

Carl David Weber – Adventurer and Town Founder

Even today, Charles Maria Weber is still omnipresent in Stockton, California. The town founder's adventurous life seems to have been the archetypal fulfilment of the American Dream's precept of being able to get everything if only you want it enough. Carl David, son of priest Carl Gottfried and Henrietta Weber, was born on February 18, 1814 in Steinwenden, in the Bavarian Palatinate. One year later it was occupied by the French. From 1815 onwards, his father worked as a deacon in Homburg. The boy attended school there until he was 12, and then switched to the Königliche Studienanstalt in Zweibrücken. After 1829 he was given private tuition for religious reasons, but showed little interest in theology – his father's wish – and instead began an apprenticeship with the Hamburg merchant Christian Scharpff. The political reality in his homeland corresponded very little with the liberal ideas that Carl had been taught by his parents, which is why in 1836 he and a cousin – possibly prompted by an uncle's letter – decided to visit the USA, the "Land of Freedom".

They sailed from Le Havre on the "McLellan" to New Orleans. While his cousin travelled on to see their relatives, Weber remained in the harbour city for a while. All his attempts to make a living failed, however. He also fell ill with yellow fever. After his convalescence he travelled to Texas, which had just separated from Mexico. Carl is believed to have taken part in the ensuing war. He then returned to New Orleans, where a restaurant venture was unsuccessful and he fell ill once again. In 1841 he boarded a ship to St. Louis, intending to go to Belleville to finally see his relatives. There he met a group of settlers planning to travel west. Without much hesitation, Weber joined the wagon train, which was known as the "Bidwell-Bartleson Party". At the beginning of November, after six months of weary marching they were the first to reach Mexican California via the land route. Weber, who had a letter of recommendation addressed to Johann August Sutter, founder of Sutter's Fort at Sacramento, travelled on to Sutter's ranch. Sutter vouched for "Carlos Maria Weber" to the Mexican authorities and hired him as a foreman. In the spring of 1842, Weber and the respected citizen William Gulnac co-founded a trading company in San José. They set up a corn-mill, ran a bakery and a smithy, mined for salt, made shoes and soap, and kept cattle and horses. Weber also opened a hotel. Gulnac turned out to be less than gifted at business, however, and Weber was not unhappy to dissolve their partnership on July 20, 1843. To buy land, Weber applied for Mexican citizenship, and officially received it on February 20, 1844. In 1843 Gulnac had bought 19,727 hectares of land, the "Rancho del Campo de los Franceses", from the Mexican government and, according to the sales contract, it had also been purchased for 11 further families. Gulnac's attempts to settle the "Campo de los Franceses" failed, however, and so he sold the land to Weber on April 3, 1845.

Meanwhile, the political situation in California was worsening. Power struggles and uprisings were undermining the Mexican government. War broke out with the USA in 1846 over Texas. Weber finally took the side of the United States, supporting them with his own troops and as an officer. On February 2, 1848 California became part of the USA. Weber's decision to change sides lost him a great deal of the trust he had built up among his Mexican business partners.

As a result, he left the running of the business to his manager, selling it to him entirely in 1849. He himself made a very adventurous decision: In August 1847, he moved to the "Campo de los Franceses" and started turning the area into a proper settlement, in order to attract settlers. Initially Weber called the place Tuleburg, but then renamed it Stockton in honour of the officer Robert F. Stockton. When gold was discovered nearby in January 1848, the stream of settlers turned into a torrent. Weber set off for the gold fields himself in the summer of 1848 together with a group of assistants, and worked there as a gold prospector and a merchant. Business boomed, and Weber founded the "Stockton Mining and Trading Company". In Germany, the newspapers wrote about the successful emigrant, prompting many people to follow his example. Stockton was the natural gateway to the southern goldfields, and quickly developed into the centre of the San Joaquin valley. Real estate prices rose rapidly. Weber devoted himself to developing the infrastructure and continued running a brisk business. He built himself a magnificent house surrounded by a large park, which soon became a popular local sight. In 1850 he became a Catholic, married Helen Murphy (1822–1895), and had three children with her: Charles Martin (1851–1912), Julia Helen (1853–1935) and Thomas Jefferson (1855–1892). IN the middle of the same year, Stockton was given civic status. Weber's claim to the land had its problems too, however: he had to defend it against squatters, and was also forced to prove his ownership to the U. S. Land Claims Commission under a law passed in 1851. The trial took a heavy personal and financial toll on him. The Californian economy slowed after the end of the Gold Rush, and this also hit Weber hard. On April 17, 1855 the Commission confirmed that the land was his property, but his opponents lodged an appeal against the decision. In 1856 Julius Dauber, a friend of his, noted in his diary: "When will this land actually become his property?" The United States government confirmed it irrevocably on May 2, 1861. Weber worked mainly as a landowner from now on. He raised the profile of "his" town by generously donating land for parks, churches, the courthouse and a fairground, and he also built a drainage canal and a wall to combat the flooding that often occurred in the wintertime. Carl David Weber died of pneumonia on May 4, 1881. By that time, Stockton already had over 14,000 inhabitants.

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