

Benicia boasts long, colorful history

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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The oldest town in Solano County is Benicia, which can boast of many firsts: first town founded in the county, first seat of the state Capitol, first U.S. arsenal west of the Mississippi, first Protestant church organized in California, first windmill developed - and on and on.

The idea of a major city along the Carquinez Strait was the brainchild of Dr. Robert Baylor Semple, a dentist from Kentucky and one of the founders of the short-lived Bear Flag Republic. Semple knew that he needed investors to make his dream come true. Together with William Colton he started California's first newspaper, The Californian, out of Monterey in August 1846. The only fonts available to them had no w's, which are unnecessary in Spanish. They made do with double v's instead. The Californian was full of advertisements for the new town, trying to raise interest in the yet-to-be-built seaport metropolis.

A year later, with aid from Gen. Mariano Vallejo, who gave Semple an interest in a five-mile stretch of land along the Carquinez Strait, and from a major investor, U.S. Consul to Mexico Thomas Larkin, the surveyors finally went to work. The official birthday of Benicia was May 19, 1847.

Semple had planned to name the new city Francisca, both in honor of Gen. Vallejo's wife and as a reminder to the sea captains that his port was on the well-known Bay of San Francisco. But the alcalde of Yerba Buena, Washington Bartlett, quickly acted to hinder the growth of this potential rival. His proclamation on Jan. 7, 1847, renamed Yerba Buena into San Francisco. Semple had to settle on Dona Vallejo's second name, Benicia, instead.

Many years later William Tecumseh Sherman, who traveled through the area in 1848 and who would be stationed at the Benicia Arsenal during the 1850s, recognized the importance of the name change in his memoir.

"I am convinced that this little circumstance was big with consequences. ... That Benicia has the best natural site for a commercial city, I am satisfied. And had half the money and half the labor since bestowed upon San Francisco been expended at Benicia, we should have at this day (1890) a city of palaces on the Carquinez Strait. The name San Francisco, however, fixed the city where it now is, for every ship in 1848-49 which cleared from any part of the world knew the name of San Francisco but

not Yerba Buena or Benicia ...”

Semple’s vision for the growth of Francisca/Benicia included a ferry. In *The Californian* he advertised: “The country around the city is the best agricultural portion of California. On both sides of the bay, the strait being only a mile wide, an easy landing can be made. The entire trade of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys ... must, of necessity, pass through the narrow channel of Carquinez, and the country is so situated that every person who passes from one side of the bay to the other will find the nearest and best way by Francisco (sic).” Rates were \$1 for horse and rider, \$1 for each riderless horse and 50 cents for a person on foot.

The ferry did not run on a regular schedule, which often resulted in long waiting periods for its customers. On a tour to the gold mines in June 1848, then-Lt. William Tecumseh Sherman recorded in his memoirs how he and Gov. Richard B. Mason had to wait two days in line to cross over to the Martinez side. He described the ferry as a boat which could carry six to eight horses across each time.

A memorable scene occurred in 1848, when Semple himself returned from a trip to Monterey and, on the Martinez side, was unable to attract the attention of his ferry boatman in Benicia.

Finally, impatient to return, Semple improvised a raft of branches and tules, even though he did not know how to swim. Barely halfway across the strait, the strong current tore his makeshift raft apart. Semple’s cries for help brought rescuers from the Benicia side. For years thereafter, the memory of the 6-foot, 7-inch giant, wading through the shallows soaking wet, brought forth the gentle mockery: “Are you the man who tried to walk across Carquinez Strait?”

By 1848, there were 20 buildings in town. One of them, an adobe building, was rented as a general store by Capt. Edward H. Pfister, who came to California in April 1847 via Honolulu as master of the *Commodore Shubrick*. He returned in August from Hawaii with a large cargo of goods, which became the foundation for the store he opened in September or October. Cash at the time was short, so that Von Pfister accepted “California banknotes” - cowhides - valued at \$1.50 each as well as corn or barley as payment. His store quickly became a center for people to meet and exchange news.

In early 1848, this led to an incident that eventually would change the quiet, rural life of California forever. Two travelers from Sutter’s Fort, Charles Bennett and a companion, passed through on their way to Monterey and stopped at Von Pfister’s store. A group of men was discussing this and that, when one of them remarked how lucky and how rich the man would be who would find coal in California. At that, Charles Bennett could no longer keep quiet and blurted out: “Coal! I’ve got something here which will beat

coal and make this the greatest country in the world!" With these words, he spilled some 4 ounces of gold nuggets in varying sizes onto the counter. The Gold Rush had begun in Benicia.

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