

# History of the Sonoma Plaza

Sonoma's town square is an enormous shaded plaza rimmed with old adobe buildings and carefully preserved historic structures. A stroll around the historic Plaza provides a fascinating look into early American life, including the former Mexican army barracks, the pristine San Francisco Solano Mission, the site of the Bear Flag Revolt, and the homes of General Vallejo. The Plaza also features historic 19<sup>th</sup>-century hotels, including:

- Swiss Hotel: built in the late 1830's by Salvador Vallejo (General Vallejo's brother) as his home and converted to a hotel in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- The Sonoma Hotel: built in 1880 as a dry goods store and a butcher shop on the street level, and a community/social hall on the second floor. In the 1920's it opened as a hotel and began its long and wonderful career as a charming local Inn.
- Toscano Hotel: built as a general store and library in the 1850's and converted to a hotel in 1886. The Toscano Hotel is open daily from 10am - 4:30pm. Docent tours are offered 1 – 4pm on Saturdays and Sundays (free with paid admission to the Mission; \$3).
- El Dorado Hotel: built in 1843 the structure has had a checkered history as the residence for Salvador Vallejo; a refuge during the Bear Flag Rebellion; a literary college; a wine making shop; and a hotel.

The eight-acre Sonoma Plaza was laid out by General Mariano Vallejo in 1835, and is the largest plaza of its kind in California. On September 24, 1961 it was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark.

## **San Francisco Solano: California's Last Mission**

San Francisco Solano Mission, located on the Sonoma Plaza, was the last of the 21 Franciscan missions of California. The Mission was founded in 1823 and marked the northern end of "The King's Highway," El Camino Real. It was the only Californian mission to be established under Mexican rule, independent of Spain.

Padre Jose Altimira blessed the site on July 4, 1823, and started construction the following month. The first crude building was a wooden structure plastered inside and out with whitewashed mud. The padres' quarters are the oldest structure in Sonoma, dating back to approximately 1825.

In 1836 General Vallejo built a barracks for troops at the northeast corner of the plaza, and made Sonoma, briefly, the center of traffic and trade north of San Francisco. In addition, he built the present adobe church in 1840 for the families and soldiers of the pueblo.

In 1881 the church and padres' quarters were sold and used variously as a hay barn, winery and blacksmith shop. However, the mission was rescued from disintegration in 1903, when the Historic Landmarks League purchased it. Later that year, it became state property and full restoration began in 1911.

The Mission and Barracks are open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for children 6 – 17 and free for children under 6.

## **Site of the Bear Flag Revolt**

For 25 tumultuous days in 1846, Sonoma was the capital of the independent Republic of California. It was the time of the Bear Flag Revolt, and it unleashed events that resulted later in

our first state flag, and American rule throughout California.

Lured by rumors of free land, American settlers had swarmed into California during the early 1840s. However, the Mexican government at the time prohibited them from owning land or holding office. Tension mounted, and during the summer of 1846, a rag-tag band of Americans who called themselves Osos, or bears, set out to change things.

Thirty horsemen from the Sacramento Valley rode into Sonoma at dawn on June 14, 1846. They halted at General Vallejo's renowned Casa Grande headquarters, arrested the cooperative general and his men, and declared California an independent republic. It was accomplished without firing a shot.

On that historic day, the Bear Flag Party elected William Ide as leader of the new republic, and William Todd, a nephew of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, volunteered to make the flag. Using unbleached muslin, and a donated red petticoat, Todd sewed a red star on the upper left-hand corner and a red stripe along the bottom. He hand-printed "California Republic" and he drew a grizzly bear just above it. The Bear Flag of the Republic was hoisted at the northeast corner of the plaza, proclaiming independence from Mexican rule.

The fledgling republic was to survive only 25 days, however. On July 7, 1846, an American naval vessel captured the Mexican capital at Monterey and claimed all of California for the United States. Two days later, Lieutenant Revere arrived in Sonoma. The Bear Flag Party agreed to throw their lot in with the American conquest. The Bear Flag came down, and up went the Stars and Stripes of the United States of America.

Years later, in 1911, the historic event was further honored, when the Bear Flag was officially adopted as our flag of the State of California. Today, a large natural rock, topped with a bronze figure holding aloft the Bear Flag, marks the site where the flag was first raised in the Sonoma Plaza.

### **The Home of General Vallejo**

Located on a 20-acre estate a half-mile northwest of the Plaza, General Mariano Vallejo's home, which he called "Lachryma Montis," is a tribute to the indomitable spirit and adaptability of this remarkable man.

With the coming of American rule, the former Mexican commandante embraced a new way of life. General Mariano Vallejo built a classic, Yankee-style, two-story Gothic as his permanent home in 1851 – moving from his adobe, Casa Grande, on the Plaza.

With steep-pitched roof and dormer windows, the Vallejo home stands at the end of a long, lovely lane, bordered by shade trees. It is a prefabricated structure, built of spruce and shipped around the Horn. Outstanding features include the large Gothic window and the carved, ornamental eaves. The general lived here at Lachryma Montis with his family until his death in 1890.

The adjacent storehouse, known as the "Swiss Chalet" (now a museum), was built of prefabricated timbers imported from Europe. Reassembled at Lachryma Montis, Vallejo used the building to store wines, olives and other produce.

On July 7, 1933, Lachryma Montis became a state historical monument, open to the public.

For information on Sonoma Valley or to receive a free Visitors Guide, contact the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau, located on Sonoma Plaza, at (707) 996-1090. [www.sonomavalley.com](http://www.sonomavalley.com).