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Taking a peek at history

Archivists will offer free behind-the-scenes tours of the state's vast collection of records

By Peter Hecht - Bee Capitol Bureau

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Kevin Turner, a document preservation tech, works at California State Archives to restore a book that is more than 75 years old. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer

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On Jan. 5, 1850, nearly two years after James Marshall's gold discovery and nine months before California became America's 31st state, Gov. Peter Burnett and the Legislature passed a law to document the Golden State's place in history.

The Statute of 1850, Chapter One, would become the first act for the new state. It mandated that "all public records, registers, maps, books, papers, rolls, documents and other writings ... connected to the political, civil and military history" of California governance be preserved in perpetuity.

"It was special," said California's chief archivist, Nancy Zimmelman Lenoil. "In view of the events that took place at the time --

the Gold Rush and the creation of the state -- there was recognition of the importance of preserving the records."



Since then, those records have only multiplied in abundance. On Saturday, in honor of the nation's Archives Month -- there really is such a thing -- the public is invited to free "behind-the-scenes" tours of the vast California State Archives.

From 4-8 p.m., state archivists will introduce a few hundred visitors at the California Museum of History, Women and the Arts to the state's vast stash of documents, maps and photographs.

The 98,000 cubic feet of files include material ranging from Spanish and Mexican land grants to the 1849 and 1879 California state constitutions and from police files on the 1968 Robert F. Kennedy assassination to decades upon decades of legislative records.

For the first time in more than 100 years, Lenoil said, archivists will display a 66-foot-long map that famed railroad engineer Theodore Judah sketched out in 1861 as a proposed template for the Central Pacific railroad crossing of the Sierra Nevada. It will take 14 tables to hold the four sections of the map.

Visitors may also encounter a book of 1800s mug shots of inmates at San Quentin prison or the log of checks written by the California state controller from 1850 to 1855 or, perhaps, the papers of former Gov. and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren from his term as Alameda district attorney in 1927.

Lenoil said the tour is intended to introduce would-be researchers to the vast information that can be accessed through the state archives.

From 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Oct. 13, state archivists will host a second event -- Family History Day -- to offer genealogy research classes and provide information on how to track down personal history documents.

People seeking more information can call (916) 653-7715 or check online at www.sos.ca.gov/archives.

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In a preview of Saturday's public tours, chief state archivist Nancy Zimmelman Lenoil guides reporters through a maze of shelves filled with volumes of historical documents. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer



Inmate photographs in the San Quentin State Prison mug book from the 1800s are on display at the California State Archives. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer



Chief archivist Nancy Zimmelman Lenoil inspects rolls of building plans stored in the state's archives. Sacramento Bee/Brian Baer

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