

John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier

By Dr. Albert L. Hurtado Ph.D

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In the history of the American frontier, John Sutter (1803–1880) looms large. A Swiss expatriate who attempted to create a personal empire in California's Sacramento Valley, he founded New Helvetia, a cosmopolitan settlement whose economy depended on Indian slaves and free laborers. New Helvetia drew overland immigrants to California in the 1840s and then—after gold was discovered by Sutter's employees—a flood of fortune seekers. Sutter was poised to become one of the richest men in the West, but rapacious settlers and his own poor business sense sent his dreams crashing.

Albert L. Hurtado has written the definitive biography of Sutter, mining a wealth of sources to create the first fully documented account of the man and his times. *John Sutter* explores Sutter's life in the broader context of America's rush for westward expansion while plumbing the inner dynamics of this erstwhile empire-builder.

Sutter was a quintessential outsider driven by anxiety over status—a man of talent, vision, and heroic ambitions who nevertheless became the victim of his own inadequacies as a businessman and his inability to adjust to a rapidly changing frontier. Sutter was full of contradictions. While building a reputation as a humanitarian friend of destitute immigrants, he callously exploited Indians. Nevertheless, this penniless dreamer became one of the most important men in California and a major player in the American conquest of the West.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Hurtado, a historian at the University of Okla., captures the rise and fall of an important and colorful immigrant to 19th-century California. Swiss expat John Sutter (1803-1880) arrived there in 1839 and founded a settlement called New Helvetia on the Sacramento River. But his thriving agricultural and commercial endeavors were crippled by the Gold Rush, as many of his laborers quit and headed to the mines. The strength of this study is Hurtado's willingness to portray Sutter's faults: his reliance on cheap, even enslaved, Indian labor; his efforts, when California entered the Union, to prohibit Indian suffrage. And Hurtado captures Sutter's excesses: he was a lousy businessman who loved to spend rather than accumulate money, and he lived lavishly, purchasing "splendid clothes," portraits of himself, and other trappings of wealth and success. Yet Hurtado often misses opportunities to bring Sutter's story to life. The author's treatment of the destruction by arson of Hurtado's home, Hock Farm, in 1865 would have been vivid in the hands of a more artful writer, but Hurtado passes over the incident with a single paragraph. While this is likely to be the definitive scholarly biography of Sutter, it's too plodding to appeal to a broad audience. 21 b&w illus., 3 maps.
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About the Author

Albert L. Hurtado is Professor and Paul H. and Doris Eaton Travis Chair of Modern American History at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of several books, including *John Sutter: A Life on the North American Frontier*.

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