

Historic sites hidden by a veil of the past

By Jerry Bowen

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Perhaps in this piece I'll raise an awareness of the rapidly disappearing historic sites that we are losing in Solano County or of those that have already vanished because so little is known about them.

In the early 1930s, extensive typewritten research notes about northern California Adobes were compiled and apparently not edited or organized by Professor Bowman following the 1944 death of Professor Hendry who did the research.

The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley bound the manuscript into seven volumes, with several counties bound together rather than as separate parts. The second bound volume consists of Napa and Solano counties and I'll draw heavily from the document for this narrative. The subject area is Suisun Valley, which had many adobes and some of them still exist, but are not well-known.

The Rancho Solano grant was in the west-central part of the county mostly east of Suisun Creek, Suisun and Fairfield, in the grant's southeast corner and consisted of four square leagues or about 17,754 acres. Gov. Alvarado gave Chief Solano the Suisun Grant on Jan. 28, 1842. The chief, in turn, later sold the grant to Gen. Vallejo who in turn sold it to Archibald A. Ritchie who received a patent for the land on Jan. 17, 1857, for 17,754.73 acres.

Francisco Solano was the baptismal name of Chief Solano who was born about 1794 and lived in the Suisun area since he was 9 years old. His home area was always on the Suisun Creek. In a deposition made by Salvador Vallejo in 1843, Solano gives his age as 49 on Jan. 16, 1837. On Jan. 15, 1842, Solano petitioned Gov. Micheltorena for the Suisun Grant and 13 days later the concession was made and the title was issued the same day.

Later in the year, Gen. Vallejo bought Rancho Solano and in 1850 sold it to Ritchie. The chief died in 1851.

The Chief Solano Adobe of the middle 1830s stood on a long mound about 150 feet east of Suisun Creek in the Herman Glashoff orchard. The U.S. survey of the Tolenas in 1857 spots land labeled "Solano's rancheria," practically in the center of section six of T. 5 N., R. 2 W., on the east side of the creek. The same site is also on the U.S. survey of Tolenas of 1861 and 1862.

Gen. Vallejo and his brother, Salvador, stated that the house was an adobe, while J. P. Leese was not sure whether it was adobe or palizada (a temporary structure usually made of logs and tules). Leese stated that it had one room and was about 9-feet high and roofed with tules. Gen. Vallejo gave 1835 as the date of the construction; but this is two years before the general had made the temporary grant.

Leese stated that he knew the rancho in 1836 and that Solano had an adobe and other houses in 1838. The probable date was no doubt somewhere in the middle '30s. The testimony indicated that the house was still standing in 1842, but nothing remains of the adobe today because of extensive agricultural use.

The location of the sites of the Gen. Vallejo adobe and stone houses of about 1842 are unknown, Gen. Vallejo testified in 1852 in the land case and the next year in the Smith v. Dorland case that he occupied the rancho from 1842 to 1850 and that he had an adobe and stone house, and that an adobe was built in 1842, but gives no date for the stone building. The use is not mentioned but it is believed that Chief Solano and his men occupied them.

According to Professor Hendry's research, "the Jesus Molino Adobe Dwelling Site of early 1840s site was somewhere near Rockville. The only knowledge of this adobe is the tradition gathered by Munro-Fraser in the 1879 'History of Solano County' that Jesus Molino, an Indian, cultivated land near Rockville and had an adobe house about 1846. This site is about five miles down the Suisun Creek from Solano's rancheria. This proximity of sites could indicate that Molino was probably of Solano's tribe and that the adobe could have been built after Solano and his people had become well settled under the new conditions of land holding, probably at the end of the 30s, or more probably in the early '40s."

Other research has determined that the Jose Molino dwelling had been another adobe that Chief Solano built and lived in. The site was destroyed when the Stonedene Mansion built by Herman Martin, a historic building in its own respect, was built on the same site.

The Stonedene Mansion still survives and is located across Suisun Valley Road from Solano College. It is believed that the Chief Solano burial site was located next to a Buckeye tree across the road from the mansion and now part of the college grounds. The burial site was obliterated during road building and the establishment of Solano College.

Now we come to a site known as the Sonoma Mission Palizada Dwelling Site of 1824.

Professor Hendry describes it as follows:

"The site is unknown, but very probably was somewhere on Rancho Suisun. The Sonoma Mission report of December 1824 stated that a rancho had been established in a place called Suisun about 12 leagues (or about 31 miles) to the northeast of Sonoma, and a provisional house had been erected for the mayordomo and also a corral for a number of horses; the establishment was in charge of an Indian alcalde and his family. The distance by trail is fairly correct; the direction however, is east rather than northeast. The site undoubtedly was in the Suisun and Tolenas Valleys which were the early known tramping grounds of the Suisuns; the upper Napa Valley would fit as to direction from the Mission but not as to distance."

In an article written by co-writer, Sabine Goerke-Schrode in 2003, "Exploring a mansion's storied past" about the Stonedene Mansion, she wrote, "The land on which Stonedene stands once housed a settlement of local Patwin Indians, as grinding stones attest. A small spring provided fresh water."

"Spanish soldiers destroyed this settlement in 1810. From 1818 until 1835, the Santa Eulalia mission farm occupied the site."

"The area became part of the Suisun Rancho, which Gen. Vallejo granted to Chief Solano. In his deposition, Vallejo wrote: 'In 1837, I gave Solano a provisional grant of Suisun Rancho, in which year he built three or four adobe houses, one for dwelling and the others for barns and storehouses...'"

In another article written by Suisun Valley Historian, Clyde Low, in the May 1986 issue of the Solano Historian he stated, "When Father Altimira visited the Suisun Valley in 1823 in his search for the best site for founding the last mission he found the area deserted of population, with only thirty Indians left in the Vaca Valley area and some fifty at Putah Creek."

"The first report on the whereabouts and activity of Francisco Solano since his baptism in 1824 as a mission Indian (Neophyte is the church term used for these converts - literally a new plant) is found in the deposition in the Suisun Rancho land grant claim case by Cayetano Juarez, an ex-soldier and present grantee, who stated that 'he had known him since 1827 when Solano was living at Sonoma, and (that) he had seen him at Suisun in 1832.'" It should be noted that a branch mission farm or 'rancho' called Santa Eulalia had been established at Suisun before the end of 1824, with a house for the padre's visit, a corral for horses, and with a neophyte in charge. M.G. Vallejo states in his deposition in the same file that 'He first saw Solano in 1829 at Mission Dolores (in present San Francisco) where Solano was employed tending cattle.' Solano went over to (the) Sonoma (mission) in 1830 and resided there and in the Suisun Valley thereafter. He supervised the mission Indians in agricultural operations until secularization of the mission system) in 1835, after which time he went to the Suisun

Rancho to live. In 1837 I gave Solano a provisional grant of Suisun Rancho, in which year he built three or four adobe houses, one for dwelling and the others for barns and storehouses . . . Solano (also) had an adobe house in Sonoma.”

Were the adobes that were once located at Stonedene Mansion the Santa Eulalia Mission or was it somewhere nearby? Where were the other buildings used “for barns and storehouses” located?

An adobe recently came to my attention at the site of the old Mangels Winery when Cordelia artist and historian, Daphne Nixon, called me. She was in the process of painting a portrait of an adobe that is unique in several respects and felt that it needed to be researched.

What little is known is that it appears to be very old, was constructed of rocks and adobe rather than adobe bricks and may have been once used as a stage stop. Judging by the addition of electrical facilities indicates it may have also had more recent uses. I have found what appears as the same adobe and a cultivated area on a map produced in 1862 before Mangels owned the property.

Is it possible this adobe was once a part of the Santa Eulalia Mission and if so, will it become known as the oldest standing adobe in Solano County? Or was it a home, or barn or stable?

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