

Capt. Ritchie battles for his land holdings

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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On Aug. 26, 1850, Gen. Vallejo sold his Rancho Suisun grant, which he had purchased back from Chief Solano earlier in May, to Capt. Alexander Archibald Ritchie. Capt. Ritchie paid \$10,000 in cash and assumed a \$40,000 mortgage for the property. Three days later, he in turn sold an undivided one-third interest to Capt. Robert Henry Waterman for the sum of \$16,666.

Six years later Capt. Ritchie died, leaving his widow and Capt. Waterman as co-trustees of the property.

These are the bare facts about Capt. Ritchie. Local history sources often do not provide further information on this fascinating man. For Capt. Ritchie himself, the Solano County land holdings formed only one part of his life, although one that would trouble his later years considerably.

Archibald Alexander Ritchie was born in New Castle, Delaware, on Jan. 28, 1806. His family originally had come from Scotland and Ireland. Ritchie's great-grandparents immigrated to America; their son, William Ritchie, was born on the ship.

William Ritchie's son, Hugh, married Esther Alexander, whose family had come to Virginia in 1737. Her father was Archibald Alexander, a name bequeathed to Esther's son.

At age 13, Archibald Alexander Ritchie ran away from home to join a merchant ship bound for China. An enterprising and intelligent young man, he quickly rose through the ranks, receiving his first full command of a brig by the name of Treaty by age 19. For the next 13 years, he would sail between Philadelphia and China.

He married Martha Hamilton of Philadelphia in 1831. The couple had seven children, Elizabeth (born in Philadelphia 1833), Martha "Patsey" (birthdate unknown), A.A. Jr. (1839, Canton, China), Ellen "Nellie" (1841, Canton, China), William C. (1843, Canton China), Hugh Canton (1846, Canton, China), and Esther Alexander "Hettie" (birthdate unknown).

In 1838, Capt. Ritchie left the sea to become the resident agent at Canton, China, for the Philadelphia import house of Platt and Son. His wife and children joined him in Macao, near Canton. The Ritchies lived in China until 1847, when they returned to

Philadelphia.

The discovery of gold in California brought Capt. Ritchie to San Francisco. By then age 42, he was an experienced businessman who saw his opportunity in providing needed services to the gold miners coming through San Francisco. One of his first ventures was the firm of Ritchie, Osgood and Co., located at 64 California Street.

He also was very active in the community. Among other tasks, he served on the committee collecting funds for the victims of the 1852 earthquake in Acapulco, Mexico. Together with a group of other citizens, he opposed the re-nomination of Chief Justice Hugh Murray to the Supreme Court of California. Capt. Ritchie also was elected as one of the 25 businessmen who helped alleviate panic among the population when the banking house of Page, Bacon and Company of St. Louis failed in February 1855. The crisis led to the eventual collapse of 200 businesses in San Francisco.

In 1856, Ritchie also supported John Nugent, owner and editor of the San Francisco Herald, in his criticism of the Second Vigilante Committee. Ritchie's Suisun neighbor, Juan Filipe Armijo, was an active member of this Vigilante Committee.

Besides his activities in the city, Capt. Ritchie was keenly aware of the opportunities offered further inland. On Aug. 6, 1850, he purchased property in Benicia, at the corner of East H and 6th Street East, making Benicia his primary residence until 1854. At the time, Benicia was hailed as an education center, including St. Catherine's Academy and the Young Ladies Seminary. Three weeks later, he purchased the Rancho Suisun from Gen. Vallejo.

In 1851, Ritchie and Paul Forbes also acquired the Rancho Guenoc in Lake County. It comprised six leagues, or 21,220 acres. Ritchie and Forbes then added the adjoining, smaller Rancho Collayomi to their holdings. Ritchie hired his brother-in-law, John M. Hamilton, as manager. Later, he also hired Robert Sterling, nephew of Capt. Waterman. Sterling's wife, Cordelia, reputedly was the first white woman in that area. She would often visit with Cordelia Waterman at the Waterman Ranch near Fairfield.

Close by, or possibly included in the grant (as always, Mexican land grant boundaries were not clearly defined) were the Harbin Hot Springs, which were eventually developed by Sam Brannan into the "Calistoga" resort town.

While Ritchie had no problems evicting the few squatters on the Rancho Guenoc, squatters on Suisun Rancho would become an ongoing battle for him until his death.

In a letter to his wife, Martha, who was still living in Newcastle, Delaware, he wrote in 1851:

"You can't imagine what lovely country and climate this is ... If you were here, dearest, you'd never want to leave this country again ... I smiled at your fears from my settlers (not squatters) in Suisun. There are some scamps amongst them whom I shall have to stir up by and by, but most of them are first rate men and on friendly terms with me. I look for no trouble and certainly no danger.

"You probably will not see the papers, but I have been amused at the frequent notice taken of Capt. Ritchie and the lovely Valley of Suisun. There is, I fancy, no doubt of my title being good and when confirmed the property will be of immense value."

His hopes for a peaceful resolution with the squatters were quickly shattered. Despite earlier surveys conducted in 1841 and 1844, borders and ownership of land remained in dispute.

In November 1852, Ritchie sent a circular to squatters on his land, warning them of their unlawful situation: "The lands which you have taken possession of and have settled upon belong to me. I hereby warn you ... and (you) hereafter make yourself liable by continuing to occupy ... cultivate and improve said lands without my written sanction."

He also hired attorney John Currey, who was beginning to make a name for himself in these land grant disputes. By 1852, the situation became desperate. In a letter on Jan. 12, 1852, Ritchie wrote:

"You are aware that these Suysun (sic) lands are very valuable from their ... situation on Suisun Bay & their extreme fertility, crops having been raised last season which gave equal to two hundred dollars per acre the first year. You are also aware that the whole of this property of mine had been taken possession by "Squatters," to the number of more than 150 preemption claimants, that they have expelled me from it, by threats and a demonstration of loaded rifles! & have formed themselves into an association, professing (or at least some of them have done so to myself) a determination never to give up the lands in question, even if my title is confirmed ..."

Surprisingly, the squatters weren't just poor miners trying to usurp a piece of land. Rather, as Ritchie described:

"I may add that many of the Squatters on Suisun, were men of considerable property, when they settled there, several of the claims being held by merchants, Doctors & I believe one or two calling themselves lawyers! Tho a majority are young men without families which reminds me that I have a wife and seven children, that the hard earnings of thirty years, mostly passed on the ocean (\$50,000) are invested in Suisun lands, which if I do not recover possession of them, will throw me back in a position of

comparative want, and certain beggary to a helpless woman and young family in case I sh(ould) be taken away from them. I may be 'more scared than hurt,' for Capt. Halleck says, 'It is impossible for our Govt. or our U.S. Courts to violate or disregard the solemn provisions of a Treaty, and that all will come right in good time,' but I have so long 'been hoping against hope,' that I must confess, I have of late been inclined to despair."

Albert Shumante's 1991 publication "Captain A.A. Ritchie, California Pioneer - An Account of His Life, Family and Ranchos," provided the information for this column. I will finish Capt. Ritchie's story in my next column.

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