established, Sutter’s Fort was a center for trade in Northern California. Its walls were built eighteen feet high and three feet thick, reminiscent of self-sufficient European castles and undoubtedly inspired by Sutter’s visit to Fort Vancouver. It was an important post because it was a strategic resting point for travel parties crossing the Sierra Mountains. It was a safe haven from the elements and a place to obtain travel necessities. For a period of seven years, from 1841 to 1848, Sutter’s Fort was a prosperous and crucial trading post in California. Sutter’s luck would soon run dry.

James Marshall found gold on January 28, 1848, at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, yet Sutter was unable to capitalize on his discovery. Sutter’s mismanagement of the situation resulted in an unprecedented downfall. Within a year, thousands of Forty-niners flocked to California. Sutter’s employees quit in pursuit of gold; his Fort and Mill were pillaged and his livestock was stolen. Sutter was left with nothing, despite his efforts to seek recognition from the government, years later:

> By this sudden discovery of the gold, all my great plans were destroyed. Had I succeeded for a few years before the gold was discovered, I would have been the richest citizen on the Pacific shore; but it had to be different. Instead of being rich, I am ruined, and the cause of it is the long delay of the United States Land Commission of the United States Courts, through the great influence of the squatter lawyers.\(^2\)

He moved to Yuba City, California, in 1850 where he reunited with his wife and five educated children. In Yuba he lived a quiet life with his family, though his tribulations continued. In 1865, a disgruntled neighbor burned down his house, completely destroying his family’s possessions. Even after the end of his Californian empire and the destruction of his home, Sutter stayed optimistic. His optimism was ultimately shattered when he was denied reimbursement for his contributions in California. He would die two days after Congress denied his petition on June 18, 1880.

John Sutter is a fascinating individual in the history of the American West. He is more than simply a figure in time; he is a character who experienced a life reserved for tragic heroes. The study of Sutter’s life demands sympathy, but he is not to be pitied. Even though he fell on hard times, he also stumbled upon many great fortunes. Sutter was a charismatic person who created great opportunities. For instance, when he set sail for Hawaii in 1838 on the Columbia, he was fortunate enough to meet Captain John Blinn and board his vessel back to the mainland. This illustrates how Sutter created his own luck: both good and bad. Regardless, his optimism and desire to succeed are notable and were perfectly suited for Mexican California.

Throughout his life, Captain Sutter viewed failure as a stepping-stone, a chance to learn and accomplish greater things. For this reason, he should be saluted just as frequently as he is criticized. Sir Winston Churchill once said “success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” Based on this definition, John Sutter was a complete success, despite the cycle of victory and defeat that plagued him until his death.

- University of San Diego