

New Helvetia Time Line

New Helvetia was located at Alhambra between I and J... the current site of Sutter Middle School.

- 1839-1849**Burials within grounds outside Sutter's Fort.
- 1845**First interment in Sutter Fort Burying Ground.
- 1849**Sutter's Burial Ground dedicated. Burials shallow, marked by wooden boards.
- 1849**Capt. John A. Sutter donated ten acres of land.
- 1850**Twenty acres in size, renamed New Helvetia Cemetery. Flooded in January, no burials until summer when Mayor Bigelow and Sheriff McKinney were buried.
- 1850-1857**No burials due to recurrent flooding ...burials mainly at City Cemetery.
- 1856 (Jan.)**Effort to have bodies moved to City Cemetery.
- 1856 (Oct.)**Title changed from estate of Frierson to Dr. R.H. McDonald (\$900 for ten acre lot) and became active cemetery again.
- 1857**Purchased by J.W. Reeves, an undertaker. After his death owned by Mrs. Reeves and maintained by her father, Mr. Mellon, as superintendent.
- 1875 (Oct.)**City took title after an agreement with the Reeves family on maintenance of the family tomb.
- 1912**Grounds closed to burial.
- 1916**Converted into a park as showed 'great neglect.' Many bodies removed including 1000 Chinese returned to their native land. Most monuments replaced by flat grave markers.
- 1954**Offered to school district by City Council as a site for Sutter Middle School.
- 1955 (Oct. 12) - 1956 (Mar. 27)** ..5,235 bodies exhumed.
- 1989**Monument erected and dedication by Old City Cemetery Committee and East Lawn Memorial Parks & Mortuaries.
- 1990**Monument erected by Japanese Community for the more than 600 Japanese moved.
- 1995**Monument to Sheriff McKinney by the Sacramento Sheriff's Department.
- 1999**Monument to Dr. Benjamin F. Pendery by Sacramento-El Dorado Medical Society.
- 2003**Monument to indigents erected by the Sacramento County Cemetery Advisory Commission.

Reburial of Early Settlers

- 4,691** sent to East Lawn Memorial Park and buried in a common grave
- 410** to City Cemetery
- 84** to East Lawn and buried in private plots by relatives
- 32** to Odd Fellows Cemetery, **1** to Masonic Cemetery
- 2** to St. Mary's, **3** to St. Joseph's
- 6** to Sacramento Memorial Lawn, **3** to Sylvan Cemetery
- 3** to Elk Grove Cemetery



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Some Former Occupants of New Helvetia Cemetery

Marion Biggs - Assemblyman for Sacramento and Butte Counties, US Congressman for CA, town of Biggs named after him.

Hardin Bigelow - first mayor of Sacramento, injured in Squatter's Riots in 1850 and subsequently died of cholera (now at City Cemetery with monument).

***Major Cloud** - paymaster for the U.S. Army, buried in the first grave.

***Dr. W.B. Gildes** - buried in 1846.

Phillipina Keseberg - wife of Louis Keseberg, both members of the Donner Party (moved to City Cemetery with no marker, but one erected later by family).

***James McDowell** - shot and killed in Washington, located across the Sacramento river.

***Sheriff McKinney** - killed in Squatters Riots, August 15, 1850.

***Dr. Benjamin F Pendery** - prominent Sacramento physician, died 1905.

J.W. Reeves and family - owner of New Helvetia for 20 years (moved to City Cemetery with no marker or monument).

Sue Robinson - a famous actress and dancer who died at age 26 in 1871.

**Denotes those most likely moved to East Lawn Memorial Park.*



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*Photos from the
Sacramento Archives and
Museum Collection Center*

Lest They Be Forgotten

Again

Sutter's Burial Grounds New Helvetia Cemetery 1845-1956



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The Forgotten Pioneers

"The soil in the cemetery is of superior quality, and lots there are adorned and beautified at much less labor and expense than in the City Cemetery... this city of the dead is laid out with avenues and walks and handsomely decorated with trees, shrubs, evergreens and flowers now in full bloom and beauty."

- Sacramento Union, January 8, 1872



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So was the New Helvetia Cemetery in the 1870's... twenty acres in size at its prime. Though it was dedicated in 1849 as Sutter's Burial Ground, burials preceded this date and were often shallow and marked with a wooden board. In fact, this is likely the area where burials were even before 1845, at which time it was considered the Sutter's Fort Burying Ground. This land was considered to be within the grounds of Sutter's Fort, but outside of the fort proper. The land was unfortunately subject to periodic flooding and there were no burials from late 1850-1857.

In January 1856, an unsuccessful effort was made to have the bodies removed to the City Cemetery and one gentleman, owning real estate in that vicinity, offered to take upon himself half the expense of the undertaking. The ten acres was sold in October 1856 to Dr. R. H. McDonald for

\$900. It was called the Union Cemetery for a short period in January 1857. It then began to be used as a cemetery again, lots selling for \$80 (\$30 more than at the City Cemetery).

John Wesley Reeves, an undertaker, purchased the cemetery in 1857 and his family ran it until 1875, when the City of Sacramento took title, agreeing to maintain the Reeves family tomb. This tomb, the resting place of J. W. Reeves, his first wife and five children, was oval with a marble tombstone, 11 feet deep and entered by a flight of ten marble steps.



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The cemetery was closed to burials in 1912 and four years later converted into a park, as it showed 'great neglect.' This was accomplished by leveling the raised plots and the removal of most of the monuments, many hand carved, and replacing them with flat concrete markers. The remains of over 1000 Chinese were sent back to their homeland at this time.

In 1952, consideration was given to disposal of the property. The City Manager stated that the City had no legal right to dispose of the New Helvetia Cemetery property if there were objections from relatives, but it

appeared that the School District and others were not in agreement with his



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opinion. Eventually permission was granted and plans to remove the suspected 1000-2000 bodies (only 200 of which they felt could be identified) began in 1954, with the removal occurring from October 12, 1955 to March 27, 1956, when 5,235 bodies were finally exhumed.

The research was incomplete. Such an extensive project had not occurred previously. Minimal guidelines were available, and the budget, based on the original estimate of number of burials, was inadequate. As more and more bodies were located, the removal fees were renegotiated and it is likely the removal



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technique became less refined. 4,691 remains moved to East Lawn Memorial Park were considered 'unknown.' There are various sets of records containing thousands of names, so we do have

documentation of many who were buried there. It is possible that there were some areas of unidentified burials from epidemics. 410 identified remains were buried at the City Cemetery. Remains buried at other cemeteries had been identified or claimed by their families.

Despite the fact that the City Attorney commented that every person who had a marker at New Helvetia would be provided one after removal, not one memorial was erected at East Lawn Memorial Park or the

City Cemetery for these 5,101 early Sacramentans. Over the past decades, numerous grave markers have been found and over 100 have been placed at East Lawn Memorial Park. Hundreds more are still possibly lining yards and driveways. The only original hand-carved monument known to exist is the Bonetti marble headstone located at the City Cemetery.



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In 1988, the Old City Cemetery Committee became aware of these forgotten pioneers and, with support and a financial donation from East Lawn, corner walls and a monument were erected and dedicated. In 1990, the Japanese Community – and the Sacramento Sheriff's Department in 1995 – erected memorials. In 1999, the Sacramento-El Dorado Medical Society dedicated a monument. Subsequently, St. Andrews African Methodist Episcopal Church placed a monument in memory of Daniel Blue. In addition, the Sacramento County Cemetery Advisory Commission dedicated a memorial to the indigents that were buried at New Helvetia. Future plans include the continuation of research and the computerization of records and an eventual web site database.



Sacramento County Cemetery Advisory Commission and the Old City Cemetery Committee greatly appreciate the tremendous and ongoing support by East Lawn Memorial Parks for the New Helvetia Memorial Project