



## ViewFinder: Subterranean Sacramento

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(ViewFinder theme music)

Hi, everybody, I'm Jack Gallagher. You know, Sacramento is a city with an incredibly rich history: the Gold Rush, the Capital, the transcontinental railroad. Most of what you hear is well-established fact...with a little bit of local color thrown in. Usually it's easy to separate the wheat from the chaff...but sometimes you get into those murky, gray areas. Maybe you've heard about the "city beneath the city," or "hidden tunnels" downtown. Well, stick with me for the next half hour, because we're going to tell you the truth behind those rumors -- and the incredible lengths Sacramento went to to survive in its early years. Ready for this? Grab a flashlight, because we're about to go...subterranean.

(eerie music)

The evidence is all around -- if you know where to look for it: strange inlays in the sidewalk...alleys that dip below street level...a bit of brickwork that doesn't belong. Something happened here...a long time ago. Something drastic. Sacramento was once a very different place. What happened to it?!

If you want to talk about Sacramento history, you've got to start at Sutter's Fort. When John Sutter received his land grant from the Mexican government in 1839, he chose one of the highest pieces of real estate he could find -- well away from the rivers -- to establish his base. It became the cornerstone of a small but bustling city...

...but those that followed him couldn't resist the lure of easy access to traffic and commerce at the nexus of the Sacramento and American. So Front Street rose quickly -- but before long, so did the rivers.

Sacramento is a really, really tough environment for the people that are coming through here. They're getting flooded, they're getting burned on a regular basis; they're getting cholera epidemics.

In December of '49 and January of 1850, Sacramento was impacted by a serious flood. It was called the "Great Inundation." The people who were leading the city come to the conclusion that they've just got to do something to keep the water out -- and the first thing you do is you build a levee. They'd build them a couple feet tall and then the next flood came over that. And they'd build them a little higher, and the next flood would come over that...

(thunder strikes)

The flood in 1862 does an enormous amount of damage to the city, and so they immediately galvanize around the idea of raising the town. Before they could raise the street, though, they had to build brick retaining walls on each side of the street. And when those brick retaining walls were built they then had two walls and they came in and filled in between them, to the top of the walls. And then they turned



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around to the property owners and said, “Well, you better do something about your buildings – or not. That’s your decision if you want to leave them in the hole, that’s up to you.”

That left property owners with two choices. They could raise the level of their building up to 12 feet to meet the new street level. That meant using 1500 to 2000 jacks to raise a typical building an inch and a half a day! Or the first floor could just become the basement. That would make the second floor the first floor, which then would make the third floor the second floor...

I was beginning to feel literally out of my depth... So I sought out Paul Hammond of the California Railroad Museum. They own one of the most important historic sites in Old Town Sacramento.

Paul, as you’re walking down the street here in Old Sacramento, you can tell that a lot of these are reconstructions. But I understand that this building -- the Hastings Building -- is original. This is the original.

Indeed it is. It actually is considered one of the most important structures here in Old Sacramento. 1853 is when this building replaced an earlier one that had burned in one of Sacramento’s many fires.

Right.

It’s had some rather high-profile tenants over the years.

Well, the Supreme Court being one of them.

The Supreme Court being one of them, and on lower levels of the building you had the various agents for the Pony Express. This was actually the western terminus of the Pony Express.

Sure, so when you’re talking about lower levels now, we’re talking about underneath street level.

Correct, because the current street level used to be one floor down.

Right, and we’re going to get a look at that right now! Good, let’s do it!

So now we’re in the alley behind the Hastings Building, and we’re headed down here now. Why are we not maintaining that street level? Why didn’t they build this area up?

Well, there were a combination of things. First of all, was there needed to be a way to still access those first floors, get entrance to them. There was also a lack of funds and a lack of dirt...

Oh! (laughs)

...to build this area up as far as the streets were being done. And it wasn’t really necessary to keep the water out. You know, the streets were the levees.

Well, here we go.



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So now we are officially at the old ground level?

We're actually at almost the old ground level.

I'm going to assume that we're looking at original doorways at street level.

Yes, indeed we are.

And here is our entry. They trust with the key to this. You have the key at all times?

I do.

So whenever you want you could come down and explore...

(eerie music)

I got a bit of a chill as I realized that with every step forward I was taking a step back in time to a part of Sacramento history that most people today aren't even aware of!

A lot of stuff has obviously been added for structural reinforcement over the years.

The entire building has been reinforced, and the whole basement ceiling has been rebuilt as well.

Well, this area is fenced off...for what reason? What's this?

This is an archeological dig dating back to the 1970s. There's actually several of these digs throughout the building here, and they're all up against the foundation. So I suspect that they were looking not only for how the structure works but also, you know, to find whatever they did in the archaeological digs.

And what did they find?

Well, I don't know the specifics but I'm sure there's boxes of stuff that came out of the soil.

Straight through?

Does the fence mean more digging?

It does. It means, "Don't fall in the hole." Another archeological dig here.

Now what do you think this was? There's some reinforcement here...

Yeah, this is going to be probably the bank vault. This space, we know, originally when the building opened was a bank. Upstairs today is the Wells Fargo Museum, so that tradition continues.



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(eerie music)

So Paul, we're leaving the building?

Yes, this is the front wall of the building on J Street.

So we're on J Street now.

The boardwalks are directly above us.

The sidewalks?

The sidewalks.

And this? Explain this.

Well, while they were raising the streets, this wall had to be built so that they could actually have the dirt being filled on the other side of the wall where the actual street side is.

Yeah, so I would have assumed that they would have just filled right up to the building, but they built a brick wall...

...built a brick wall...

This has got to be about ten or twelve feet from the storefront, and then they filled on the other side.

That way they could be filling in the streets, and at the same still be getting access to these first floors. Because you've got a whole transition period going on here.

But there would have been a huge gap between the wall and the storefront -- about ten feet, eight or ten feet down. More than that!

Until they actually put the boardwalk in there would have just been a pit on every side of the street.

Yikes! And this has seen somewhat better days.

Yeah, these buttresses hold back the earth. Yeah, they've seen better days, but this whole area has been reinforced. The posts kind of show you that.

So now we're walking down J Street. We're now on the corner of J and Second. Well, how about that. Look at that! And again the wall, filled behind it, huge gap... A dangerous time to let your kid run around own here I'd imagine. You know, what you think is that on a weekday morning like this, mid-morning, 150 years ago there's a lot of stuff happening here where we are now.

Absolutely, and it probably would have been somewhat chaotic here. Horses and carriages...



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Oh, this is kind of cool, Paul. They've got bars on these windows, and they look like they're original. What's happening here?

Well, a couple of possible explanations. There was the Supreme Court on the top floor of this building. They could have needed these for holding cells; kind of an unusual space for that. The other most likely is just the sidewalk areas extended through the district, and you might be able to get into the sidewalk area, but then as a building owner, you didn't want people to be able to get into your basement. So you had to have bars over the openings.

Speaking of which, after the level of the street went up, what would they use these areas for?

Well, it depends on the building. Obviously, this one just became a storage space. Some of the other basement areas were, I understand, rented out. And so it depended on what that building owner wanted to use that space for. But they were in many cases not forgotten; some other cases, kind of left behind.

Well, this has been a lot of fun. I've heard about this for years and never have been here, didn't think I'd get to come down. So I appreciate it!

Thanks for coming down.

Yeah, great job touring this!

Now how do we get out?

Well, I'm counting on you knowing the way out, and I'm going to hold onto the back of your suit coat until I see daylight! So let's start that maneuver...

Here in Old Town, some of the merchants have taken advantage of having access to these underground walkways. We're here at Fulton's West End Bar and Grill, one of the few places where the public can still see them.

(guitar music)

This story is such a huge part of Sacramento's history, but you wonder if the people who are eating in this restaurant realize that 150 years ago, this was a sidewalk! And these buttresses and walls don't just exist in Old Sacramento; there are parts of downtown that have them as well. But unfortunately, those areas aren't as easy to get to.

The easiest way to get from old town to downtown is, ironically, also the most accessible part of the underground sidewalks. The historic brickwork is gone, but the pedestrian walkway remains at the original street level. Very few people today get to see firsthand what these spaces used to look like. Historian Paula Boghosian is one of the lucky ones...



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This is a map prepared by the Public Works Department of the city, and the areas that have these little dark blue areas are portions of the underground sidewalk that are still in existence.

I contracted with the city to do a survey of the downtown -- actually the whole central city. I went down myself and took a look around. Something really washed over me that made me realize people that were standing in this very spot a hundred years before.

In some instances, they left the sidewalk open and they had stairways down to a restaurant, or a store, or something that would still be on the lower level.

Another project with the library caused me to go down into every single basement on that square block. They said, "Oh, we'll just fill them in and they'll be there for some future generation." But they've been demolished because they had to put new foundations and everything in, you know.

It almost needs to be experienced to turn certain attitudes around, I think. Because it does give you a very strong sense of time and place, and once you have experienced that feeling you don't forget it...

So I got out my copy of Paula's map, and hit the streets of downtown. I figured with a map, I wouldn't have any trouble gaining access to more of Subterranean Sacramento. But to my surprise, I discovered that most storeowners aren't willing let a total stranger nose around in their basements.

(door slams)

And many of the places marked on the map were now empty storefronts.

But with so many rumors about the underground sidewalks floating around, I figured somebody downtown had to know how I could get down there...

Can I talk to you for a second?

No, thanks.

Aw, just... I need a little help.

There's a series of underground sidewalks from where they raised the city. Are you familiar with that at all?

I never heard of it.

So the old first floors are under the sidewalk, and apparently you can get in at some point and walk around in there.

Really?!!

Yeah!



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Do you know any access points?

No, never.

Who would you get in touch with to get down there, do you think?

Probably some explosives specialist or something...

But...the more people I talked to, the more I started feeling like I was an expert on subterranean Sacramento.

Did you know that during the 1860s they actually raised the level of Sacramento about 12 feet to keep it from flooding?

During the 1860s they raised...

...the level of the city to...

...keep it from flooding. Do you know about this?

No...

After a while, I started getting desperate, and I realized it was probably time to turn to the pros. So I made my way to the downtown partnership, a non-profit dedicated to improving Sacramento's central business district.

Shawn!

Oh, hi!

Hey, how are you?

Nice to meet you.

Good to see you. Shawn Peter: Shawn is a downtown guide. If you've been downtown at all in the last 8 or 10 years you've seen these guys. They help out. They offer goodwill to tourists and residents alike.

That's right.

Now for our need today, you I understand can offer some entrée into some places I haven't been able to get to.

What are you looking for, actually?



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Underground!

Underground? Well, you've come to the right place. I have some private access; I can take you guys down.

Exactly what we've been looking for. I haven't been, as I said, very successful in that regard. So where do we start?

Actually, you know, fortunately, we can start right here! We're just going to head right over here in the office.

Lead away!

Let's go ahead and follow me up here. And we're actually standing on the original sidewalks of Sacramento...

Wow!

...and also our locker area.

Yeah, I was going to say, you've found some way to utilize the space – which hasn't happened a lot in downtown, right?

No, not at all.

Where are we?

We're at 900 J Street. We're on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and J Street in the old Frank Ruhstaller Building.

Who was he?

He was a brewmeister who came to California in 1889 and established the Buffalo Brewing Company.

Oh, wow. Well, the same buttressed walls that we saw in Old Sacramento. It looks like the same thing.

Yeah, Chinese immigrants were hired to raise the city streets to keep the state capital here in California.

To keep the state capital here?

Yeah, the cities were always battling, and it was constant flooding, legislation, no building built. They were ready to -- shoop! -- leave town.

Is that right? And this is what changed their minds.

This is what changed their minds, finally, to keep them here.



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I didn't know that. So...you have access to other places?

Oh, yeah! We've got a lot of other places to go to.

Let's do it!

Let's go.

Listen, could I, uh...could I wear the jacket?

Well, I'd let you but it's part of the uniform and they might think you were a guide, so I can't do that.

Well, we wouldn't want that to happen, now...

(eerie music)

Shawn led me over to 7th Street and Merchant, just off the K Street Mall, to an old building he called the Pioneer Hall.

I got the flashlight and keys, and hopefully they'll let us in...

All right, just watch your step. We've got a hole there.

I got that chill again as I realized I was finally about to see another piece of Sacramento's underground.

(door creaks)

It's kind of dark so watch your step.

Kind of dark? It's very dark!

I wondered if this space would look the same as the one in Old Town -- or if downtown had new mysteries to reveal...

Now what we're standing on here, Jack, actually is another sidewalk. And we're actually on the exterior of the building; you can see an old window here. And I'm actually taking you into the basement of the Pioneer Hall. I'll turn on the light over here...

Now...we're in the basement, now?

We're in the "basement-basement" actually.

So this would have been street level?



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This would have been street level here.

They filled this?

They filled this up. And this would have been a window access to allow light...

Oh, look at this! This was a basement window.

This was a basement window, and this allowed light from the south side of the building to come in. Because this was the only existing building here when they originally built the building.

Pioneer Hall was built in what year?

1868 for the Pioneer Association, built by Nathaniel Goodall, who built the Governor's Mansion at 16<sup>th</sup> and H Street.

Oh! What was this space that we're in now used for?

This was Nathaniel's architectural firm. This was his offices, and this was the main entrance off of 7<sup>th</sup> Street. You can see the doorway.

Oh, you can see windows on the sides of the doorway. Okay, this is... I hope I'm not the only one who's getting confused with this. This was the level of his office. What we're standing in now is the basement...that they've raised.

Mm hmm.

So we've gone from street level which used to be the second floor to the basement which used to be the first floor to the...basement which...

...is the basement. Yeah, I'll take you right up here.

And this would have been his entrance to what street?

Seventh Street.

Seventh Street and Merchant.

Now, I'm going to take you in here, Jack. This is actually Seventh Street and we're underneath the sidewalk.

So we're on Seventh...

Seventh and Merchant. Pretty close, right between K and J Streets.



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So across the street from the Hard Rock, St. Rose of Lima Park. Wow. And this was the original entrance to the building.

Yeah, you can see the wall here, how much wider the door was. You got the two windows here on either side.

And we can hear people walking on the sidewalk above us! Now this is really more reinforced than any area that I've been in so far. What happened down here?

Oh, well, this is one of the reasons we can't get into the downtown tunnels. As you can see here this was completely replaced about three years ago, and a lot of the original tunnels are very dangerous, because they were built 150 years ago or so.

What's this big concrete wall down at the end there? What's that?

Oh, the concrete wall? Actually that is the old wall to the old vaults of the Merchant National Bank...

...which is still operating upstairs?

Still operating upstairs. It was built in 1921. It was a federal reserve bank for the Sacramento area. They actually had their own printing facility in the basement, but instead of using the Presidents' faces they actually used the bank manager's portrait on the currency.

On the money?!

On the money itself.

(laughs)

Well, this is great! So now we have someplace else we're going.

Oh, yeah.

This stretch of sidewalk had had a lot of work done in recent years, but Shawn said he'd take me to a place that would give me more of a sense of what downtown originally looked like.

All right, Jack, we're heading into Osteria at 915 K Street.

Now, the people downtown just let you into these spaces?

Um, pretty much. I've talked to them and I've developed a nice trust, a little bond with them.

Think they'd do that for me?

No, no, I don't think so.



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See, that's why I wanted the coat.

Watch your head, Jack, on the plumbing. And I'm showing you an 1860s storefront right here at 915 K Street.

915 K, so right on the K Street Mall, and this is the original...

This is the original frame, right here. We're looking at it.

So people would have walked off of K Street, into whatever this was, whatever business this was. And a couple of windows here, the original window frames.

A couple of original window frames here. This is very well-preserved.

Yeah.

Shawn was clearly the go-to guy for Subterranean Sacramento, so I asked him to lead on to our next destination -- a space that he assured me was unlike anything else in downtown.

Oh, great! We're going to go to the Crest?

Well, not really exactly...

We went next door, into Fresh Cut Florist, which Shawn told me used to be a part of the Crest Theatre.

We're down below 1011 K Street: Fresh Cut Florist.

These guys are getting a lot of use out of the space.

Yeah, a lot of the businesses now pretty much use their basement access as storage.

"The John Malkovich Room." What's this about?

I'll show you! Come on in. Watch your head...

This is why we call it the John Malkovich Room.

Look at this!

We're actually right below the Crest Theatre at 1013 K Street.

So let me see. We're like right below the lobby...



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Yeah, right below the lobby. This is probably where the candy counter is, and what we're looking at here is the old access tunnel of what used to be the Hippodrome. And this, what we're underneath, was all done in 1949 when they built the Crest inside the old Hippodrome.

That's amazing...

Come on, I've got something else I wanted to show you!

Yeah, this is what I wanted to show you, Jack.

Wow, look at this!

This is the old service elevator. This is how they used to access the basement when the streets were raised.

So this would pop right up onto the street, onto K Street.

Yeah, right onto K Street.

And then they'd load it in. At what point did they cut it off here?

Probably in '69 when this became a foot mall.

Yeah, when they changed K Street... Oh, look!

(sighs)

Shawn? Shawn! Hey, Shawn wait up...

I was grateful to Shawn for all the access and information he'd provided, but there was one more mystery I was hoping he could help me unravel.

This is what I'm talking about, Shawn. I see these in different places downtown. What are these? Is this just decorative?

No, no! These actually had a full function. These allowed light to illuminate the downtown tunnels before there was electricity.

Really?

Yeah, and if you like, I can actually show you around the corner...

Absolutely! We can get under some of these?

Yeah, let's go.



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All right!

Were these everywhere downtown?

Everywhere downtown.

Every sidewalk?

Every sidewalk.

Wow!

It was amazing to me how many of these spaces were still around -- and how each one was unique.

This is what I was talking about, Jack.

Wow!

Isn't that awesome?

This is incredible! Look at the amount of light that these things let in!

Yeah, really effective.

That's really something. I didn't think it'd be anywhere near this light down here.

Yeah, this is how everything was pretty much illuminated up until the tunnel system was pretty much closed off to the public.

And this wall is the original retaining wall, but it's been reinforced obviously.

Yeah, when they were building this high-rise back in the mid-1920s, they probably put this new retaining wall up.

Well, this is incredible. Wow, look at the light in here! So this would have been...this would have been an active walkway?

This would have been an active walkway had the tunnels been not closed off. And this is pretty much what you would have seen walking from one storefront to the other.

Amazing. Shawn, thanks so much.

No problem, Jack.



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Great job!

Think about everything we've seen: underground sidewalks, 150-year old store-fronts, subterranean elevators, the original walkway to the Crest! But will these things be here for future generations to appreciate? Will they be here in a few years?!! You know, as downtown undergoes a facelift, these spaces are disappearing fast. In fact, it was only a few years ago that Sacramento missed an opportunity to save a really unique slice of history...

Cosmo Garvin wrote the definitive article on the underground sidewalks for the Sacramento News & Review.

The best part we got to see was along the J Street side where the Coolot Building is. I think most people call it the Comstock Building. It was an abandoned area for 10 or 15 years. It was some of the most accessible and most interesting of the underground space.

Me and a photographer just went in there, because we wanted to see what was going on. And it had this arched brickwork that was used to help support the sidewalk above it, and I understand that it was really rare to see that.

The building that's going up there now originally was supposed to preserve part of that underground tunnel, and part of the building façade. It was exciting because when the project was done, the public was going to get a chance to see this.

About two days before the story went to press, that building caught fire and was demolished, I think, within a day. They started knocking it down, completely throwing out the plans to preserve that part of the structure. And it was frustrating.

As we grow up, um, we're also growing down and we're filling in the foundations and filling in these spaces. What I hope the city would do is rather than just see all of that space as blight to be filled in, to at least consider the possibility that some of it is an historic resource.

Well, we're about two blocks from where the Coolot Building used to stand, and as you can see there's another example of Sacramento's subterranean spaces being dismantled right before our eyes. Sacramento takes such pride in its history that it's kind of sad to see such an important part of that history disappearing year after year, brick by brick. I hope you enjoyed this tour of underground Sacramento and found it as fascinating as I did. I hope someday you get to experience it for yourself...before it's too late.

Try a button. Oh, it does.

What are you doing? It doesn't work.

It doesn't work? Oh, sorry.

(alarm sounds)



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I always watch KVIE, and my wife donates to the PBS all the time.

(whispers) “Jack Gallagher is an amazing host.”

And you know, I’ve got to say something about Jack Gallagher. He is fantastic. I can’t miss any one of his shows.

Thank you. Cut!

(laughter)

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