



Sumpter Valley Dredge State Heritage Area

Visitors to Sumpter Valley are greeted by a strange sight: long, narrow water channels cut into the earth surrounded by piles of rock and gravel. One of the machines responsible for the bizarre landscape rests at the north end of the valley, just outside the city of Sumpter: the Sumpter Valley Gold Dredge.



Gold!

Gold was discovered in Oregon's Blue Mountains and nearby Sumpter Valley in 1862. Prospectors—many of whom were veterans of the 1848 California Gold Rush—arrived in droves and scoured the land for the precious metal.

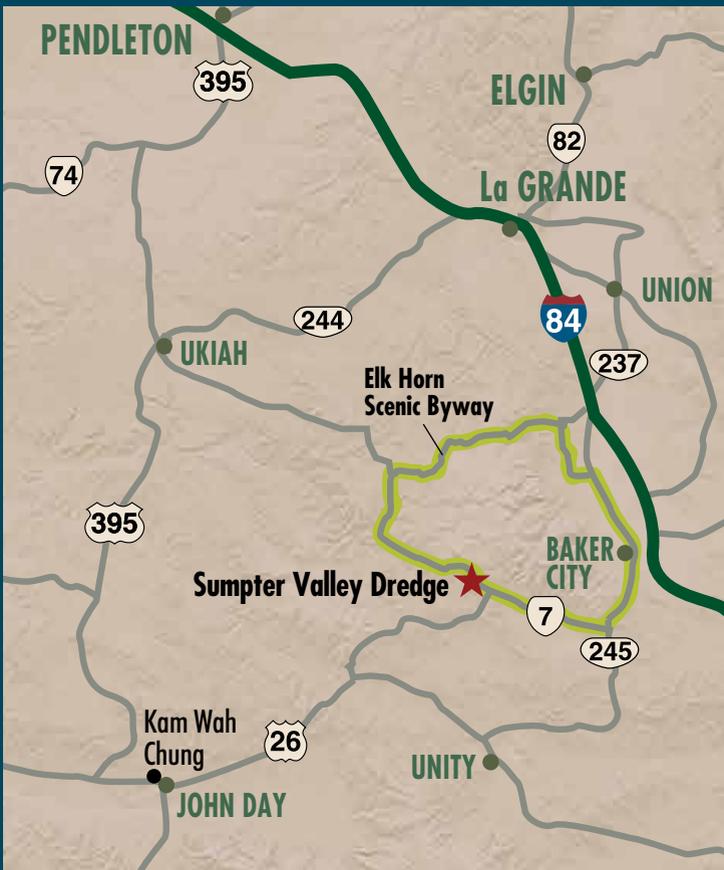
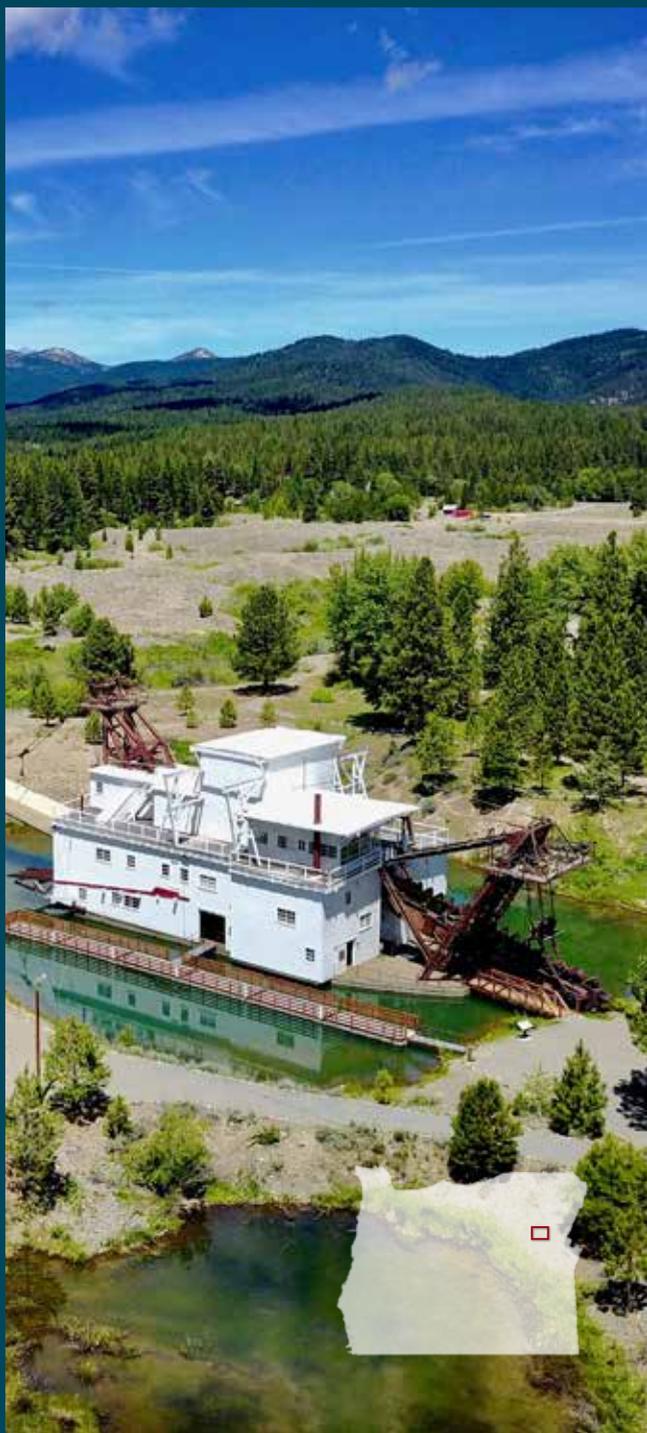
By the early 1900s, the “rush” had dwindled to a trickle; all of the easily accessible gold had long been discovered in the mountains and valley. However, gold hunters knew tiny flakes of gold remained buried deep in the valley riverbed. Extracting it by hand would have been too costly and time-consuming, so they enlisted a machine to help: the dredge.

Three dredges were built in Sumpter Valley in 1912, 1915 and 1935 respectively. Each had the same basic design: a long row of front buckets that dug through the ground and steadily dumped soil, rocks and other material into the heart of the dredge. Once inside, the earth would pass through a series of sorting mechanisms that strained out the tiny flakes of gold. The leftover dirt and rocks—called tailings— were dumped behind the dredge. Piles of tailings still litter the valley landscape today.

Gold dredges come to Sumpter Valley

Dredges had been used since antiquity to level off or deepen waterways, and were well-suited for large-scale gold mining operations. A dredge's high yield and low operating costs made them promising investments for prospectors.

The dredges were assembled on the Powder River but they weren't bound to it. Their floating design allowed them to strike out perpendicularly into the ancient gold-rich riverbed. As their front buckets cut new channels in the earth, river water would flow forward into the new channels, keeping the dredge afloat and moving forward.



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The two early dredges were stopped and disassembled by their owners in the mid-1920s, but the 1935 dredge crisscrossed the valley until the early 1950s. Mounting pressure from local citizens and skyrocketing operating costs finally forced the dredge company to permanently stop the machine in August 1954. It's estimated the dredge unearthed more than \$4 million in gold during its lifetime.

The dredge reborn

The 1935 dredge—the only one left in the valley—remained where it was after being abandoned in 1954. Weather and neglect took their toll on the wood and steel dredge, threatening to damage the structure beyond repair.

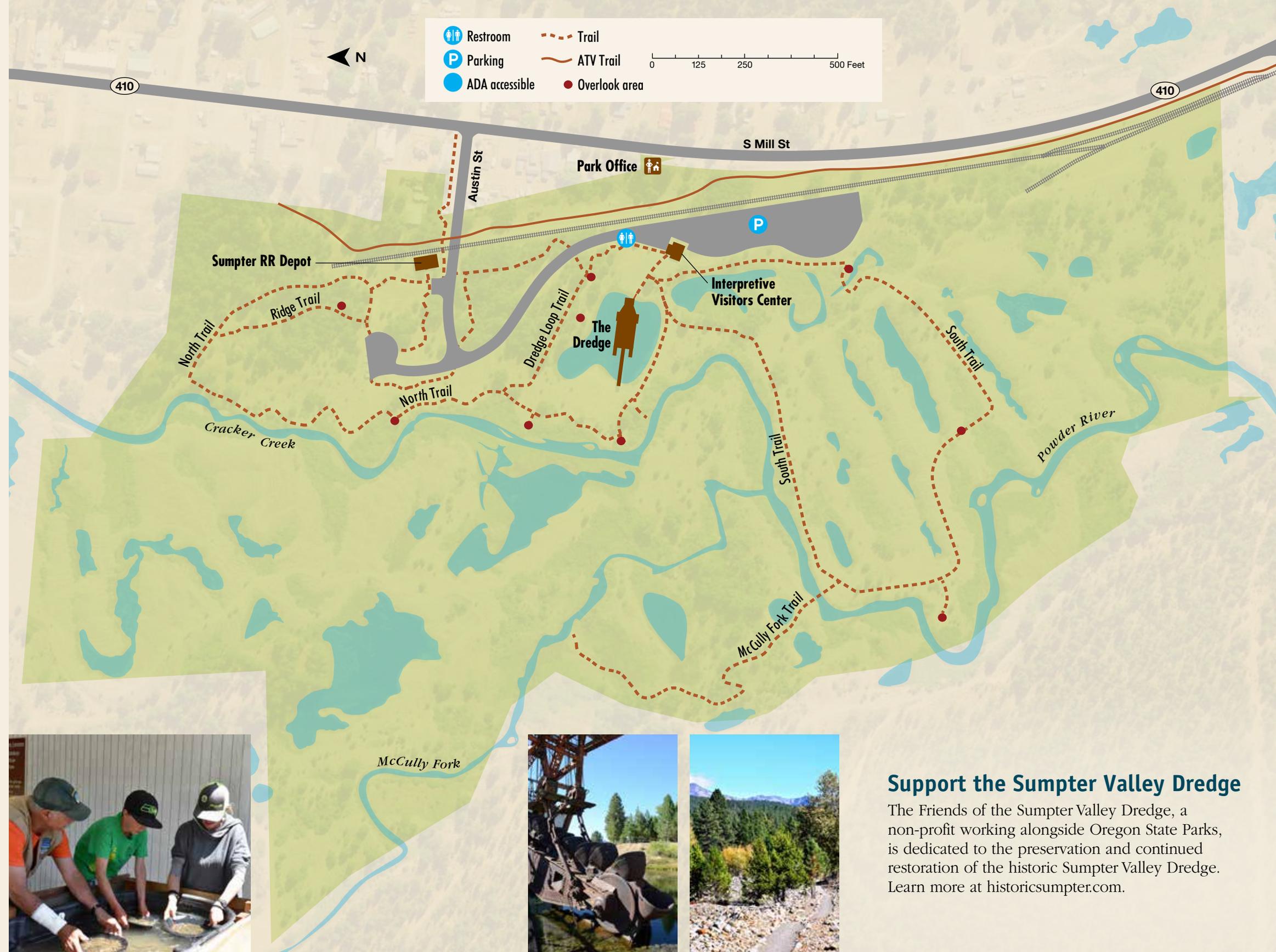
The dredge languished until the early 1990s, when local Sumpter residents took a renewed interest in preserving this important part of their history. Their enthusiasm caught the attention of Oregon State Parks and after a few years of preparation, Sumpter Valley State Heritage Area opened to the public in spring 1994.

Visiting the dredge

Today, the dredge is the centerpiece of a park that encompasses several acres of Sumpter Valley. The park is open daily 7 a.m. - 7 p.m., although hours may vary slightly as the seasons change. Visitors are welcome aboard the dredge May - October. Explore the decks yourself or take part in a ranger-led tour; guided tours are held on weekends only.

About 1.5 miles of trails wind through the park wetlands. Stop at one of several viewing platforms for a glimpse into how nature has reclaimed the valley over the past 50 years.

Rangers present gold panning demonstrations on weekends. Visitors can pan for their own gold too! Panning lessons are free; visitors may purchase gold flakes they find for a small fee.



Support the Sumpter Valley Dredge

The Friends of the Sumpter Valley Dredge, a non-profit working alongside Oregon State Parks, is dedicated to the preservation and continued restoration of the historic Sumpter Valley Dredge. Learn more at historicsumpter.com.