

Cities battled over location of county seat

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Monday, June 05, 2000

Solano County has “mobility” written all over its early history. Not only did the county host the state capitol several times - for one week in January 1852 and again for a few weeks in January 1853 in Vallejo. And after that, the Legislature moved to Benicia in February 1853, where it stayed until February 1854.

The location of the county seat proved to be nearly as mobile and heavily contested, sparking bitter fights. Then as now, being the county seat brought many economic benefits to a town as well as being a considerable status symbol.

In 1850, the newly formed state Legislature named Benicia as Solano County’s first county seat. It remained there until 1858.

By then, population numbers had grown considerably throughout the county. At a time when people traveled by horse, carriage or on foot, having the county seat at the extreme southern end proved inconvenient for many citizens. On March 20, 1858, the Solano County Herald ran an editorial titled “Removal of the County Seat,” saying, “the long-mooted question is about to be tested.”

Back in 1853, Capt. Robert Waterman - whose story deserves a column of its own - acquired one-third of the Suisun Rancho which had originally belonged to Chief Solano. After his failure to turn Cordelia into a major shipping port - and in direct competition with the bustling port of Suisun City (founded by his rival, Capt. Josiah Wing), Capt. Waterman founded a townsite in 1856 and named it Fairfield, after the Connecticut town in which he grew up.

By 1858, the dissent between upper and lower Solano County over a shift in the governing center had grown considerably.

On Aug. 7, the upper county’s landowners called a county convention to debate the relocation of the county seat. Three dozen delegates from the townships of Vacaville, Tremont, Suisun, Montezuma and Green Valley attended. Delegates from Vallejo and Benicia were noticeably absent. Candidates for the new seats were Vacaville, Denverton, Fairfield and Suisun.

Vacaville, Fairfield and Suisun offered land to entice votes. Capt. Waterman, speaking on behalf of the town of Fairfield, offered 16 acres of land for the county buildings, an

area called Union Square, in addition to four adjacent blocks for the courthouse ground and a personal bond of \$10,000.

A.P. Jackson offered a lot 120 feet by 100 feet, as well as \$5,500 on behalf of Suisun City. Vacaville citizen Mason Wilson offered four blocks of land and \$1,000. And Denverton's representative declined to stoop to offering incentives, proudly extolling the merits of his town instead.

After the votes were counted, Fairfield had won with 16 votes, Suisun had received 12 and Denverton one.

But the final say belonged to the voters of the county. After the election results had been counted on Sept. 2, Fairfield again emerged as the winner with 1,029 votes, followed by Benicia with 625, Denverton with 38, Suisun with 26, Vallejo with 10, and Rockville with 2.

Fairfield's appointment was not just a result of Capt. Waterman's generous offer, but also due to the lingering rivalry between Benicia and Vallejo over the seat of the state capitol earlier. This time, the citizens of Vallejo decided to throw in their lot with Fairfield.

The Solano County Herald ran this editorial a few days after the election: "In every general engagement, however glorious the bulletin of victory, there necessarily follows the melancholy supplement of casualties. In the list of killed and wounded of Wednesday's battle, our eye falls mournfully on the name of Benicia - Benicia! The long-suffering mortally wounded, if not dead - killed by Vallejo's unsparing hand! That the people of Suisun and the adjoining region should have desired a removal of the county seat was by no means surprising: but Vallejo! Et tu Brute! In the house of our friends we were wounded."

Fairfield went to work immediately. A temporary courthouse was built and the county records removed from Benicia. Other buildings were rented from Capt. Waterman. In January 1859, a two-year tax of 50 cents on each \$100 of assessed property was levied for the construction of a permanent courthouse and jail. For the next 15 years, Fairfield was the county seat.

The year 1873 saw another attempt to move the county seat, this time by lawyer E.H. Sawyer, who owned much land in Vallejo. He was backed by John B. Frisbee, son-in-law of Gen. Vallejo.

The city of Vallejo had grown to 6,000 inhabitants, many of whom signed a petition for the change. During the ensuing campaign, Vallejo argued that Fairfield with its 400

citizens was “a dreary treeless plain” with few and poor accommodations and unsafe county offices prone to fires.

Vallejo, on the other hand, boasted water and rail transportation, well-maintained streets and even offered free space for the county offices and the jail until permanent buildings could be erected.

Nearly every eligible voter cast a ballot in the special election in November 1873. Voter fraud was rumored to be commonplace. Marguerite Hunt wrote in her “History of Solano County”: “It is said that many a one cast more than one vote, and the names of the deceased voters appearing on the great register that year were all used, as well as absentees, the advocates of the two opposing cities believing they were only doing their duty as citizens.”

Vallejo won the election by 300 votes and, as of Feb. 7, it was to be the new county seat. But the residents of upper Solano County immediately introduced a counter-bill proposing to divide the county in a way that Vallejo with its own county would be little larger than the city limits. This bill went all the way to Gov. Newton Booth, who vetoed it as unconstitutional. He let it be known that he would sign a bill to keep the county seat in Fairfield.

Fairfield supporters responded quickly and Gov. Booth signed the new bill on March 30, 1874. Fairfield has remained the county seat ever since.

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