

# VISALIA TIMES-DELTA

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## Take a tour of The Lofts at Fort Visalia in downtown

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By: Donna Orozco



Rick and Susan Mangini are shown by a newly created diorama at the Fort Visalia Heritage Room in Visalia, Calif., Monday, Dec. 4, 2023, which was the old lumberyard and the original site of Fort Visalia, the first European settlement that started the town. Gary Kazanjian / Visalia Times-Delta

In December, Self Help Enterprises finished its housing development known as The Lofts at Fort Visalia.

Suppose you wonder why it was given such an interesting name. In that case, you'll have a chance to find out, along with such facts as who Visalia was named for and why was the rowdy frontier downtown area called "Spanishtown" when Visalia Heritage hosts its first quarterly history event on Saturday, Feb. 24.

Visalia Heritage, whose mission is to preserve Visalia's historic buildings and resources, became very active last year, opening the Fort Visalia Heritage Room at The Lofts and completing its downtown walking tour of historic buildings. It was also gifted land to begin plans for building a cultural center museum, which has been a long-time goal.

Members had a chance to tour two historic homes during its holiday party. Visalia Heritage is planning regular events and tours for the public to learn more about Visalia, the oldest town between Los Angeles and Stockton.

"We want to engage more people in our fascinating history. Visalia is the largest town in our area. Yet, we are about the only one that doesn't have a museum to show off and preserve that history,"

said Walter Diesler, Visalia Heritage president. "We will need everyone's support to make our dream a reality."

## **Fort Visalia**

Visalia Heritage thought it only natural to kick off its first event on the spot where Visalia began, Fort Visalia. Local historian Terry Ommen will take participants through its history.

Here's a taste of what he will be talking about.

"Fort Visalia was actually Visalia's first neighborhood back in 1852. The first settlers built the stockade-like structure for protection from the local Native People. The settlers lived inside the fort walls at night, and during the day, they would farm the land nearby. After a time, they determined that the fort's protection wasn't needed, so they built homes and other buildings nearby, and the fort was abandoned.

"As more people arrived, the area around the old fort became known as 'Spanishtown,' frequently portrayed as one of the toughest parts of Visalia with bordellos, saloons, and dance halls. The Spalding Lumber Co. came in later and began the many years of lumber sales, including Copeland Lumber on the old fort site.

"For many years, the old lumber buildings sat vacant. The city of Visalia bought the site and eventually let the Arts Consortium occupy the area, hold events there, and have artists fill the walls with murals. Self Help Enterprises thought the site perfect to put low-income housing, and in honor of its history, they called their development The Lofts at Fort Visalia.

"Prior to construction, archaeological work was completed on the site, including the use of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) equipment. A few artifacts were found, which will be displayed at the event. Guests will be able to tour the Fort Visalia Heritage Room, which has a scale model of the fort, and look at the historical plaques placed at the entrance of the building."

## **Music at the fort**

Luckily for historians, Edgar Reynolds, who helped build the fort, returned to Visalia in 1915 and told the locals where the fort was located and how it was built.

He also told them, "...a dance floor was constructed from puncheon timbers, and the settlers amused themselves in the evenings by dancing to the music of an old fiddle owned by one member of the party."

To bring back a feeling of history, local fiddler Tim Johnson will kick off the event with fiddle music. Johnson started playing the fiddle at age 7 when he found an old violin under his father's bed. He played for many years with the Sons of the San Joaquin. He also plays classical violin with the Sequoia Symphony and teaches music for Visalia Unified. His albums are available online.

The event is free and open to the public.

## **How to attend**

What: Fort Visalia: Where Visalia Began & Tour of the New Heritage Museum

When: 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 24. Fiddling music begins at 1:30

Where: The Lofts at Fort Visalia, 340 E. Oak St.

Information: (559) 972-4872, [www.visaliaheritage.org](http://www.visaliaheritage.org)