

The rise and decline of Soscol City

By Jerry Bowen

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In my two previous articles I discussed the history of the area from the intersection of Soscol Ferry Road and Highway 29 to the Napa River.

The "Old Ferry Road," now called Soscol Ferry Road, ran east from the ferry at Soscol, through Thompson's orchards, to intersect with the county road near the existing Soscol House, enabling transfers between the various modes of transportation.

Nearby Napa City was growing and the city of Soscol shared in the prosperity as traffic increased. Road and river traffic grew from Vallejo, Benicia, Sonoma, San Francisco and Petaluma via Soscol to Napa. The town laid out by Mariano Vallejo in his Soscol Grant was increasingly becoming an important link for various types of transportation.

In 1852, H. Lutten established a ferry providing a shorter route to Sonoma across the Napa River at Soscol City landing. It was located about a mile west of the intersection of today's Highway 29 and Soscol Ferry Road. Although very little is known about the craft, it did carry stagecoaches across the river. At most, it was probably not more than a flat bottom barge pulled by hand along a rope. The steamers stopped at the Soscol ferry to transfer cargo and passengers for stage connections.

As road and river traffic increased with the growth of Napa, the small community developed between the ferry crossing and the county road and provided services for the many travelers. Teamsters hauling grain and goods used Soscol as a watering station. An assistant State Geologist, Mr. Brewer, noted in his diary while camping by the Soscol House in 1861, that "there was so much travel on the roads that the teams of horses could only be seen by the dust clouds they raised, which were almost beyond endurance." The little community had become the main transfer point for steamer traffic and east-west road transportation. By 1867 Soscol acquired many of the same businesses as other early California towns - a saloon, blacksmith, general store and hotel, although it never grew large enough to need either a church or a school.

Observing the amount of traffic at Soscol, Businessman Elijah True, who had built and operated a roadside inn in another area during the early 1850s, knew what that meant in business potential. In 1855 he built Soscol House. He located the inn on the north side of the junction of the county road (today's Highway 29) and the Old Ferry Road (now named Soscol Ferry Road). The inn was a two story "L" shaped structure with wood lath siding and contained eleven bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs, there was a

dining room, gambling room, and a bar. It was an inn typical of its time, with the wife and children helping in the daily operations. A stage barn and blacksmith shop was also in operation by 1867 on the south side of the junction on the old Patwin Village site.

In 1858 the Thompson brothers constructed a wharf at the Soscol ferry crossing. In May 1865, "The Amelia", the largest and finest sidewheel steamer to ply the Napa River, began to make connections to the Soscol ferry. Smaller steamers provided shuttle service to and from Napa City, since the Amelia was too big to make the trip.

In July 1865, the Napa Valley Railroad ran its first train between Napa City and its southerly terminus at the Soscol ferry.

The railroad route ran along the Napa River. The Soscol ferry was used as a transfer point between the train and the bay steamers. In January of 1869, transportation expanded further with the opening of the rail line from Napa Junction to Soscol Ferry, extending the railroad from Vallejo to Napa City and further north.

With the opening of through rail service, transfers at the ferry were no longer necessary, marking the beginning of Soscol's downfall. The more efficient railroads replaced the stagecoaches, wagons, and steamers, which had been Soscol's main source of business. The steamer "Amelia" was removed from its run to the Soscol Ferry in late 1868, as were other steamers. In July 1869 there was only one remaining stage line from Soscol via the Soscol ferry to Sonoma.

By 1872 the number of businesses at Soscol had dropped to three. In 1875 Soscol still had a postmaster, Simpson Thompson. A blacksmith's shop was still in operation, but the Soscol House was now a "liquor saloon" run by Elijah True. Although the franchise was renewed for the Soscol Ferry in 1875, business was seriously declining.

In July 1905, the "Vallejo, Benicia and Napa Valley Railroad Company" opened an electric line, which ran from Benicia through Napa to Lake County. A 1913 timetable notes the Soscol stop, next to the Soscol House, as a "flag" stop. Parts of the county road were taken into the State Highway System in the early 20th century, providing Soscol with a transportation mode, but its role as a transportation center had come to an end.

The Soscol House continued to serve the traveler as a "saloon" in the early 1900s, as a "roadhouse" in the 1940s, and as a "dining room" in the 1950s, and then later as an antique shop. The building has been altered several times by successive owners, having had some parts removed and other parts added, but it has retained some of its original character and appearance.

Finally, the Soscol house was moved to the other side of the Soscol Ferry Road/Highway 29 junction at the foot of the Napa Southern Crossing Bridge to its current location on the old Patwin Village site. Today a complete restoration has been made and it serves today's public as an upscale restaurant and banquet facility.

In a column I did a couple of years ago I told of the world's largest train ferries in the world that carried complete trains from 1878 to 1930 between Port Costa and Benicia. The Rubarth brothers in Arizona and Michigan who have been building a scale HO gauge working model of the Solano ferry for the last 15 years supplied much of the information for an expanded article in the January-June issue of the Solano Historian magazine.

The model ship is 8-feet long and includes a model of the docking facilities at Port Costa making the replica 16-feet long. It will be on display at the Southern Pacific Historical & Technical Society during their annual convention in Sacramento this October 1-5.

The Rubarth's are seeking sponsors to help with expenses for shipping it from Michigan as well as other expenses. They are also seeking other places to display this unique model while they are in California.

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