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FEATURED

## A Rare Gem Turns 150

Public Tour Day — Saturday, September 9 Feast at the Foundry — Saturday, September 16 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.

By Sarah Spinetta Ledger Dispatch  
Sep 1, 2023



Samuel Knight & Knight Foundry Crew. Sutter Creek, California. Circa 1890

*This scarce site, thought to be one of (if not the only) remaining water-powered foundries in the US, has received*

*significant recognition through national societies as an endangered historical location.*

COURTESY PHOTO

A remnant of the past, a unique piece of living history untouched by modernization: the Knight Foundry in Sutter Creek is a truly rare gem. The site draws in visitors from the Motherlode to international tourists, interested in seeing firsthand the machines, tools and techniques that literally built our modern lives and changed the Western world forever.

At its basis, foundry work is an art form...the ability to transform ingots into tools and machines, all created from a vision. A foundry was the real heart of a community: any industry or business, even the local farmer who needed a new tool or piece of equipment would visit their foundry.

Owners like entrepreneur and visionary Samuel Knight (namesake of the Knight Foundry) would sit down with the client, where the issue and proposed solution would be discussed. From there, Knight worked his magic, utilizing creativity, ingenuity and adaptability to handcraft the smallest gears to the streetlights of San Francisco - and everything in between, powered by his water wheel invention.

2023 marks the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Foundry, which volunteers couldn't be more excited to see celebrated at the upcoming Feast at the Foundry.



COURTESY PHOTO

How did the Knight Foundry survive for 150 years without being modernized? Perhaps appreciation for the craft, but quite possibly a combination of passing the business and skills on from employee to employee, a bit of “dumb luck” and decisions that led to twists of fate. “We feel very fortunate that this is the case, the water-powered equipment, those original employees and their historical knowledge didn’t modernize for whatever reason,” Board Chairman Robin Peters said, “That really sets us apart, it might be a bit dramatic, but I don’t know if that could be replaced. We have all those prior owners and operators to thank, from Knight onwards, who didn’t see the need to modernize. We are fortunate to be able to pick up the still-functional tools and start using them, just as they were put down the last time the previous generation did. Sometimes the hair on the back of your neck stands up when you pick up a tool, thinking that is probably still in the same place as it was 150 years ago.”

Keeping this authenticity and close connection with its roots has been the basis of the Foundry over time, a huge focus of the Knight Foundry Alliance. Their volunteers keep such a relic alive: continuing to further its historic value through education and hands-on experience for coming generations.

Robin, a mechanical engineer by trade, always had an interest in the location. He described his best days spent in the Foundry are teaching and conducting tours: showing the public how the most fundamental industrial skills are done by hand instead of computers. “It gives us volunteers the opportunity to teach and instruct students and adults in a 19th-century manufacturing facility complete with its original patterns, tooling and machinery,” he explained. “We are trying to create a world-class facility, really a multifaceted classroom that

promotes an immersive manufacturing experience you may not see anywhere else. In modern times, it's really just the 19th-century fundamentals, but just automated, and it's important people understand how that works to appreciate it."

Machinist Ron Edgar, who runs the Restoration Shop and teaches these skills to Amador High School students, has been involved from the start. Also an antique tooling and equipment aficionado, one of his greatest passions is refurbishing equipment and breathing new life into it, skills which come in handy. "This really began with the Amador Sawmill and Mining Association - we actually started the restoration shop there," Edgar explained. "When the Alliance came up, most of us found our heartbeat was at the Foundry and we wanted to switch over there. All of the owners of the Foundry learned their trades and became experts there, they kept the machinery they knew and preserved it. We are so appreciative, it was unique how that was handed down. A pure love for the craft."

"It's really a well-preserved artifact, untouched by time," Ron added. "If people want to come see how it was done in the late 1800s with water-powered and water-driven line shafts, they can. It's just like they set their tools down and walked out the door. This is a huge milestone, in 150 years so many things have been torn down. The impact foundries had on industries was huge, and we get a heck of a lot of fulfillment being a part of moving this place forward in time. Everyone is fighting for it, and finding solutions on how we can fix things and make them look old, retain that character and integrity. It's taken tremendous support and efforts to bring this place from ruin to operational."

Remaining open on a commercial basis, operations ceased in 1996 as casting work



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had gone overseas. That is where Ron Edgar, Robin Peters and several other former employees or those tied in with the foundry stepped in. "We never thought this site would come back to life like it used to be, which weighed heavily on our hearts...there were so many things that could have happened to the Foundry when it shut its doors. This is prime Sutter Creek real estate, has industrial zoning - anybody could have come in with a bulldozer and pushed the buildings down, scrapped everything and built new, modern buildings. The potential was really high, but in 2016-17, the Knight Foundry Alliance was able to take over the property for the City. Now we're celebrating the 150th Anniversary, which is hard to get your head around. It's very personal to me," Robin said.

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They cannot forget the outpouring of support to save the Knight Foundry, which came from unexpected places. "Support from the community has been tremendous," Peters continued. "Just when we were certain that we would not be able to pay the loan in time, interest-free, a lady from Santa Barbara called and asked how fundraising was going. We were \$85,000 short of our \$350,000 fundraising goal- she asked a few more questions and told us "best of luck". A couple days later, a check for \$85,000 came in the mail. When the project is right and you tell people what you are doing and how you're trying to accomplish it, the support comes in."

This scarce site, thought to be one of (if not the only) remaining water-powered foundries in the US, has received significant recognition through national societies as an endangered historical location. "A really good example of the craft is the Argonaut Mine," Peters continued. "This was mining at levels nobody had seen before, so deep in tortured rock formations. They knew what they were trying to accomplish, but didn't always know how to get there. So, they sat down with Knight and his crew, and talked over the problem together and came up with a solution. Knight and his group would design and manufacture the parts, deliver and install them in the mine. That takes a lot of varied ingenuity and experience, to design and brainstorm solutions to problems that nobody had faced."

Nodding to an ongoing joke about the inevitable breeze which carries off table settings at the Feast each year, commemorative 150th anniversary castings have been crafted just for this occasion. "One year we scrounged patterns and used them to weigh things down, the

next we ran to the nuts and bolts den," Robin laughed. "My wife and I were talking about casting a paperweight that people can take with them, so we went into the storage archives and adapted an original pattern into a new pattern with lettering. There will be one casting per place setting so folks can take home a piece of the Foundry."

Always thinking of the Foundry's legacy, volunteers work hard to offer new programs and experiences every year, such as their monthly Public Tour Days. Peters and Edgar, with their 20- and 40-odd years' involvement with the Foundry, have now cemented his name in the long list of passionate volunteers who have continued its relevancy and immeasurable value. "I'm just one guy...we have a team of 40-50 volunteers who have advanced our programs, always doing something fresh and interesting. It's remarkable how cohesive our thoughts are, everybody is pulling in the same direction. There's no limit to where we can take these programs, and people from all over and abroad are factoring the Knight Foundry into their sightseeing/vacation. The reason we're here today, 150 years on, is because of the most amazing group of volunteers I have ever seen: highly skilled machinists, physicists, foundry workers, mechanics, scientists, builders, electricians, volunteers that can do almost anything, each have their niche and play a key part. Without their dedication, this never would have been possible."

Upcoming Knight Foundry Public Tour Days will be held on the second Saturday of each month: September 9th, October 14th, November 11th and December 9th from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. No reservations are required; purchase tickets at the door. Knowledgeable docents are found throughout the complex, firing up the forge and demonstrating the process of sand casting to pouring molten metal, and the finished product.

Feast at the Foundry 2023 will be held on Saturday, September 16 from 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. Tickets include appetizers, a multi-course dinner (vegetarian option available), live music, a raffle and silent auction all down the closed-off Eureka Street. Seating is extremely limited and reservations are required. Tickets may be purchased online at [knightfoundry.com](http://knightfoundry.com) or in person on their upcoming Tour Day, September 9th. For more information, 209-560-6160 or email [info@knightfoundry.com](mailto:info@knightfoundry.com). All proceeds will support the ongoing restoration and maintenance of the Knight Foundry, preserving this history for generations to come. Knight Foundry is located at 81 Eureka Street in Sutter Creek.