

# The Indomitable City and Its Environmental Context

---

Steven M. Avella

Sacramentans, like all city dwellers, live each day with the realities of their natural setting. Embraced by two rivers, area residents swim, fish, inner-tube, and sail up and down the sometimes treacherous waters of the American and the Sacramento. They note the rivers' low flow in the hot summer months and (especially since Hurricane Katrina breached critical levees and inundated New Orleans) worry about their rapid rise during the rainy season and when the Sierra Nevada snow-melt cascades down the mountains and into the flat valley. Sacramentans know that their city, sometimes referred to as the Big Tomato or, in the past, Sacratomato, is part of an agricultural processing center. Along the highways, motorists travel behind huge trucks filled with ripe, red tomatoes grown on valley farms and destined for processing into sauce, ketchup, and salsa. Visitors to the city tour the famous Blue Diamond almond plant, which processes tons of nuts harvested from the myriad groves up and down the valley. Travelers landing at Sacramento's airport see the expansive green rice paddies that are along the flight paths of most incoming aircraft into the city. Joggers, walkers, and bicyclists maintain an uneasy truce along the American River Parkway, which carves paths for exercise enthusiasts and occasionally provides a safe shelter for the city's homeless.

But Sacramentans are also aware of how they have pushed back nature. They walk along the high levees and see the dams and weirs and floodgates that stand like guardians against periodic threats of inundation. Areas of the city are the sites of erstwhile industrial and military facilities that once brought hundreds of thousands to work and live in the community and also polluted the soil and the water. The city and the remaining legacy of the ranchos that became unincorporated towns are crisscrossed by freeways and smaller roads that cut through old neighborhoods and open up a pathway to the recreational areas of the mountains.

Causeways cross floodplains and propel commuters and tourists west through Yolo and Solano Counties toward Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco.

Sacramento's history is a virtual case study of urban environmental development in California and other communities of the American West. It was first inhabited by native peoples, who created their own distinct tribal cultures in the area, then explored by Spain, traversed by early Anglo visitors, and carved up into Mexican land grants—one of which was secured by the Swiss adventurer Johann Augustus Sutter. Sacramento “took off” as a gateway to the gold fields of the Sierra, which made the settlement an “instant city” on the banks of the Sacramento River. Over the years it recreated itself again and again, refusing to be dominated or pushed out by the forces of nature or the whims of human decision making. Although raised in chaos, the solid, middle-class core of its residents displayed enough moxie to land the state capital. It became the western terminus for the Central Pacific Railroad, whose repair shops became the economic mainstay of the city for many years. As a railroad hub, Sacramento provided industrial jobs and created a food-processing and packaging center that drew from the abundant produce of the fields, orchards, and farms of the Sacramento Valley. Parallel to its manufacturing and agricultural growth was its rising significance as the capital city of the growing state of California. Although its most dynamic population surge took place after World War II, Sacramento enhanced its respectability by erecting a magnificent capitol building and eventually installing activist governors and legislators who transformed the valley community into a city of rank. While it never replicated the charm of San Francisco or the fast-paced sprawl of Los Angeles, it held sway in California's growing interior as a good place to live and prosper. Yet, the Sacramento region's unique sense of place and interaction with its surrounding environment was not often appreciated or understood by many of the state's residents.

In short, human interaction with nature has been an ever-present theme in Sacramento's history. Sacramento provides an instructive example of how “Nature and culture are always entangled.”<sup>1</sup> And what Louis Warren has written of environmental history in general is specifically true of Sacramento. Sacramento's history is the story of how its inhabitants “have lived in the natural systems of the planet and how they have perceived nature and reshaped it to suit their own ideas of good living.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the development of Sacramento fits well into the construct identified by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, which examines the intense interplay between countryside and city.<sup>3</sup> Even though these authors disentangle respective dimensions of the larger story, the collective impact of this volume should provide a fresh look at Sacramento's history and a new appreciation of the complex environmental history of the region.

The Sacramento region's history is far from unknown, but at the same time it has not received a comprehensive treatment; this collection of chapters is a start. The authors seek to understand the city's identity and examine the historical con-

text of some of the significant issues of the environment and urban growth. Sacramento and its region have not lacked historians concerned with the interplay of city and environment; one of the earliest was Joseph McGowan, a faculty member at Sacramento State, who produced two substantive and still helpful volumes on the Sacramento Valley.<sup>4</sup> McGowan had engaged his own students in this research and examined the dynamic exchange that took place between the city of Sacramento and the northern part of the Great Central Valley. He repeatedly demonstrated the linkages between valley agriculture, climate, and land use, and the rise of Sacramento. His work was the first phase of a wider environmental history of Sacramento.

The rivers that embrace the California capital have both punished and rewarded. They created terrible floods and carried waterborne diseases like cholera but also helped to fashion the “earthly Eden,” as one booster described Sacramento. All Sacramento historians have to pay tribute to the rivers and their dynamic impact on the environment and the culture of the River City. Robert Kelley’s *Battling the Inland Sea* (1989) provides some of the richest descriptions of the Janus-faced impact of the rivers and the creation of the complex system of water controls that enables Sacramento and its watershed to survive and thrive. Other historians and students have also explored various aspects of this region’s “commingling” with nature. Yet, this collection attempts to weave together an even more comprehensive narrative of Sacramento’s dynamic interaction with its environment.

A metropolis that emerges from the hinterland can be explained in terms of urban development. Although not addressing Sacramento in particular, urban historian Carl Abbott argues that three themes characterize the history of western cities. First, western cities viewed themselves as “central and centralizing points” in a global economy. Self-consciously planned or “imagined” western cities matured into modern metroplexes that still sell themselves as centers of commerce and innovation in direct competition with both their neighbors and the cities of the world. Second, western city growth, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, forced a “cumulative rebalancing” of influence in North America as western cities accounted for eight of the twenty largest cities in the nation. Third, as western cities have grown, they have ceased to be imitators of eastern culture and capital and have come forward as innovators.<sup>5</sup> Abbott notes, “These decades have vaulted western North America into a new global position, central rather than peripheral to global circuits of trade and migration. In the process, its cities have filled the valleys with houses, contoured the hillsides with freeways and lined the highways with the lights of commerce.”<sup>6</sup> As part II of this volume argues, this process of western urban growth and innovation, as seen in Sacramento, must be understood in the context of an emerging federal/city partnership.

While environmental and urban historians often aim their scholarship directly at public policy makers concerned with land usage, urban sprawl, and the use of scarce resources, these chapters follow a more straightforward approach. Given the

relative dearth of scholarly historical work on Sacramento and the vacuum that exists in knowledge of Sacramento even by local inhabitants, these thematic chapters follow a rough chronological sequence and deploy a narrative style that will both inform and hopefully stimulate critical thinking about the future of nature and culture in the Sacramento region.

This book is divided into four thematic sections, each of which identifies major, overarching themes in the history of the Sacramento region. In part I, titled “Boomtown Sacramento,” the authors examine the origins and early entrepreneurial development of Sacramento. In describing the prehistory of Sacramento, Albert Hurtado, the authoritative voice on both California Indians and Johann (John) Sutter and his Mexican land-grant settlement at what became Sacramento, singles out the extensive work done by local Indians (Miwok and Yokuts) in creating Sutter’s economic advance; they constituted a “native labor pool” familiar with the rhythms of climate, soil, and food gathering and processing in the Sacramento Valley.

During the gold rush “Days of ’49,” many profit-motivated entrepreneurs bypassed the safer ground of Sutter’s Fort and set up warehouses and shops on the low ground just south of the confluence of the rivers to outfit those heading to the rich gold fields of the eastern Sierra. Riverboats and barges hauled tons of goods and materials to and from Sacramento, transforming the river itself into a profitable superhighway. This combination of location, entrepreneurial risk-taking, and perhaps the urge to be literally at the center of things led people to this early boomtown to build the nucleus of a city that would become the commercial and political center of northern California. “Sacramento,” as Mark A. Eifler writes in *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento*, “in its own fast-paced and dramatic way, thus reflected the struggles throughout the United States in the nineteenth century of a rural people transforming themselves. . . . We see the collision of two different cultural systems: one based on rural resource extraction and the other on the urban buying and selling of commodities.”<sup>7</sup>

The inchoate settlement soon evolved into a city, and the rivers formed the plumb line for the original grid superimposed on the flat ground fronting the north and west banks of the Sacramento and American Rivers. In 1854, the state of California planted its wandering capital in the River City. Creating a city and a governmental center on this location proved to be a perilous decision. Nature punished the heedless decisions of the get-rich-quick merchants and violently asserted itself with horrendous flooding that overwhelmed the city in its early years (and threatens occasionally down to the present day). Fires, sparked in the wooden buildings and fueled by the oppressive heat of summer, devastated the community while waterborne diseases caused inhabitants to flee to the salubrious air of the mountains along the sea coast. The Sacramento region was not conducive to the development of urban life. That circumstance did not daunt Sacramentans, who would “reengineer and refashion” Sacramento to deal with the rivers, the climate, and the topography. Sometimes we know the names of the human agents who

made this reengineering possible, but often, as Kenneth Owens notes in his chapter here, the work was done through the efforts of Sacramento's middle-class merchants, professionals, and laborers, whose work Owens hails as the "unheralded, quiet accomplishments of ordinary people."

Establishing the city of Sacramento was an act of defiance against nature. Nathan Hallam lays out with clarity the now familiar story of how economic rather than geographically strategic forces placed it on a floodplain. An improvident Johann Sutter had surrendered his claims to the demands of his many debtors, and the new city's land was platted and gridded for easy sale. When the liabilities of its low ground became evident during winter's rains and the rising of the river's waters, Sacramentans raised the city grade rather than abandon what had been chosen in haste. Citizens taxed themselves nearly to urban death to pay for the ambitious street raising that figuratively hitched the skirts of infant "Sacramento City" above the floodwaters. Sacramento survived—a repeated refrain of its long, indomitable history.

The new city's locale would be a choice from which there was no turning back; its doughty inhabitants "altered" nature by building levees. When these barricades proved inadequate, the city's visionaries entered into a compact with the imaginative engineers of the Central Pacific Railroad, the western leg of the famous transcontinental railroad, who, in exchange for land and rail access, transformed "unruly" nature by redirecting the American River and erecting and improving stronger new levees. The railroad also created a symbiotic relationship between Sacramento and the fertile hinterland, both near and far. Agriculture became and is still an important mainstay of Sacramento's livelihood. The fields provided millions of tons of rice, hops, and other grains for the city's processing plants. Orchards, groves, and farms transferred vast quantities of fruits, nuts, and vegetables to Sacramento's food-processing, boxing, and shipping enterprises.

Richard Orsi's chapter in this volume details how the railroad filled in (and polluted) land that became the city's major industrial complex and its chief source of wage-earning jobs for many years. It cut through city neighborhoods, spewing noise and pollution, but while it destroyed and altered the lands around it, the railroad also helped to preserve the city and the rivers from ruination. Railroad interests aided the city in a long but eventually successful battle against hydraulic miners in the far-off hills of the eastern Sierra whose high-pressure hoses dumped tons of destructive slickens into the riverbeds, overspreading the fields and orchards on which Sacramento relied for a part of its economic life. Orsi's chapter represents the paradoxical nature of Sacramento's "commingling" of nature and culture. The railroad contributed to the "disordered environmental patterns" (including congestion, pollution, landscape degradation, and space allocation) that afflicted Sacramento. But it also "created or encouraged more balanced, sustainable human-nature" relationships. Although pilloried as a greedy and parasitic "Octopus" by Sacramento journalists such as C. K. McClatchy, the railroad ultimately

gave as much as it took from Sacramento: jobs, economic stability, and critical assistance in taming the waters and assuring the city that it could survive and prosper.

Part II, “Valley Reclamation,” highlights the overarching role of the agricultural impetus and, in particular, the realities and politics of river control—a by-product of the wider need to provide stability and predictability for the region’s agricultural economy. Sacramento became “nature’s metropolis,” as David Vaught argues, because of the purposeful intervention of individual farmers, engineers, land speculators, and legislators who produced an array of land policies and created agencies to tame the landscape and alter the natural environment to make it economically productive. Todd Holmes and Anthony E. Carlson detail with great specificity the twists and turns of policy makers who pressed for a more coordinated, equitable, and efficacious use of Sacramento’s water, for navigability of the rivers, and for the rights of all who lived “whithersoever the river cometh.” Sacramentans threw bridges over the rivers to connect the city with nearby Yolo County’s factories in the field and with the truck farms and orchards of the eastern part of the county. The rivers provided a test ground for the efforts of the emerging Progressive state, which undertook to rationalize water-use policies not only for flood control but to ensure the equitable usage of water resources. The reclaimed lands provided by dams, levees, and the huge Thor and Hercules dredgers of the Natomas Company also provided agricultural produce and work for the Sacramento food-processing plants. The rivers were the point of reference for city buildings and public space, and they gave, in the biblical phrase, “joy to the city” by providing bucolic pathways for walking, jogging, or biking, lovely vistas for elegant homes, recreational boating for summer months, and water for drinking, maintaining lawns, and filling swimming pools. No longer an “island community,” Sacramento developed a version of the organizational revolution that drew on the advice of professionals who rationalized the use of the river systems. Reclaiming the valley also required the creation of a new identity for the Sacramento region. This effort was the work of local booster organizations such as the chamber of commerce and other development associations. Paul J. P. Sandul argues in his chapter that Sacramento’s boosters and real estate speculators touted the area’s rural-urban combination as a heaven on earth. The siren song of temperate days, of abundant citrus fruit, and health and prosperity had for many years enticed weather-battered easterners and midwesterners to the California capital. Sacramento boosters like the McClatchy brothers (Charles and Valentine, owners of the *Sacramento Bee* who themselves had landholdings in the area) pressed the natural advantages of the region—its water, sunlight, and benign weather. They even argued that northern California citrus ripened before the more widely advertised fruits of the south—and tasted better.

Inevitably, Sacramento, like all of California, was drawn more and more into the orbit of the ever-widening influence of the federal government. The third part of this book, “Government Town,” lays heavier emphasis on the instrumentality of

human agency than on the earlier themes of “commingling.” In the contributions of part III, the effective action of the federal government is highlighted as a critical element in shaping Sacramento’s environment and providing the engine for its most dramatic period of population growth. In the Progressive era, the state government was already transforming Sacramento as more and more of the city’s workforce labored in state and local bureaucracies (with some of these workers summoned to the city from San Francisco). California, like most of the American West, was dramatically transformed by the huge transfers of federal dollars into infrastructure, defense, and other kinds of discretionary spending. Sacramento became more than ever a government town, with a local economy heavily dependent on paychecks from federal, state, or local government sources. Gray Brechin and Lee Simpson lay bare federal efforts to rescue the city from the worst ravages of the Great Depression. Public works sponsored by the alphabet soup agencies of the New Deal—the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—poured millions of dollars into Sacramento and employed hundreds of Sacramentans. These efforts left behind visible monuments, including two high schools, an array of public buildings, a popular band shell, water towers, a rock garden in the city’s most prominent public park, military structures, and the Tower Bridge. Less visible, these and other federal agencies also repaired roads, cleaned out weed-choked culverts, and literally sheltered hundreds of homeless and starving people who camped out in the city’s various Hoovervilles and took advantage of its benign climate. Brechin is one of the foremost scholars working to re-awaken millions of historically illiterate Americans to the ubiquity and effectiveness of federal intervention. Sacramentans who labor under neoconservative myths that private enterprise created local infrastructure will find Brechin and Simpson’s conclusions quite challenging.

Rand Herbert’s chapter discusses the creation of the Sacramento region’s defense economy, which supplanted the railroads as the economic mainstay of the region. The military already had selected California’s sunny skies as the best place to train neophyte airmen during World War I. Later, as relations with Japan deteriorated during the 1930s, American defense planners girded for war by locating critical supply depots well inland from vulnerable coastal installations. Sacramento, sufficiently distant from the ocean and protected in part by mountain redoubts, was a natural location—shrewdly advanced by local booster Arthur S. Dudley. The new military installations—McClellan Field, Mather Field, the Army Signal Depot, and Camp Kohler—helped Sacramento play its role in “Fortress California.” They also transformed once placid pasturelands into thriving workplaces, thus depositing millions of dollars into the local economy. These same military installations continued to perform such duties during the cold war and sprouted infrastructure and suburbs like mushrooms. Aerospace testing also shook the environs of the eastern part of the county as mighty rocket engines were tested with distressing regularity.

These facilities flourished and sustained Sacramento's economy, causing it to grow dramatically in the middle years of the twentieth century. However, when political machinations and a changing international climate undercut their usefulness, their time ended, and, like the railroads, when they closed they also left behind pollution and surplus buildings.

New people meant additional demands on outdated energy systems. Power generation, an increasing need since the late nineteenth century, began simply, with a small dam near Folsom. Sixty years later, two new dams—higher and more awe inspiring than ever—held back the fast-flowing American River at two points, thus providing protection from floods and generating hydroelectric power and recreation for Sacramento's fast-growing postwar population. But some argued that the region needed even more power. Chris Castaneda's astute distillation of oral histories provides us with an important examination of Sacramento County's municipal utility and an ultimately ill-fated attempt to harness atomic power for the region. But the problem-plagued history of nuclear energy in Sacramento and the interplay between local government and environmental politics, combined with the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, helped a cadre of activists to persuade Sacramentans to shut down the facility.

The last section of the book, "Reclaiming the Past," reflects the impact of the environmental movement and the aligned interests in historical preservation and heritage tourism.<sup>8</sup> The twin impact of these developments caused a rethinking of how the Sacramento region allocated its public space and resources. Part IV offers a thoughtful examination of the concerted efforts of Sacramentans to reclaim a world they had lost or freely bartered away in exchange for continued urban viability. Sacramento had early on lamented its loss of trees, which gave way to efforts to control the rivers and to build the city. In particular, the long, hot summers were even more difficult to bear without the natural cooling of shade trees. Likewise, the dusty streets were unattractive, particularly to state legislators, who sometimes felt condemned to hell during the sessions of the legislature. My own work on Charles K. McClatchy, editor of the city's most widely circulated daily, the *Sacramento Bee*, recounts his front-page scolding of those who cut down trees and his relentless insistence that Sacramento needed tree-lined commercial streets and neighborhoods to provide shade and beauty to the California capital. A restful and memorial-filled park took shape around the state capitol, and Sacramentans could then find shade and peace as they walked through the giant granite pillars that stood as guardians around the statehouse. Later generations would call for small, postage-stamp-size parks—green spaces in the relentless grid and also places for youth to engage the physical culture that eugenicist Charles Goethe insisted was essential for the health and vitality of the American race.

Urban planners dreamed of diagonal boulevards emanating from the state capitol. City parks were an issue of great contention when William Land, the hotelier and former mayor (not to mention gambler), bequeathed a small fortune to



purchase land for a large park where Sacramentans could picnic, recreate, and meet each other. Suburban development also had a green-belt flavor to it as small communities of agricultural gentleman farmers set up colonies to plant citrus orchards, delicately swaying olive trees, and fields of hops and barley. Even the giant Natomas Company planted vineyards and fields on reclaimed land. As Al Holland's chapter indicates, other dreamers sought to preserve the natural habitat of the riverbanks to the advantage of the growing city. The American River Parkway attempted to preserve the ecosystem's diverse wildlife and flora as a perpetual treasure for all Sacramentans. Denizens hike or bicycle along the parkway's winding paths or float gently down the river's chilly waters on hot Sacramento afternoons.

Returning to the legacy of the area's first inhabitants, Tanis Thorne explains how the native peoples first engaged the forces of nature—taking and receiving—and found themselves reborn and reinvested in their ancestral lands. In a twist of fate, they imitated the early gold rush era entrepreneurs by setting up a thriving gaming industry that provided a rich—if at times contentious—source of revenue for these tribes who had earlier been deprived of their land and very existence. Lee Simpson and Lisa Prince then turn to the city's other riverbank, along the Sacramento, to describe the complex and historically challenging reconstruction of Old Sacramento. The riverbank, once a railroad property and a deteriorating skid row, was one of the first transformed by the urban renewal and historic preservation policies of the federal government. Simpson and Prince not only provide the outline of the interesting policy history that created Old Sacramento but also raise deeper questions about the reconstruction of Sacramento's historical past. How does one accurately and honestly capture the historical memory of a community that has so often—by necessity—had to rediscover and reinvent itself? Where does one “freeze-frame” the history of Sacramento: in the gold rush period, in the railroad era, in its shuttered military bases or the capitol, or in the modernizing midtown?

These chapters each accentuate in their own way the tensions between humans and the natural environment that created Sacramento and that still inform contemporary urban realities. Sacramentans, like most Americans, are more conscious of the fragility of the environment than ever before. Reducing or undoing some of the ecological damage of the past, living more harmoniously with the natural environment, and conserving resources has been written into Sacramento's daily existence by law and public consensus. Economic changes in the city also have created new realities. The railroad yards are long gone—now mostly detoxified and awaiting the political will and money to transform them into commercial and/or urban use. Gone, too, are the military installations with their large workforces and distinct demands on the region. Sacramentans relish their proximity to the relatively tamed rivers that frame the city, but since Hurricane Katrina, they worry even more that an excessively wet winter will make the Sacramento Valley a replica of post-2005 New Orleans. These chapters will contribute to a sense of continuity in under-

standing human interaction with the regional environment. Nature and culture will continue to “commingle” in this area but perhaps with more thought and foresight, assisted by the perspective that these chapters bring. This book is the contribution of the work of an assortment of historians who have dedicated significant time and energy—and in some cases a full career’s worth—to the study of the Sacramento region. If that indefatigable “lover of the place” Charles K. McClatchy were still alive, he would no doubt confer a rare accolade on this circle of scholars: “More power to your elbow!”

---

As this volume goes to press, renewed efforts to reuse land once developed by the all-powerful railroad move forward in the fits and starts that have always accompanied progress in the California capital. Renewed appreciation for the virtues of living in Sacramento’s sometimes pulsating downtown has refurbished old neighborhoods and created new venues for entertainment and dining. This current season of re-creation focuses on streets and entertainment corridors once used by businesses and the railroad. However, it also extends to open concern for those left behind by the instability of the local economy—the homeless, who daily congregate in large numbers for free meals, showers, and respite from the perils of indigence. They, too, are part of the “environment,” camping on the riverfronts, occupying the vacant spaces in the downtown, milling around the businesses and enterprises of the middle class, who are still the bedrock of Sacramento’s vitality. Perhaps the same indomitability that led the denizens of Sacramento to fight flood, fire, disease, and the dislocations created by business enterprises will one day be applied to helping those who often cannot help themselves so that the city born at the meeting of two rivers may be a place fit for habitation by all.