

GUIDE TO THE BENICIA CAPITOL STATE HISTORIC PARK
PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Finding Guide written and encoded by
Sam Skow

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Park History

Benicia Capitol State Historic Park contains nearly one acre of historical resources. Located in Solano County, the park sits at the northwest corner of West “G” and 1st streets in the city of Benicia. The park is accessible by car and by foot via West “G” Street.

Prior to European conquest, southern Solano County—containing the present-day park—was home to the Southern Patwin for at least 1,000 years. A band of Wintun speakers, the Patwin were hunter-gatherers who traded for obsidian and other resources. In 1810, Spanish soldiers engaged a large group of Patwin at Suisun Marsh. Turned back, the Spanish returned in 1817, slaughtered the warriors, and transported enslaved survivors to *La Misión de Nuestro Padre San Francisco de Asís*. Moved to Mission San Francisco Solano, the captive Patwin rebelled in 1826, burning down several mission buildings. Falling victim to violence, forced labor, deprivation, and disease, today, the greatly reduced Patwin population lives on rancherias dispersed throughout northern California.

In 1844, Mexican Governor Manuel Micheltorena deeded 80,000-acre Rancho Suscol (encompassing present-day Vallejo, Benicia, and the western part of Suisun Marsh) to General Mariano Vallejo. Two years later, Kentucky immigrant Dr. Robert Semple arrested Vallejo during the Bear Flag Revolt and persuaded him to sell off half the rancho. Financed by wealthy Euro American, Thomas O. Larkin, Semple founded the city of Benicia, named in honor of Vallejo's wife, on this land.

In 1852, the city passed a bond issue to erect a city hall (**Figure 1**). It also sent a delegation to the State Legislature to lobby to move the capitol to Benicia. The legislature, finding inadequate accommodations in Vallejo—site of the 1852 session—moved mid-session in 1853 to Benicia. One year later, finding Benicia similarly inadequate, officials reopened the debate regarding the capitol's ideal location. In late February, the State Capitol moved to Sacramento where it was afforded more real estate and better facilities.

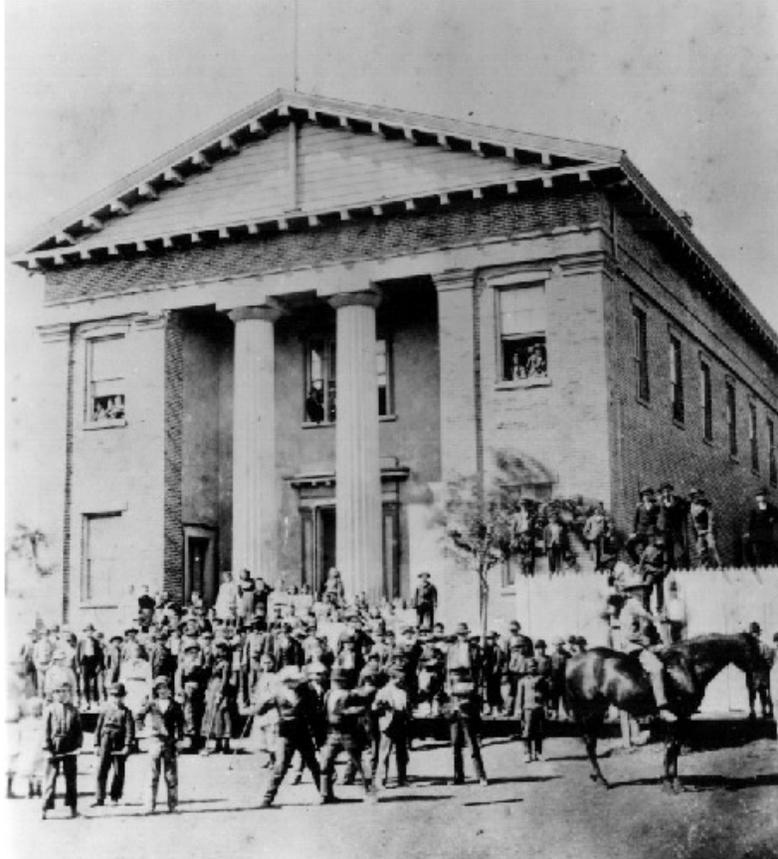


Figure 1. Benicia capitol building, ca. 1860. Catalog # 090-13883.

In Benicia, the former State House resumed its role as City Hall, a function the building served until 1956 when it was closed for safety issues. The building also served as the County Court House until 1858 when the Solano County Seat moved to Fairfield. The two-story Greek-Revival-Palladian building served several functions: housing the local public school, the city library, the fire department, the police station, a jail, a boxing arena, a museum, and the Red Cross. Its rooms were often used to host dances, Episcopal Church services, and other activities. The California Department of Beaches and Parks acquired the property in 1951, restored the interior and exterior to their original appearances by 1958, and classified the building a state historic monument in 1963. It later reclassified the property a state historic park in 1970.

California State Parks, coordinating with the Benicia State Parks Association, maintains two house museums at Benicia Capitol State Historic Park. In addition to the restored former State House, the only surviving pre-Sacramento capitol, the park also includes the historic Fischer-Hanlon House with adjacent servants' housing, carriage house, and privy (**Figures 2, 3, and 4**). In 1858, Swiss immigrant and prominent butcher, Joseph Fischer, converted a fire-damaged hotel into a family residence and moved it to its current location. The house passed down to Fischer's descendants until his granddaughters—Catherine, Marie Rose, and Raphaelita Hanlon—gifted the property to the State of California in 1968. It was listed on the National Register of Historic

Places in 1978. The park offers guided tours and is closed Monday through Wednesday and major holidays.



Figure 2. Benicia capitol building, March 3, 2010. Catalog # 090-P71187.



Figure 2. Benicia capitol building, Assembly Chambers, May 3, 2010. Catalog # 090-P71206.



Figure 4. Fischer-Hanlon house, May 3, 2010. Catalog # 090-P71218.

Scope and Content

The Benicia Capitol State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years 1850-2011, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1950-1962, 1976, 2000, and 2010-2011. There is a total of 441 cataloged images including 259 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 115 35mm slides, and 67 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff.

The collection mainly depicts interior and exterior views of the restored capitol building. Exterior views showcase the building's Greek-Revival/Palladian architecture, the adjacent flower gardens, and several commemorative plaques. Interior views reveal the building's restored Senate and Assembly chambers as well as multiple period objects and furnishings. Various park signs, museum exhibits, and park rangers interacting with visitors are also depicted.

The collection also documents the capitol building prior to restoration, circa 1852-1950, and during restoration, 1956-1958. Pre-restoration images include historic drawings, engravings, and photographs, as well as photographs from the early 1950s that document exposed pipes, weathered roofing, a dilapidated stairway, and a depiction of the building's use as the Benicia Public Library. Images documenting the 1956-1958 restoration include the Assembly and Senate Chambers during restoration, the installation of period furniture, and numerous carpenters laboring at their craft.

The collection likewise depicts two events held at the restored capitol building. Images showing the 1958 dedication include various speakers—actor and California Beach and Parks Commissioner Leo Carrillo, California Governor Goodwin Knight, and Lieutenant Governor Harold J. Powers—as well as a commemorative Assembly session, a parade, and a ball. Images depicting the 2000 California sesquicentennial celebration likewise include various speakers—then-California State Assembly Members Virginia Strom-Martin and Antonio Villaraigosa, then-State Senators Debra Bowen and John Burton, Sonoma State Professor Edward Castillo, and California historian Kevin Starr—as well as a commemorative legislative session, marching band, banners, and park rangers.

Also depicted are interior and exterior views of the restored Fischer-Hanlon House. Exterior views showcase the house's facade as well as the adjacent carriage house and garden sundial. Interior views reveal the restored living quarters with all the attendant period furniture.

The collection also includes miscellaneous items such as: scanned building receipts from the turn of the twentieth century and a 1958 Senate Concurrent Resolution; portraits of State Senator Amos P. Catlin, 1853-1854, and Joseph Xavier Fischer, namesake of the Fischer-Hanlon House; two aerial views of the park; and two other historic properties in Benicia, the Clock Tower Building and the Arsenal Building.

Related Collections

Album of an Early Family of Benicia, California, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Benicia Capitol State Historic Park, California State Parks Archives.

Thomas O. Larkin Papers, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

United States. General Land Office. Records Relating to Suscol Rancho Cases, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Aerial view	Governor Knight
Amos P. Catlin	Interior view
Antonio Villaraigosa	John Burton
Arsenal	Joseph Xavier Fischer
Assembly Chamber	Kevin Starr
Benicia	Leo Carrillo
Capitol Building	Lt. Governor Powers
Clock Tower	Plaque
Debra Bowen	Portrait
Dedication	Restoration
Document	Ruins
Drawing	Senate Chamber
Edward Castillo	Sesquicentennial
Engraving	Sign
Exterior view	Virginia Strom-Martin
Fischer-Hanlon House	