The strongest evidence for early slot machines is not a modern screen that looks old-fashioned, nor a story repeated in a casino brochure. It is the combination of surviving machines, contemporary records and carefully documented places associated with their manufacture and use. Each kind of evidence answers a different question: an object can show how a mechanism was built; a document can help date or identify it; and a marked site can connect a machine's history to a particular workshop or city.

That distinction matters in **San Francisco slot machine history**, especially in accounts of inventor **Charles Fey**. Fey is widely associated with the three-reel Liberty Bell machine, developed in San Francisco in the 1890s. But a convincing history should say not only what the machine looked like, but what a player did, what the mechanism did in response, and what the evidence can—and cannot—establish.

Start with the object, not the legend

Early gambling machines are often discussed as if there were one simple, continuous line from a nineteenth-century machine to every modern slot. The surviving record is messier. Machines differed in their construction, symbols, payout arrangements and ways of recording a result. Some early devices used playing-card imagery and were closer to automated poker games than to later reel machines. The important historical task is to identify the particular machine and its operating arrangement, rather than treating every cabinet with spinning symbols as the same technology.

A surviving machine can provide unusually concrete evidence. Its casing, reels, handle, pay indicators and internal mechanism can be inspected. Wear may show where hands repeatedly touched the cabinet; repairs or replaced parts may reveal that it was maintained and used. But an object by itself does not automatically settle its date, maker or original location. Those claims need to be tested against other evidence, such as photographs, catalogues, patents, business records, contemporary reporting and a reliable ownership history.. Pretty simple.

What the machine can show

- **Player action:** whether the user pulled a handle, inserted a coin, pressed a control or interacted in another way.
- **Visible result:** how symbols or indicators displayed the outcome.
- **Mechanical response:** whether the device used physical reels, gears, springs, stops or another arrangement to produce that result.
- **Payment or recording:** how winnings were indicated, paid out, or otherwise settled.
- **Later alteration:** whether parts appear to have been repaired, replaced or modified after manufacture.

These are related but separate questions. A row of fruit symbols is a visual convention; it does not, on its own, tell us how the machine worked. The mechanism is what connects a player's action to the result.

Charles Fey and the San Francisco connection

Charles Fey occupies a central place in accounts of the early three-reel slot machine. He was a San Francisco mechanic and manufacturer, and the Liberty Bell is commonly dated to the mid-1890s. The familiar account is that three reels and a simple set of symbols made the outcome easier to read than on some earlier, more complicated machines. That is a useful summary, but it should not be mistaken for a complete technical description of every early machine called a Liberty Bell.



Fey's story is especially valuable because it can be connected to a real place. **California State Parks Historical Landmark 937** is associated with Fey's workshop and the development of the Liberty Bell in San Francisco. The landmark gives visitors a fixed point for a history that might otherwise float free of its industrial setting. It links the machine to a workshop, a city and a period of mechanical manufacture.

A landmark, however, is evidence of commemoration and place, not a working demonstration of a machine. It does not by itself prove the precise date of every surviving example, establish that a particular machine was operated at that address, or reveal the full details of its internal workings. For those claims, researchers need to compare the site's historical interpretation with physical objects and documentary records. That careful distinction makes the landmark more useful, not less: it tells us what kind of claim the site can support.

Look for converging evidence

The most persuasive case for an early machine usually comes from several kinds of evidence that support one another. A period photograph may show a cabinet in use, but the image might not reveal its internal mechanism. A surviving object may have working parts, but uncertain provenance can make its date difficult to establish. A patent can describe a design, but a patent drawing does not prove that a particular machine was manufactured or operated in a particular venue.

Evidence What it can establish What it cannot establish alone Surviving machine Materials, construction, controls, visible indicators and, where intact, mechanical operation Exact date, original venue or uninterrupted history of ownership Patent or technical description A proposed or protected design and the inventor's stated arrangement That the design was built, sold or used exactly as described Photograph or contemporary report Appearance, setting, public presentation or reported use at a particular time Details hidden from view, including the full mechanism and often the exact model Landmark or historical site A recognised connection between a place and a historical account The operation, date or provenance of an individual machine Live stream of equipment How a visible, present-day machine is handled and displayed in real time How an early machine worked or how it was used historically Animated reels How a digital interface represents a spin and presents a result Physical reels, mechanical stops or historic operation

This comparison is particularly important when modern media are used to explain old gambling equipment. A live stream can show a physical machine in use and document the sequence of visible actions. It may let viewers see a handle being pulled, reels turning and an outcome appearing. Yet unless the equipment is identified and its date and provenance are established, the stream is evidence of that machine's present-day operation—not proof of how a nineteenth-century machine worked.



Animated reels are an interface, not a mechanical record

Animated reels on digital slot interfaces can help explain the visual grammar of a game: symbols appear in rows, a spin begins, and a result is displayed. They are useful for studying how players are guided to look and act. But the animation does not establish that physical reels are turning behind the screen. It may represent an outcome generated by software, with motion added to make the result legible and engaging.

For object-led history, the distinction is simple: *what the player sees* is not necessarily *what the machine is doing mechanically*. A digital animation can imitate the appearance of spinning reels without containing reels at all. Likewise, a historic machine's visible symbols do not tell us the precise logic of its payout or internal stopping mechanism. historyfiles.co.uk To establish that, we need access to the actual mechanism, an accurate technical record, or both.

Modern visualisations can still be helpful in exhibitions and teaching. They can demonstrate a sequence that is hard to see inside a closed cabinet, or let visitors compare different arrangements. They should be labelled as interpretations or simulations, however, rather than presented as footage of historic operation. The label is part of the evidence: it tells the visitor what is being shown and what is being reconstructed.

Gameplay is shaped by the equipment

A machine does not merely display a game; its physical design organises the player's actions. A handle invites a pull. A coin slot makes payment a distinct step. A window focuses attention on the reels, while a paytable or set of marked symbols explains which visible combinations matter. The dimensions and placement of controls determine how a person stands, reaches and waits for a result.

Early machines also had to make outcomes understandable and manageable. A result needed to be visible to the player, and the operator needed a way to recognise and settle it. Depending on the machine, payment might

involve a mechanism, an attendant or another arrangement. These practical requirements—visibility, handling and recording results—are not minor details. They help explain why the equipment took the form it did.

Visibility, handling and recording

- **Visibility:** The player must be able to see the relevant symbols or indicators. The operator may also need to verify a result.
- **Handling:** Controls, coin openings and access panels shape both play and servicing. Wear can provide clues about repeated contact, though it must be interpreted cautiously.
- **Recording:** A machine or venue needs some way to recognise the outcome and handle payment. This may be built into the device or involve staff and external records.

Looking at a cabinet from the front is therefore only part of the investigation. A photograph can document its outward appearance, but it may omit the coin mechanism, the payout arrangement or the operator's position. Even a clear image of a machine in a room may show only part of the equipment. Researchers should record what is in frame—and note what has been cut off, obscured or left outside the picture.

Tables, layouts and marked areas are functional equipment

Machines rarely exist in isolation. Their placement in a saloon, arcade or gambling room affects how people approach them, observe one another and move between games. A table, counter or marked floor area may help organise play, manage payment or distinguish a player's space from an operator's. These are functional parts of the gaming environment, even when they are not inside the cabinet.

This point is especially familiar from roulette. The wheel alone is not the whole apparatus: the betting layout, its numbered and marked areas, and the placement of the wheel and players all shape what people can do. I've seen this play out countless times: learned this lesson the hard way.. The same caution applies to slot-machine history. A machine photographed without its surroundings may tell us about a cabinet, but not how it fitted into a venue's circulation, payment practices or social setting. The layout can reveal whether the device was positioned for individual use, supervised operation or public visibility.

For researchers, plans, photographs and descriptions of rooms can therefore be as revealing as close-ups of machinery. They may show where attendants stood, how users queued or watched, and whether results were easy for others to verify. Those details help reconstruct gameplay as a series of actions in a space, rather than as an abstract image of symbols turning.

So, what is the most concrete evidence?

The strongest evidence is a well-provenanced early machine whose physical construction can be examined, supported by contemporary documentation and a credible connection to its maker, date or place of use. For the San Francisco story, the association with Charles Fey and California State Parks Historical Landmark 937 provides an important geographical and historical framework. It becomes more compelling when read alongside surviving objects, period images and technical records, each checked for what it actually shows.

Live streams and animated reels have a different role. A live stream can document the visible handling of a particular physical machine today. An animated interface can show how a digital game presents movement and results. Neither should be used as a substitute for evidence of early mechanical operation. They are records of present-day demonstration and visual design, not direct witnesses to the past.

The best account, then, is object-led but not object-only. It asks what survives, how securely it can be dated, what a player could see and touch, how a result was handled, and how the machine sat within a larger room and system of play. That approach gives early US slot machines their proper material history: not simply a tale of spinning symbols, but an investigation of mechanisms, people, places and the equipment that organised gambling.