



*Sacramento's wharf and the steamboat, Yosemite, at the dock of the California Steam Navigation Company, c. 1874. The City Railway Company's horse-drawn trolley car and horsedrawn freight wagons loading and unloading their goods.*

## Chapter 5: Navigation

The earliest navigation of the Sacramento River, of which we have any record, was in the year 1839. The first white navigator of the Sacramento River was the famous Captain Sutter.

A correspondent, speaking of the first steam navigation of the river, says: "I made the first and only trip on Captain William A. Leidesdorff's little Russian steamer from San Francisco to New Helvetia. She had no name, but has since been called the *Sitka*. "Occasionally the *Indian Queen*, Perry McCoon, Commander, a sloop of ten tons, would make a trip in the busy

Finding a vessel lying in the Sacramento, laden with every thing, from a nail to a house, I was soon enabled to make my purchases there much more advantageously than at the stores in the place. There appeared [was] an infinite variety of articles most in demand, which the owners were rapidly disposing of to a throng of purchasers. It is from such sources that fortunes have been quickly accumulated.



James L. Tyson, 1849

“The only regular packet running between the embarcadero of New Helvetia and Yerba Buena, was Captain Sutter’s launch, *Sacramento*, a schooner of seventeen tons. She was built by the Russian American Company, I think, at Sitka, for the sea-otter service, at Bodega and Presidio Ross, and sold to Captain Sutter, in 1839. I last saw her lying at Washington, opposite your city, in 1858, roofed over, and used as a house for salmon-fishers. She was coppered and copper-fastened, officered and manned by Indians — a captain, and six men before the mast. She was kept running regularly, a change of the entire crew every trip. Frequently not a pound of freight to send down, but it was the only way we had of getting our letters and newspapers that were received by men-of-war and whalers, via the Sandwich Islands.

*Daily Union*  
extract from a letter by Captain  
Sutter’s agent in 1847



*The levee and Central Pacific Railroad, mid 1860s.*

season. Capt. Sutter had, also, another line running from New Helvetia to the Hock Farm.’ She was called the *White Pinnacle*, an open yawl boat, rowed and poled by six nude Diggers. She run in connection with the Yerba Buena Line.

Occasionally the *White Pinnacle* would extend her trips to ‘Cardua’s Ranch,’ New Mecklenburg, on Yuba River (now Marysville), to bring down a load of hides and tallow en route for ‘the Bay.’ Old Peter Lassen would make one or two trips per year from his ranch, above Chico, on Sacramento River, to Yerba Buena and Santa Clara, in a canoe made from the trunk of a huge sycamore tree, crossing the bays in perfect safety. The Mormons had a settlement up the San Joaquin in 1847, and run a small sloop boat, Captain Winner; and that was the whole mosquito fleet in 1846-7.”

*Alta California*, Jan. 4, 1850: “Well do we remember the early days of inland navigation—the tedious days and sleepless hours (there were mosquitoes in those times) passed in sailing up the Sacramento, the San Joaquin, or, at a later period, the Feather and Yuba rivers. The torments of those trips, pleasant little passages of two or three weeks’ duration, we shall ever remember—as we bled then, freely, distinctly, agonizingly—stamped on memory with unfading freshness, with indelible firmness. Shall we ever forget them?”

“Three years since, the Sacramento boasted but one fast boat. The reader will understand us to speak in the language of

departed days. This was the purchase effected by Capt. Sutter, of a Russian schooner, drawing about four feet of water, of twenty tons burthen, and which was certainly the safest, combining the advantages of possessing the best accommodations, and a fame for speed ‘unsurpassed by any boat on the river.’ Indeed, launches plied between the two great cities of San Francisco and Sacramento only when freights of wheat, hides and tallow were ready for the market. The first steamboat sent up the Sacramento was the property of a very enterprising gentleman of this city, now deceased, and was of pigmy dimensions, with a pocket engine, and not adapted to the purposes for which she was procured. Not of superior speed, either, if our recollection serves us: it lives a matter of history, that in the month of January, two years ago, the steamboat started from Sacramento, and was distanced four days into Benicia, by an ox team, which had rolled out of the former place by the great road leading south on the same day that witnessed the steamboat’s departure. From this time, ‘no ponderous wheels dashed the brine,’ until the fall of 1849.

“Last spring, it was considered an extraordinary achievement to sail a vessel of three hundred tons, drawing eight feet of

*The New World, a 525 ton side-wheel steamer with Captain Hutchins at the helm was built in 1850 and broken up in 1879. Note the sailing vessels in the background. Before the flat-bottomed river boats were built and plentiful enough to handle the massive amount of passenger and freight trade, large sailing vessels made their way all the way to the Sacramento embarcadero with passengers and freight.*



Courtesy Sacramento Area Museums Collection Center (SAMICC)

“The first sea-going vessel on the waters of the Sacramento plied between the present site of this city, and what was then Yerba Buena — now San Francisco. That was over four years ago. It was a Russian schooner, owned by Captain Sutter and called *The Sacramento*, navigated by Digger Indians and employed to transport wheat, hides and tallow from Sutter’s Fort to the bay. It was a vessel of about forty tons burthen. Since the advent of the golden era and the building up of Sacramento City, the pioneers for ‘vessels of heavy tonnage’ are well known to be the Chilian brig *Eliodora*, and Peruvian bark *Joven Guipuzcoana*; hulks of both vessels now lying at our levee. The schooner *Providence* preceded either of these, but her burthen was less than one hundred tons. If we recollect rightly, both vessels above-named exceeded two hundred and fifty tons burthen. They sailed from San Francisco in April of last year, within a day or two of each other. The *Eliodora* was the property of S. Brannan and was piloted by him to this embarcadero. The *Joven Guipuzcoana*, owned by Hensley, Reading & Co., also merchants of this place, followed within a few hours of the arrival of the *Eliodora*, both brig and bark having made an exceedingly quick run, meeting with little or no detention from shoals in the river or slough. At that time about twelve tenements graced the locality of this flourishing metropolis.”

*Sacramento Times,*  
May 13, 1850: