

GUIDE TO THE FOLSOM POWERHOUSE STATE HISTORIC PARK  
PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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## FOLSOM POWERHOUSE STATE HISTORIC PARK PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

### Park History

Folsom Powerhouse State Historic Park contains roughly 35 acres of cultural and historical resources. Located in northeastern Sacramento County, the park stands adjacent to the Folsom Lake State Recreation Area along the southern shoreline of Lake Natoma in the city of Folsom. The park is accessible by car via Greenback Lane.

The area containing the present-day park has been occupied by human beings for over 4,000 years. Archaeologists have unearthed the remains of numerous base camps along the American River and speculate that the ancestors of the modern-day Washoe tribe may have resided there initially. For thousands of years, the Nisenan (or Southern Maidu) made the riverside region their home, foraging seasonally in the nearby foothills. Their numbers sorely depleted after a malarial outbreak in the 1830s, the Nisenan suffered further depredations at the hands of land-hungry Euro-American miners and settlers after gold was discovered in 1848. Today, the nearly decimated descendants of the Nisenan live in nearby communities or on reservations.

In 1844, Governor Manuel Micheltorena granted the 35,521-acre Rancho Rio de los Americanos, containing the modern-day park, to U. S. Vice Consul at the Port of San Francisco, William A. Leidesdorff. Within a few years of Leidesdorff's death in 1848, Captain Joseph L. Folsom acquired the property and proceeded to develop the city of Folsom. Attracting hordes of prospectors to its rich ore deposits, the area quickly filled with mining settlements and adjacent businesses. In 1857, the Natoma Water & Mining Company, founded four years earlier, purchased 9,654 acres of the rancho where the park sits today.

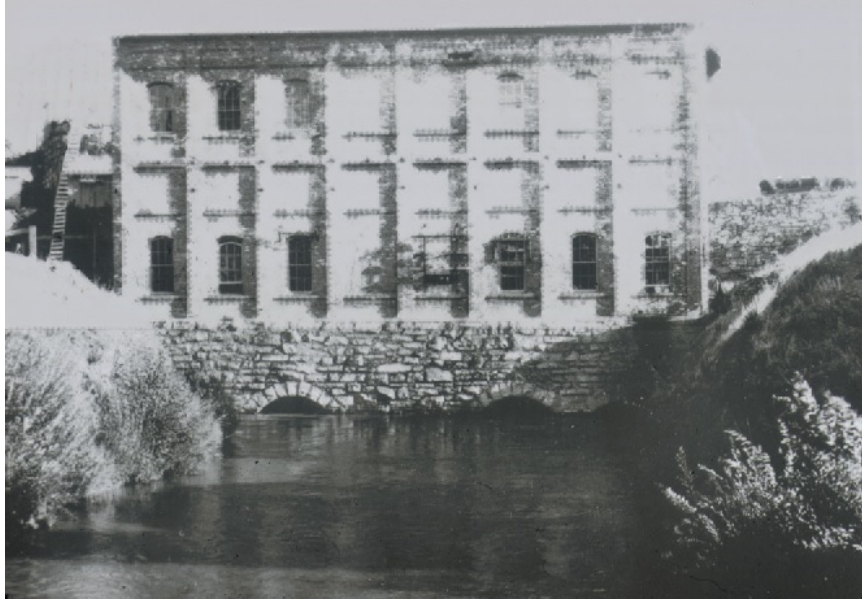
In 1862, former prospector and state senator, Horatio G. Livermore and his sons, Horatio Putnam and Charles Edward, acquired controlling interest in the company. Four years later, they began construction on the original Folsom dam and canal. In 1868, the company contracted with the State Prison Board, exchanging 350 acres of land (for what ultimately became Folsom State Prison) for 30,000 days of convict labor (**Figure 1**). Prison construction was completed in 1880, and convict labor began work on the dam and canal projects in 1888.



**Figure 1.** Folsom Prison, ca. 1900. Catalog # 090-S15377.

In 1881, the Natoma Water & Mining Company was reformed as the Folsom Water Power Company. Although the elder Livermore originally intended to establish a sawmill on the property to supply lumber to nearby towns, after he died—a year historians disagree on as 1879, 1881, or 1892—his sons realized the vast hydroelectric potential of the site. With the dam and canal completed in 1893, the Folsom Water Company entered into a contract with General Electric to construct a hydroelectric plant, a project begun the following year.

On July 13, 1895, the Folsom Powerhouse delivered its first surge of power using alternating current to the city of Sacramento, 22 miles away. On September 9, California's Admission Day, the Grand Electric Carnival was thrown in celebration of the new source of power. One year later, the Livermores consolidated their companies to form the Sacramento Electric, Gas & Railway Company. That same year, a drought severely impacted the powerhouse's ability to generate power, which necessitated the construction of the secondary lower powerhouse. Owing to financial difficulties, the Sacramento Electric, Gas & Railway Company sold the Powerhouse to the California Gas and Electric Corporation, soon reformed as Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) in 1903. Under new ownership, the Powerhouse was in operation until 1952 (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.** Folsom Powerhouse, ca. 1920s. Catalog # 090-S18005.

In 1952, as a component of the larger Central Valley Project, the United States Army Corps of Engineers began construction of Folsom and Nimbus dams. Completed in 1955, the dams created Folsom Lake and Lake Natoma. In 1957, PG&E deeded the Powerhouse to the Department of Parks and Recreation to preserve as a site of great historical significance, being one of the earliest generators of alternating current. The following year, the property was incorporated into the Folsom Lake State Recreation Area, which was also established that year. That same year, the Folsom Powerhouse was registered as a California Historical Landmark. It was soon awarded several prestigious recognitions. Deemed a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark in 1975, a National Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark in 1976, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1981, the Folsom Powerhouse was classified a state historic park in 1995.

California State Parks, coordinating with the Friends of the Folsom Powerhouse, preserves and interprets historical and cultural resources at Folsom Powerhouse State Historic Park (**Figures 3 and 4**). In addition to the two-story Classical-Revival-style brick powerhouse, the park also contains other historic buildings and structures including the turbine room, the pump house, the lower powerhouse, the machine shop, the forebay, spillways, and half a mile of the original canal. On Lake Natoma's shoreline, the park also includes a prehistoric grinding rock associated with the Southern Maidu. The park additionally includes a picnic area, parking lot, and a Visitor Center. Group tours are available throughout the week with reservations.



**Figure 3.** Restored Folsom Powerhouse, April 1995. Catalog # 090-S23638.



**Figure 4.** Panoramic view of restored Folsom Powerhouse interior, December 9, 2009. Catalog # 090-P66710.

## Scope and Content

The Folsom Powerhouse State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years 1893-2009, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1893-1905, 1970-1980, 1991-2001, and 2009. There is a total of 197 cataloged images including 32 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 145 35mm slides, and 20 born-digital images. Photographs primarily originated from California State Parks staff and various unknown sources.

The collection mainly depicts historic and contemporary views of the Folsom Powerhouse complex. Exterior views include the powerhouse's façade from several vantages, the original Folsom dam and canal, canal headgates, spillways, the southwest flume, park signage, protective fencing, and commemorative plaques. Interior views of the powerhouse include turbines, generators, boilers, the electrical switchboard, penstock, pipes, valves, and exhibit panels. Also featured are historic images of workmen and contemporary images of DPR employees and volunteers interacting with visitors.

The collection also includes images of non-powerhouse elements of the park. Images of Lake Natoma including pathways, trees, grass, other vegetation, picnic

tables, and birds, are also featured. Additionally, the collection includes aerial views of the park which capture nearby Lake Natoma, Negro Bar, and Rainbow Bridge.

The collection also documents two events at the park. Events include the 1893 construction of the powerhouse as well as Earth Day 2001, an event in which scores of volunteers worked to clean up trails, tend vegetation, and restore historic gates.

## **Related Collections**

Architect George Livermore Reminisces about the Pioneering Livermore Family, 1850-1999: Oral History Transcript, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Folsom Powerhouse State Historic Park Collection, California State Parks Archives.

Folsom Prison Views, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Folsom State Prison (Folsom, California) Photograph Album, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

Livermore Family Papers, UC Berkeley: Bancroft Library.

## **Catalog Subject Search Terms**

Advertisement	Lower powerhouse
Aerial view	Penstock
Boiler	Ranger
Canal	Switchboard
Canal headgate	Transformer
Construction	Turbine(s)
Control room	Volunteer(s)
Document	Workman
DPR employee(s)	
Earth Day	
Exhibit	
Exterior	
Flume	
Folsom Dam	
Folsom Lake	
Folsom Powerhouse	
Folsom Spillway	
Forebay	
Gate	
Generator	
Interior	
Lake Natoma	