

The History of Olompali State Park California

Ever since I relocated to Sonoma County, California, just north of San Francisco, I wanted to visit **Olompali State Historic Park** in nearby Novato.

The park combines a beautiful natural setting with a unique and expansive historical timeline, starting with ancient Native America and ending with a hippie commune.

It is home to the oldest adobe house north of San Francisco. It was once a cattle ranch and hosted a private swim club, and eventually the Grateful Dead lived there.

Here is why Olompali is a must visit whether you are visiting Wine Country, traveling up Highway 101 and need to stretch your legs, or you are just a history/nature geek like me looking for an excuse to get out of the house and onto the trails.

Location

Olompali State Historic Park is located 35 miles north of San Francisco, about an hour drive, on Highway 101. It is located on the border of Sonoma and Marin County - 3 miles north of Novato, 30 minutes from Sonoma, and 45 minutes from Napa.

The History of Olompali

Native American - Coast Miwok

Olompali is the Coast Miwok word for "southern people" or "southern village."

The Coast Miwok people resided in this area as early as 6000 BCE. By 1400 CE, Olompali was one of the largest Native villages in the region. The ancient Coast Miwok community could claim 25 square miles of territory.

Today, Coast Miwok descendants are part of the Federated Indians of [Graton Rancheria](#), along with the Southern Pomo. The Rancheria is located about 20 minutes north of Olompali, with many tribal members residing throughout their ancestral homelands in Sonoma County.

Over 50,000 artifacts have been uncovered at the park, including the discovery of an English sixpence, which is dated to 1567. Archaeologists believe that this is evidence that the Coast Miwok may have come into contact with [Sir Francis Drake](#), or his people, when Drake landed on the Marin Coast in 1579 and explored the area.

The arrival of Europeans deeply impacted the Coast Miwok community - traditional food sources became scarce (from acorn trees to farming to cattle), causing starvation, and the Europeans also brought disease with them, which led to widespread illness and death within the Coast Miwok community.

European contact also led many Coast Miwok people to convert to Christianity, including Camilo Ynitia, who became the last chief of the Coast Miwok in 1834. He lived at Olompali.

The original adobe built by Camilo Ynitia, the oldest house in the Bay Area. It is behind a protective fence and wall to avoid vandalism or environmental damage.

In 1843, Ynitia would become the only northern California Native American to be awarded a Mexican land grant. He was granted almost 8,900 acres of land with the support of General Mariano Vallejo. This land included Olompali.

His historic adobe, built in 1837, still stands (albeit much in ruins) and is the oldest adobe house north of San Francisco.

As if the history of Olompali can't get anymore fascinating: in 1846, a skirmish took place, as part of the [Bear Flag Revolt](#), at Olompali. One man was killed and two were wounded.

Ynitia sold his property for \$5,000 in 1852 to James Black, who would provide us the next chapter at Olompali.

Ranch Era

James Black gave Olompali to his daughter, Mary, upon her marriage to dentist Galen Burdell, in 1863. The couple came to live at Olompali in 1865.

The couple transformed Olompali into a working ranch, with cattle and an orchard. At Olompali you can see barns, cottages, a blacksmith shop, a Victorian garden, and rock walls built by Chinese laborers.

Mary Burdell died in 1900 and she left Olompali to her children, James and Mabel. James bought Mabel's share of the property. James built a mansion in 1911 (see picture below).

The Burdell's sold Olompali to the University of San Francisco in 1943.

Modern era

When the University of San Francisco brought the property they used it as a Jesuit retreat.

Olompali then became a dairy farm, followed by a private swimming club.

In 1966, the Grateful Dead moved onto the property. At Olompali, they practiced and performed concerts. Rock stars like Grace Slick and Janis Joplin spent time at the property. Olompali is featured on the back cover of the Grateful Dead's 1969 album *Aoxomoxoa*.

A hippie commune, the Chosen Family, moved onto the property in 1967. At Olompali, the Chosen Family made bread that they gave away in San Francisco to their fellow hippies during the Summer of Love. They are considered one of the first hippie communes in the San Francisco Bay Area and they hold an annual reunion at the park.

They resided on the property until 1969, when an electrical fire broke out, destroying the mansion and thankfully not harming anyone.

The Chosen Family and the Dead left behind their own archaeological record - about 100 vinyl records were found, as well a reel-to-reel player, ashtrays, a pool table, and even go-go boots.

Items are on display in the visitor center. (Funny enough, you drive past the Birkenstock headquarters en route to the park...)

Wild Olompali

Olompali has not only archaeological and historical discoveries around every corner, but also a vast array of natural beauty to discover.

On my visit, I hiked the Loop Trail (3.1 miles, about 2 hours), which starts at the parking lot. The beginning of the trail takes you past the Burdell Home, Mansion and the Ynitia's adobe. After passing the adobe, you'll see a collection of funky trees to your left - many are exotic, planted by Mary Burdell after she visited Asia. Trees include a Chinese Chestnut and Japanese Morning Cypress.

A small wooden bridge is located just past the dairy barn. A fairly flat, yet slowly inclining trail leads you through beautiful grasslands and views of the wetlands.

About halfway up it gets steeper, so take a break at one of the many benches dotting the landscape and enjoy the views. Get up close with giant manzanita trees and countless wildflowers. Perhaps you will be as lucky as I was and you will spot a deer.

During my hike I saw 12 species of birds, with Acorn Woodpeckers being particularly rowdy. You'll also see vultures, hawks, jays, and more.

Continue on the Loop Trail, higher up into the hills. To your right you'll see the recreated Coast Miwok village in the valley below. Shortly thereafter, you'll have the option to turn onto the Burdell Trail - it is a one way trail that leads to a stone wall built by Chinese laborers in the 1880s. It's about 2 miles round trip. I did not take this trail, but you can learn more about it [here](#).

Eventually you'll walk alongside Olompali Creek, which was trickling when I was visiting, and a reservoir. The trail starts its decline and returns you to level ground at the recreated Coast Miwok village. I took a stroll through the ethnobotanical plant garden, which features various species of native plants that served as medicine, food, and tools for the Coast Miwok people that once resided here.

The Loop trail heads through the recreated village and back to the parking lot, passing the historic barns and homes.

Final thoughts

Olompali State Historic Park has a little bit of everything - from ancient to modern history, unique architecture, great bird and animal watching, Victorian gardens and orchards, and spectacular views of the surrounding countryside.

I soon forgot I was so close to one of the busiest traffic corridors in the country, Highway 101.

The visitor center features a small museum and sales area, all of which support the preservation of the park. Signage dots the landscape near historic sites, which inform visitors about everything from hippie bread-making techniques to the architecture found on the property.

Olompali is a hidden gem amidst an area that is widely celebrated for wine and luxury living.

Take a break and breathe in Olompali State Historic Park, your mind, body and soul will be glad you did.

Take note

Olompali State Historic Park is open Wednesday through Sunday, 9AM-5PM. The visitor center, old buildings and the Coast Miwok village are all ADA accessible. You cannot enter most of the buildings due to preservation reasons, but you can look inside from plastic covered windows (worth a peak, especially for the paint jobs the hippies left behind). Bring a credit card to pay for parking (\$8) and cash to make a donation at the visitor center. No dogs or bikes are allowed.

Take action

Olompali State Historic Park is located just north of Novato, California. Visit California State Parks' website for more [information](#) and also visit The Olompali People's [website](#), the nonprofit organization that maintains the park, staffs it with volunteers, and hosts special events. For more information call (707) 762-9715. Also check out [Visit Novato](#) to learn more about other things to do in Novato and the area surrounding Olompali.