

## *Who Was James Rutter?*



## **James Rutter and the Flame Tokay**

By [Elizabeth Pinkerton](#)

This article first appeared in the [Elk Grove Citizen](#) Newspaper  
on Wednesday, September 12, 1984

Used with permission of the Author

How fortunate for the children of the south Sacramento area that the 7-8 school located in Florin was given the name of James Rutter. In the story of early day Sacramento pioneers, the contributions of James Rutter, an English carpenter, are both unique and noteworthy. As one of the first agriculturists of the south area, Rutter was the first grape grower in Sacramento County, the first person to raise Tokay grapes in California, and besides that, he had the first irrigation pumping system in the state. It is only right and proper that James Rutter, Florin's famous fruit grower, should be remembered by generations of school children.

James Rutter came to America from England in 1849 at the age of 22. A carpenter by trade, he soon secured work in New York City, but he must have heard the cry of "Gold on the American River" as it was shouted through the streets of New York. With the news of the California gold rush ringing in his ears; he decided to go west, as did countless other young men, in search of the glittery gold.

Love and romance along the Mississippi River, however, slowed the trip of the adventurous young carpenter as he tarried through the frontier towns of Illinois. In October of 1851, James Rutter married Tomasine Pemberthy, also a native of Cornwall, England. The young couple set off across the plains with an ox team in the company of 20 wagons and 60 people bound for California, the land of golden opportunities.

Their wagon train passed through the Humboldt Sink and Carson Valley by summer's end, and they entered California through Echo Summit, now Highway 50. The honeymooning couple settled at Diamond Springs where James found carpentry work in the booming gold camp of Hangtown (now Placerville). The mines were in full swing along the rich banks of the American River, and the camps were lively places, but probably not a proper environment for the young English bride.

Before long, the Rutters traveled on to Sacramento where there was plenty of work in the new city rising on the banks of the Sacramento. The devastating fire of 1852 set Rutter's plans back a bit, particularly with the loss of his carpentry tools, but he started anew and was one of those who rebuilt the city after the fire. At \$10 a day, Rutter's wages were a small fortune in a time when a dollar a day was considered a good wage.

After six years of carpentry and working for others, Rutter longed for a place of his own, somewhat removed from the hustle and bustle of the young, growing city. A place was found about eight miles from Sacramento - 200 acres not far from Upper Stockton Road, the busy highway that connected the two major cities of the gold trade, Stockton and Sacramento (now Highway 99). The Rutter ranch was plains land, part of the area known as "the meadows" that rose gently from the Sacramento River to the foothills of the east. There were few neighbors and no one could have guessed that a hundred years later, the city of Sacramento would spread out to cover the farm lands of the ranch.

The ranch was excellent for a young man eager to try his luck at growing fruit. Nothing had been raised on the soil before; Spanish cattle grazed on it when the Rutters first came there to live in January 1858. Water was easily available, only eight feet from the surface.

In the first year, Rutter planted 600 peach trees. His high hopes were destroyed by grasshoppers as they nibbled away at the tender little trees. Only 158 of them survived, but Rutter gamely replanted them and they grew well the second year. In 1864 when a bad drought forced Rutter to experiment with a watering system, his peaches were excellent and commanded exceedingly high prices for there were only a few on the market. Rutter was able to pay off the mortgage of his ranch with only half of his proceeds.

In the first year on the ranch, Rutter also planted grapes - mostly Muscats, and he kept increasing the vineyard each year. When the railroad was completed in 1868, the first grapes shipped to eastern markets were from the Rutter ranch.

The Flame Tokay grape, which later became the mainstay of the Florin grape growing industry, was the first raised by James Rutter; he also was the first to ship raisins out of the country, and he was a pioneer agriculturist in the raising of wine grapes and strawberries. His efforts resulted in the eventual status of Florin as the grape and strawberry capital of the state for many years. From a half dozen carloads in 1880, the Florin shipments increased quickly to 133 carloads in 1893. Most of these were Flame Tokays, excellently matured in the hot August and September climate of Florin and the surrounding region.

"God has done only one thing for the people of Florin," wrote one scribe of the early twentieth century; "He has made the sun very hot." No wonder the beautiful Flame Tokay reddened and ripened so perfectly, and most important, earlier than anywhere else in the state. That little jump on the market is what made Florin famous. The great, fuzzy bunches, rich in grapey aroma, were picked on trays and carried to the busy packing sheds where they were rushed away to tempt the pocketbooks of eager buyers from Seattle to Chicago and New York City.

James Rutter, the man who started it all, was awarded wondrous prizes for his grapes all over the United States. In 1872, he received awards in New York for his Muscats, Alexandria and Flaming Tokay grapes; the next year, the American Pomological Society in Boston awarded him a silver medal for the best collection of grapes west of the Rocky Mountains. There were numerous others including hundreds of dollars in premiums from California State Fairs from 1878 to 1890.

The Rutters had one daughter, Agnes, who married Leonard Landsborough. The Rutter home was a beautiful Victorian structure widely know as a Florin landmark. In addition to the many commercial fruits raised on the ranch, the gardens around the home were filled with a variety of plantings, some quite rare at the time such as persimmons, date palms, mission and white figs, quinces, English walnuts, eucalyptus, pepper trees, white oleander, mulberry, poplar and pomolo. Many varieties of myrtle, flowering quince, privet, osage and flowering pomegranate made the gardens a showplace of color and grandeur all year around.

Rutter was an experimenter who never tired in his search for creative methods of growing plants. His ingenious mind was quick to find solutions which had eluded others who tried to do the same. He had a unique understanding of the soil, climate and other conditions needed for various plants. Though his ideas were looked upon skeptically at first, eventually his methods of cultivation, irrigation and horticulture were widely followed.

"If at first you don't succeed try, try again," might well have been James Rutter's motto. It's a good one for young people today, too, as they begin another school year, especially those twelve hundred who go to the school that bears the famous agriculturist's name. And if anyone should wonder who was the most famous fruit grower of Florin who also thought well enough of education that he willingly served as a trustee of the local schools, it is hoped that the school children of 1984 will know the answer. It was James Rutter, the carpenter from England, who gave up the search for the glittery gold to spend his lifetime with the gold of Florin's grapes. When he didn't succeed, he didn't give up; he tried and tried again, and his claim to fame is the Flame Tokay.

**Elizabeth Pinkerton was Principal at James Rutter Middle School from 1984 through 1987**