

Captain Waterman finds his land legs

By Jerry Bowen

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This is part four of the continuing account of Captain Robert "Bully" Waterman's journey to Solano County. Look for the next installment on July 13.

In my last column I stated, "... Waterman was exonerated of all blame for the deaths of his crew. In addition, he was commended for his nautical skills in bringing the Challenge safely into San Francisco"... without the loss of a spar, sail or piece of rigging."

While he was exonerated of all blame, he and his first mate, Douglass were still fined; Waterman \$400 for beating John Smith for refusing to work and Douglass \$50 for flogging Michael Gallagher with a rope.

Waterman made his stake in Solano County shortly after arriving in California on Aug. 8, 1850.

On the 29th, Archibald A. Ritchie purchased Suisun Rancho from Mariano G. Vallejo and his wife for \$10,000 cash and a \$40,000 mortgage. Exceptions to this purchase were portions of the rancho, which Vallejo previously had sold to Landy Alford, Nathan Barbour, Daniel Berry and others. On the same day, Waterman purchased an undivided one-third interest in the Suisun rancho from Ritchie for the sum of \$16,666.66.

To this point, the history of Waterman is easy to follow, but once he settled in California, his trail becomes confusing. The main source used for many years is a book written by David Weir, "That fabulous Captain Waterman." In it, he had access to and used many references. Unfortunately, when compared to the official records of Solano and San Francisco counties, there are many differences, as we shall see.

A survey of the Suisun Rancho Grant was made in 1842, but was lost in 1846 when the archives of the alcalde of Sonoma were partially destroyed.

In 1851, Jasper O'Farrell, the state surveyor, was hired to accomplish a new survey of Rancho Suisun for Ritchie and was filed in 1852.

One thing to keep in mind, up to a certain period of time, is that Waterman owned an "undivided interest" in the Suisun Rancho. In other words, he did not own any specific

identifiable portion of the land. Waterman's history becomes muddled even further as can be seen by numerous stories from several other authors.

Often, one author will write his version of history based on what a previous author wrote without checking official records. If the first author quoted was wrong, incorrect history is perpetuated. To add to the confusion, many official records have been lost.

Much confusion existed over the years as to when and how many houses were built by Waterman in Solano County and when he lived here. By going through the official records including deeds and tax assessments at the Solano County Archives, it can be determined that Waterman owned no property outright until 1858.

With this in mind, Weir was incorrect when he stated, "One roadway lined with eucalyptus seedlings planted by Captain Waterman and his cowhand-farmers employed on his large ranch, leads from the county road to the big ranch house built by Waterman in 1852."

According to a Historical Archaeological Assessment of the Serpas Ranch made by Holmann & Associates in 1999, Weir stated in his book, "Waterman constructed, or at least began construction of a house on property within the Suisun Rancho in 1852. Waterman's wife, Cordelia, arrived from Connecticut the same year and at some point the following year (1853) the Waterman's house was completed. This house was a three-story, twelve-room house," (Weir 1957, pp. 76-77)

When I checked Weir's book I found no such statement, so it is anybody's guess where Holmann & Associates found that information. Note: Waterman's two-story, Tengage house originally had only four rooms and was completed in 1859, as we shall see.

One of the homes that Waterman and his wife Cordelia, lived in was on Angel Island. In his book, "Miwoks to Missiles, a History of Angel Island" by John Soennichsen, he states "Captain Waterman was Port Warden and Inspector of Hulls for San Francisco in the 1850s. At one time his residence was a building near Point Blunt at the southeastern extremity of Angel Island." He went on to say that "... the dwelling contained seven rooms and was built by the Pacific Mail Company." How long Waterman occupied the house is unclear but it gained a notorious reputation in later years as "Camp Rafferty," a haven for Civil War deserters.

In the meantime Waterman, who apparently was living either on Angel Island or in San Francisco, established the original town of Cordelia, naming it after his wife, about a half-mile from its present location on the north side of Interstate 80. It gained a post office by 1854. Waterman believed this site at the head of Cordelia Slough and its creek

would be the best place for a town with facilities to ship farm products. Cordelia Creek was close to the old Sacramento-Benicia road that led to the upper Suisun and Green Valleys. Waterman felt there was little risk in his enterprise, since he was under the impression that he held title to all other possible sites and could exclude any competitors.

Josiah Wing made his own bid in the area about the same time as Waterman established Cordelia. The original terms of the Suisun Grant specified only dry land up to the edge of the marshy areas as the boundaries of the Rancho Suisun. Wing discovered a piece of property that was an island separate and within the grant surrounded by marsh, which did not legally belong to Waterman because of those original terms.

Wing established an “embarcadero” on his “island” in competition with Cordelia. Wing then constructed a wharf and a warehouse on the embarcadero. These facilities were expanded; a general store and other buildings went up. Its location allowed it to draw on a larger region for commercial and shipping activity since it was five miles closer to the lush farming areas of Solano County than Cordelia. As settlement extended eastward from Rockville in the late 1850s, much of the Suisun Valley trade came to Wing’s facility and in 1854, it became known as Suisun City when its streets were laid out.

Wing’s facilities drew trade away and when news that the railroad would bypass the town of Cordelia it began to lose its residents and buildings to the current location, then known as Bridgeport and named after Cordelia Waterman’s birthplace. Later, it was renamed Cordelia when the post office refused to allow the name of Bridgeport.

On July 9, 1856, Waterman’s partner, A.A. Ritchie was killed in a buggy accident when deer frightened the horses or after suffering a seizure, depending on whose version you read. By the end of the same month, Robert Waterman and Ritchie’s widow, Martha Ritchie, were appointed administrators of Ritchie’s estate. Ritchie’s widow gave power of attorney over the remaining portions of land on the Suisun Rancho that had not already been sold.

So in 1856, even though he was co-administrator with Ritchie’s widow of the Ritchie estate and had power of attorney, according to official records, Waterman still owned no property outright until 1858 in the Rancho Suisun.

In my next column I’ll attempt to unravel more of the confused history of this very interesting man, Robert H. Waterman.

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