

# Bidwell Mansion

## State Historic Park



### Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at (530) 895-6144. This publication is available in alternate formats by contacting:

#### CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

P. O. Box 942896

Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

For information call: (800) 777-0369

(916) 653-6995, outside the U.S.

711, TTY relay service

[www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)

Discover the many states of California.™

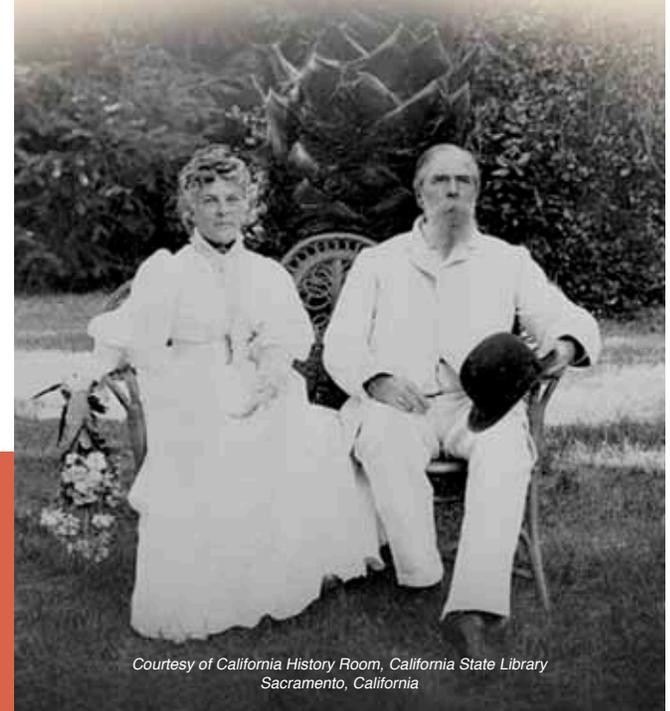
### Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

525 Esplanade

Chico, CA 95926

(530) 895-6144

*The stately Bidwell  
Mansion embodies a  
great love story—of a man  
for his land and for his  
wife, and of the couple's  
mutual love for their new  
state—California.*



## Walk into Chico's Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park

to relive a part of California's rich early history. The mansion was headquarters for John Bidwell. In 1841 at age 22, he became one of the first pioneers to cross the Sierra Nevada to California. Bidwell became deeply involved in the development of his adopted state, its agriculture and the city of Chico.

The Chico home that Bidwell shared with his wife Annie became the center of the town's social and political life from 1868 to 1918. In this beautiful home, the Bidwells entertained guests including President and Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman and naturalist John Muir.

### PARK HISTORY

#### Native People

The Mechoopda, who spoke the Konkow language, lived on Little Butte Creek, about 3½ miles from what is now downtown Chico. The land was abundant with plants and animals that allowed the Mechoopda to nourish their body and spirit. Their skills at basketry enabled the native people to collect, transport, store and cook their food.

With the discovery of gold and the influx of miners and settlers, the lives of the



*John Bidwell*

Courtesy of California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California



*Annie Bidwell*

native people changed forever. An enduring relationship was established when John Bidwell was befriended by the Mechoopda after he purchased the Mexican land grant of Rancho del Arroyo Chico. Most Mechoopda, as well

as residents from other villages, moved to Bidwell's ranch, where they worked.

Today the Mechoopda people are a vibrant community and stewards of their ancestral land.

#### A Proud Californian

During his early days in California, Bidwell served as business manager for another well-known California pioneer—John Sutter. Bidwell personally carried the first gold sample discovered in California to be assayed in San Francisco.

In the summer of 1848, Bidwell made his own gold discovery near the Middle Fork of the Feather River. Acting as both miner and merchant, Bidwell used the Gold Rush to build his financial resources. He used this money to further his new state in the agricultural and public service arenas.

#### Rancho del Arroyo Chico

By the 1850s, Bidwell had purchased more than 30,000 acres. He then built a general store, a hotel, post office and flour mill.

About his land, Bidwell wrote: "The broad plain, richly carpeted with lush green grass and tall clover, was studded with magnificent groves of stately oaks. The soil was deep and fertile . . . Wildflowers there were in reckless profusion. In the distance, toward the rising sun, were seen the snow capped Sierras."

In 1860, Bidwell helped lay out the town of Chico, which he named. Three years later, Governor Leland Stanford made him a brigadier general in the California State Militia.

#### A Great Statesman

From 1865 to 1866, Bidwell served California as its representative in the United States Congress. In the House of Representatives, he was a member of the House Agricultural Committee and introduced legislation that led to the completion of the California and Oregon Railroad. By 1870, the railroad's tracks ran through his rancho and the town of Chico.

#### A Loving Partnership

While in Washington, D.C., Bidwell met Annie Ellicott



*Konkow Maidu (Mechoopda) baskets*



*Memorial portrait of John Bidwell by Alice Reading, 1903*

Kennedy, the oldest daughter of his friend Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the U.S. Census. Miss Kennedy was 20 years Bidwell's junior, but the two were like-minded on many issues. Neither John Bidwell nor Annie—as revealed through their extensive correspondence with one another—had ever envisioned themselves married, but each capitulated when love overcame them.

“Why is it that only one of all women I have ever seen fills the measure of all my earthly yearnings?” wrote John Bidwell to Annie Kennedy in March of 1867. “I care nothing for what the world call wealth and affluence. They have no charms for me without a tender being to share them with me. You have no idea of the influence which women exert in the world.”



*Ginkgo biloba tree and leaves*

The Bidwells were married in Washington, D.C. on April 16, 1868. During their long and happy marriage, they passionately supported both women's voting rights and the prohibition movement.

### **The Bidwells at Home**

John Bidwell had already begun work on his three-story, 26-room mansion on Rancho Chico before he met Annie. San Francisco architect Henry W. Cleaveland designed the grand house. Completed in 1868, it had running water, flush toilets, modern gas lights and an air cooling system.

A proponent of higher education, Bidwell donated eight acres of his cherry orchard in the 1880s for a teachers' college called Chico State Normal School (later renamed California State University, Chico). Bidwell died in 1900. The Bidwells had no children, so Annie willed her home to her church to be used as a school. After Annie's death in 1918, the Presbyterian Church was unable to fund the school. The Normal School bought the mansion in 1923. The Bidwells' home was used as a dormitory and was later used as offices and classrooms. California State Parks acquired the mansion in 1964.

Displayed in the fully furnished home are both original and period pieces, including Mrs. Bidwell's piano, local Native American baskets and the Bidwells' eclectic library.

### **An “Agricultural Eden”**

Until his death in 1900, Bidwell worked to build an agricultural showplace. Wheat and flour production enabled Bidwell to finance ventures in specialty crops. He would harvest his gold-medal-winning wheat, grind it into



*Bidwell enjoyed “up-to-the-minute biscuits.”*



*Annie's square grand piano in parlor*

flour in his mill, and have the cook make it into biscuits the same day. He called his results “up-to-the-minute biscuits.”

Bidwell fostered the development of the casaba melon and produced California's first commercial raisin crop. Almond and olive varieties bore his name. Many specimen trees he planted still stand, including a cockspur coral, a tulip tree, a *Ginkgo biloba*, Italian cypresses, a South American monkey puzzle and a huge Southern magnolia.



**TOURS**

Guided tours are required to see the inside of Bidwell Mansion. A fee is charged for tours. For daily tour schedules or group tour reservations, call (530) 895-6144.

**CLIMATE**

Spring is mild and often wet. Summer temperatures can reach well over 100 degrees. Fall and winter days range from the low 40s to the mid-70s. The mansion is climate-controlled.

**ACCESSIBLE FEATURES**

The mansion has three floors. The first floor is accessible via a sloped exterior ramp. The two upper levels are only accessible by stairs. An open-captioned video is available. Parking, picnic areas, grounds and the Visitor Center are accessible. Call the park at (530) 895-6144 for updates or visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

**PLEASE REMEMBER**

- Park only in State Park-designated areas.
- Tour admission may be paid by cash or check only. The Visitor Center Museum Store accepts cash, checks and credit cards.
- Only service animals are permitted inside buildings.

Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park receives support in part from a nonprofit organization. For more information, contact Bidwell Mansion Association, PO Box 1303, Chico, CA 95927 (530) 895-6144