

Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation

July Newsletter, 2024

The Real Original Settlers in Amador County

This newsletter will celebrate the 100th anniversary of two important events in the long history of Northern California Indian cultures. In order to better appreciate the significance of these two events, it is useful to revisit some of the history of the area and the major challenges the Indian people had to overcome.

The first documented report of the presence of Caucasian Europeans in present day Amador County was in 1846. John Sutter, with a party of Indians and a few white men, sawed lumber for a ferryboat in a cluster of sugar pines on the ridge between Sutter and Amador Creeks, about four miles above the towns of Amador City and Sutter Creek, approximately near Shake Ridge and Oneto Road.

This group was a work party only, not looking to settle in the area. When their job was completed, they returned home to Nueva Helvetia (Sacramento) and Sutter's Fort.

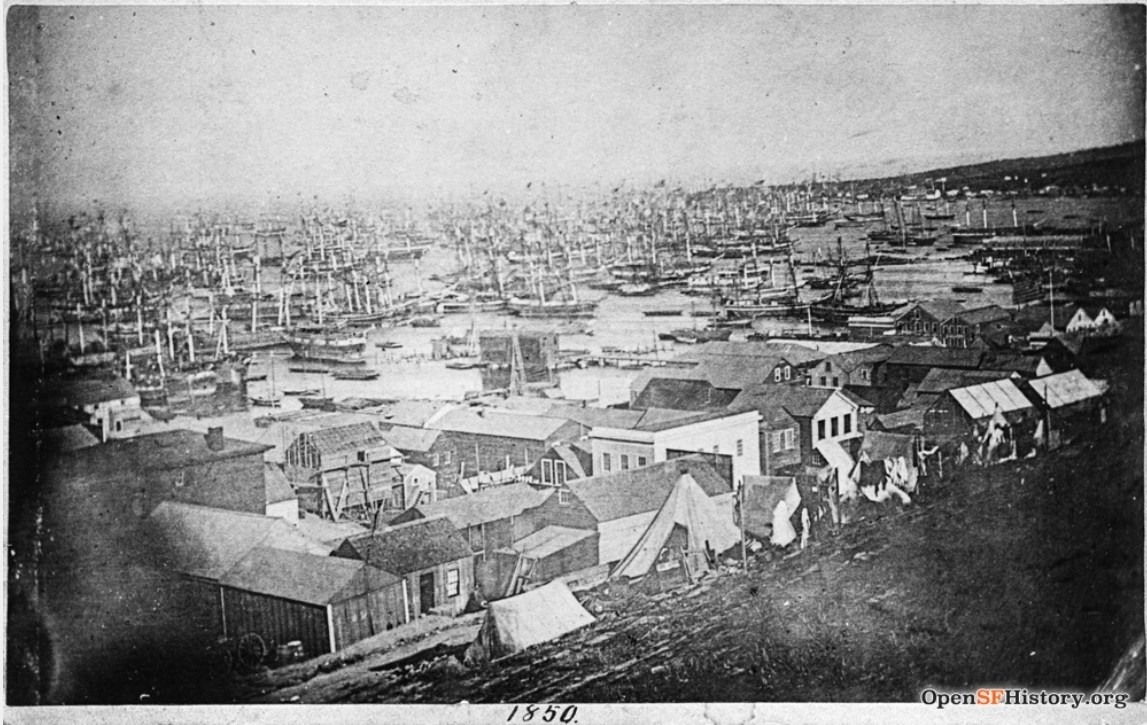


Sutter's Fort in the 1840's. Today those cattle on the right would be in the



Distribution of Native Tribes before European contact.

Indian encampments were frequently located along the various streams and rivers flowing down from the Sierras (which unfortunately would be the same locations favored by the upcoming flood of gold seekers). It is estimated that between the discovery of gold in 1848 and the year 1852, over 250,000 people from all over the world flooded into the California foothills in search of quick wealth.



San Francisco bay in 1850. You could almost walk across without getting your feet wet!



That's Telegraph Hill in the background. Ships were signaled from this vantage point in the 1840's and 1850's until the bay became un-navigable. Today, Coit Tower stands atop that hill.

The early arrivals to the gold fields found that there were essentially no laws to worry about and that the land was considered free for the taking. Prior to statehood, land ownership was a contentious combination of Mexican land grants and land grants offered by John Sutter (who claimed ownership of most of

the central valley and what was to become San Francisco). The fact that the land was already occupied by thousands of Indians was considered a minor inconvenience. The miners/settlers merely took whatever they wanted by force, either killing or displacing whichever Indians were in their way.



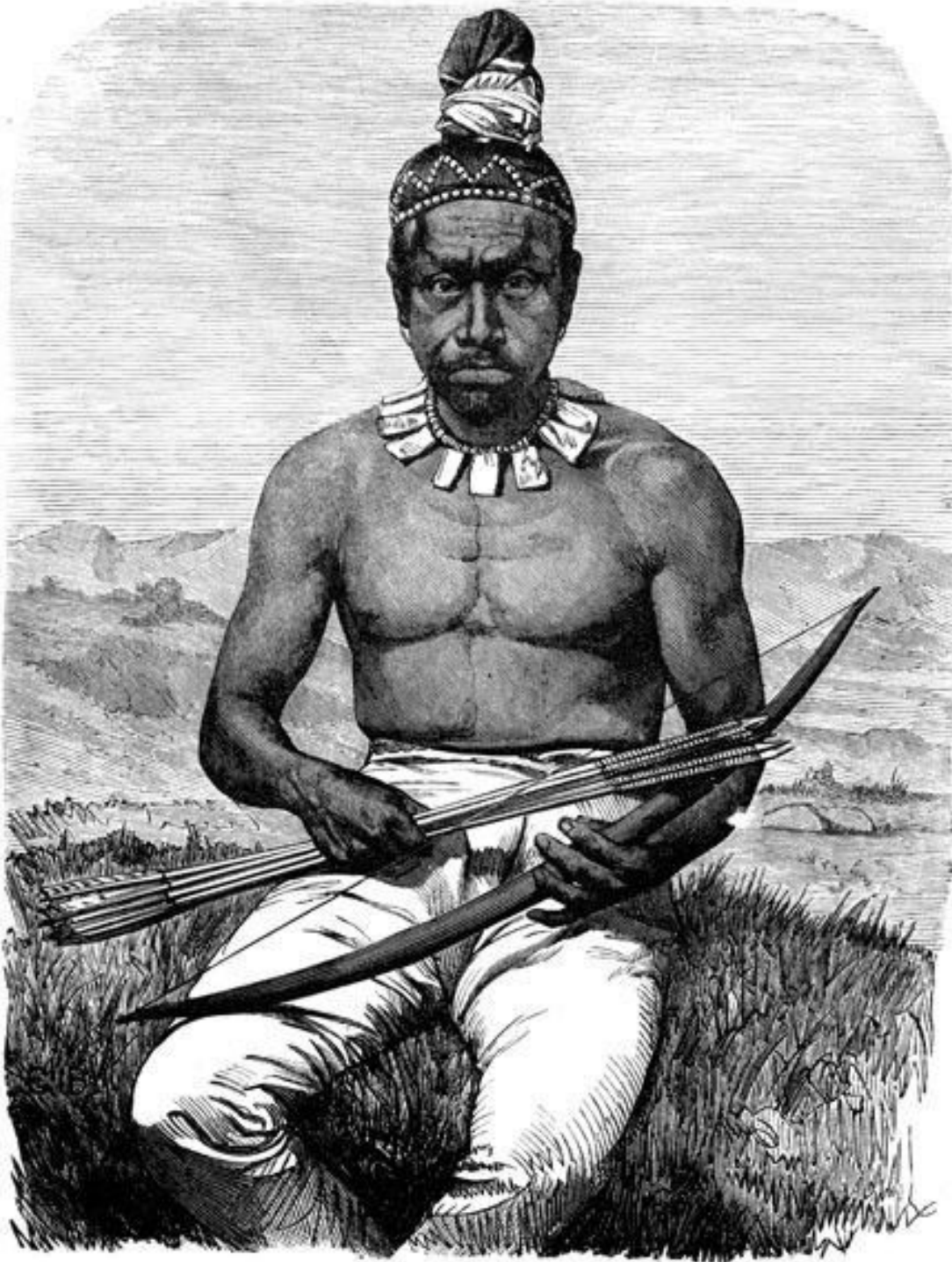
Typical camp of the 1850's. This one near Fresno.

California was admitted to the Union as a free state in 1850 with a population of 92,000. However, since the majority of the population were single men which had come in search of gold, much of the State remained very much wide open and effectively lawless. This did not bode well for the future of the resident Indians.



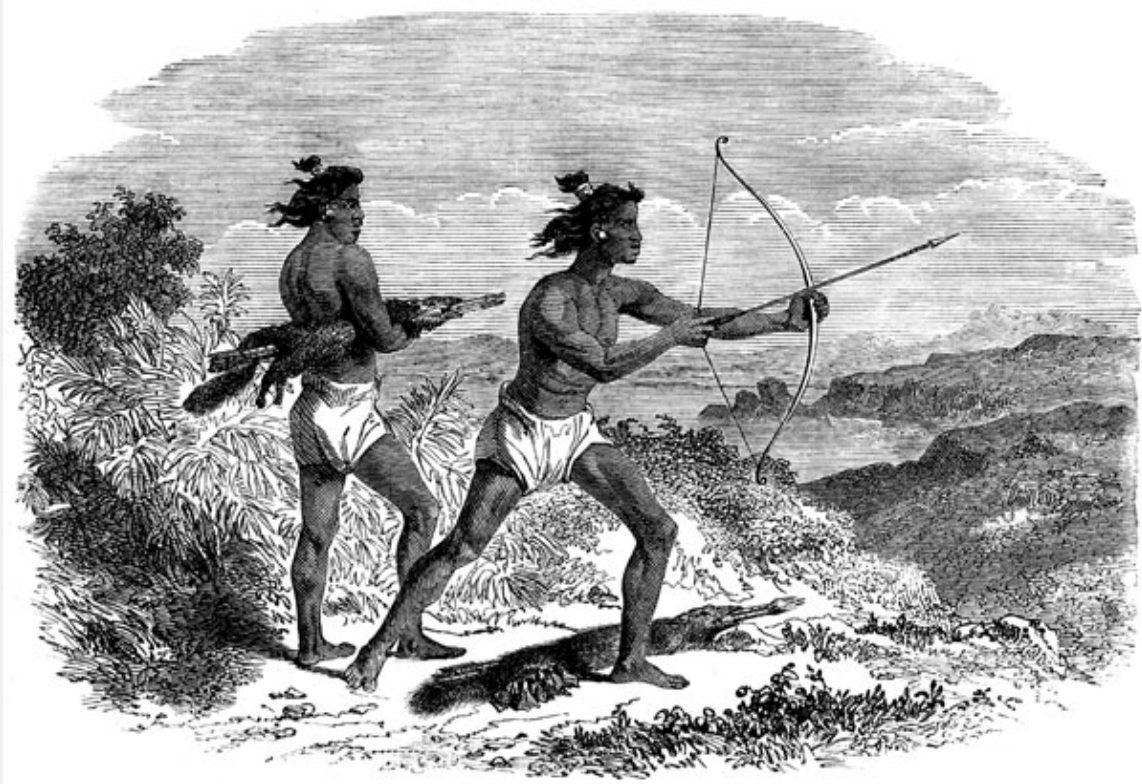
Group of foothill Natives ca. 1850.

However, the plight of the Indians did not go totally unnoticed. One of the earliest efforts to provide some level of protection and stability to the Indian populations occurred on April 13, 1850, four months before California was accepted for statehood. Assemblyman Brown introduced Assembly Bill No. 129, *AN ACT FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND PROTECTION OF INDIANS*. However, due to the growing conflicts between the new settlers and native Indians, and the lack of effective enforcement, the Act was frequently interpreted and misapplied in such a way as to facilitate *the removal of Indians from* their traditional lands, separating at least a generation of children and adults from their families, languages, and cultures, and the indenturing of Indian children and adults to white settlers. Dozens of amendments were made to the Act over the next decade to mitigate the effects of the gold rush upon the Indian population, with little effect.



Native warrior with bow and arrows. He is dressed in pantaloons with shell necklace, basket hat, and top knot.

In fact, by 1851 California was effectively at war with the Native American population. As stated by Governor Peter H. Burnett, January 7, 1851 *“That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races, until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert.”*



Traditional California Natives hunting or at war. Note hair in top knots, bows, arrows, and animal skin quivers.

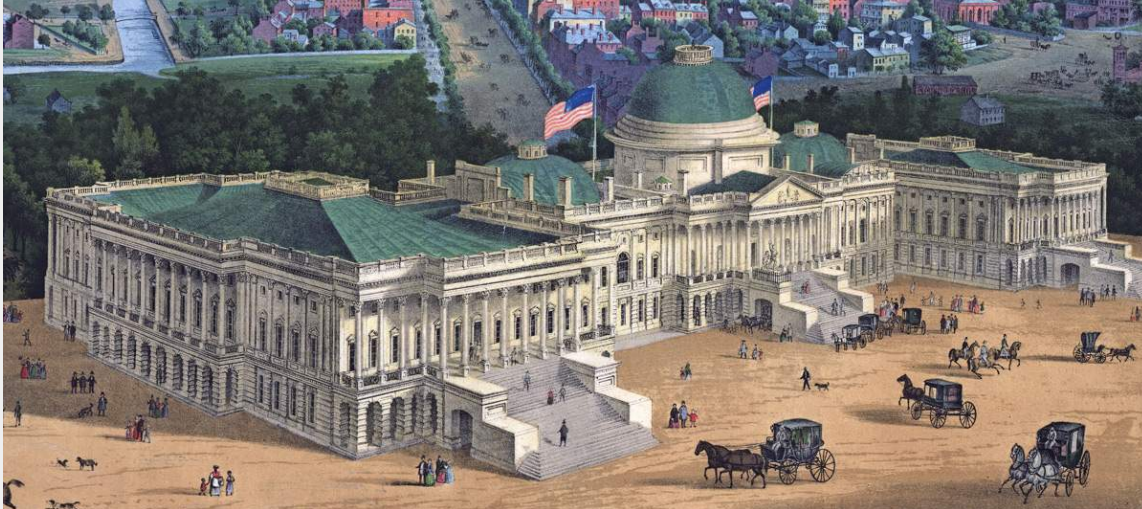
Despite this fact, the U.S. Indian Commissioners, acting on behalf of the United States, negotiated 18 treaties with California Indian tribes between 1851-52. The treaties negotiated by the Indian Commissioners reserved to the Indians approximately 11,700 square miles, or about 7.5 million acres of land. The total amount represented seven and a half percent of the State of California. However, the treaties had no effect unless and until they were approved by Congress.

In mid-March 1852, the California Assembly (35 to 6) and Senate (19 to 4) voted to submit resolutions opposing the ratification of the treaties to California's U.S. Senators. The President submitted the treaties to the U.S. Senate on June 1, 1852.



Millard Fillmore, U.S. President, 1850 - 1853

On June 7, the treaties were then considered and rejected by the U.S. Senate in secret session.



U.S. Capitol 1850.

Unbelievably, prior to this event, Native Americans were not considered citizens, and could not vote.

The treaties did not reappear in the public record until January 18, 1905, after an injunction of secrecy was removed. Obviously, the efforts to protect the Indian population were no match for the economic benefits to the State and Federal movements provided by the gold rush. As the gold rush came to an end and settlements grew into towns, the war against the Indians receded. However, by then the once populous and thriving Indian cultures had been reduced to small pockets of severely impoverished family units.



By the early 1900's renewed attempts were made to address the plight of the remaining Indians. Two such efforts occurred in 1924.

First, since the earliest settlers, all Indians were referred to simply as "digger Indians" possibly due to the fact that acorn gathering was a major source of food for the foothill people.



Miwok woman showing gathering baskets filled with acorns. Black Oak acorns were favored.

Eventually this term was applied to all the Indians in the northern California territory. Eventually the term "Digger Indian" became a negative term fostering the long held negative impressions of the Native Americans' intelligence, ambition and civility.

On Sunday, April 20, 1924, an effigy of a Digger Indian was burned in a ceremony to symbolize the death of the derogatory label Digger Indian and replacing it with Me-Wuk, which referred to people, and has been in use for the past 100 years.



The two pictures above showing the "Digger Indian" effigy being burned. The derogatory term was replaced by Me-Wuk or Miwok meaning "The People".

The fact that this event occurred near Lone is ironic as it was only a short distance from a site where, in 1826, agents from the Mission San Jose raided a local Indian settlement capturing all adult men and women able to survive the march back to the mission and killing all the elderly, infirmed, infants and children too young to survive the long march back to Mission San Jose.



Mission San Jose before being destroyed by earthquake in 1868.

The second major event occurred on June 2, 1924, when Congress finally granted citizenship to all Native Americans born in the United States.



Native Americans becoming citizens with the long overdue stroke of a pen.

Obviously, this was a monumental event in the ongoing struggle for native American rights and sovereignty.



President Herbert Hoover and several “new citizens”.

When you look back over the past 175 years of California history, it is clear that, although we have some dark pages in our local history, there are also examples where individual leaders made a difference, standing up against racial and cultural discrimination and persecution. We may not be completely there yet, but we certainly have come a long way toward true equality for all members of our society.

References:

1. Some photos courtesy of Glen Villa, Miwok Heritage Center
2. https://www.csus.edu/college/education/engagement/internal/documents/indian_early_california_laws_and_policies_related_to_california_indians.pdf
3. and “The History of Amador County by J.D. Mason, 1881 , the full text of which is available online at “archive.org/details/historyofamadorc00masorich”

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DONATE

SCCBF's current renovation project is the Historic Sutter Creek Grammar School which is rich in Gold Rush history. This beautiful building is California's second oldest two-story brick schoolhouse. There are four rooms within the Historic Grammar School that can be rented. Contact the City of Sutter Creek for information on rates and availability - (209) 267-5647 ext. 230 or email info@cityofsuttercreek.org / website - cityofsuttercreek.org



The Sutter Creek Community Benefit Foundation (SCCBF) is dedicated to the restoration, preservation, and development of the community's historic assets both now and for future generations. (nonprofit 501(c)3 – Tax ID #87-1825043)

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