

Sea captains weighed their anchors in Solano

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Sea captains played an important role in the development of the Fairfield and Suisun area. With its proximity to the Suisun Bay, it is no surprise that men like Captain Robert Waterman, Captain Archibald Ritchie and Captain Josiah Wing saw an opportunity to combine business skills with their knowledge of the sea.

Josiah Wing's family originally came from Banbury in Oxfordshire, England. Banbury was a stronghold of Puritanism during the 17th century. Like many, the Wing family was persecuted for their Puritan faith. Eventually, an ancestor of Josiah, Deborah Bachiler Wing, (1592-1692) daughter of a Nonconformist pastor, Stephen Bachiler, and widow of the Reverend John Wing, brought her four sons to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1632.

Deborah's oldest son, John, acquired land near Brewster, Massachusetts around 1652. Located close to the sea, many of her descendants chose to go to sea.

Captain Wing was one member of this long line of sea captains. He was born at Harwich (now Brewster) Barnstable, Mass., on April 3, 1799, the second of the seven children of Captain John Wing and Hannah Foster.

Josiah's two brothers, John (1802-1822) and George (1805-1877), also followed in their father's steps. Returning from a sea voyage, John died at age 20 at the Boston quarantine station in 1822.

Both Josiah and George were rapidly promoted in their careers to master mariners. Josiah was 22 in 1821, when he was given command of one of the packet brigs of the Union Line. For the next 15 years, he sailed his ship on round trips lasting two to three weeks.

With the security of a steady employment as a packet line master, Josiah was able to marry Phebe Lincoln (1800-1837) on Oct. 12, 1822. Like Josiah, Phebe was the daughter of a sea captain and thus was familiar with the dangers inherent to life at sea.

The couple had five children, all daughters: Phebe, Charlotte, Martha Ann, Emila and Louisa. Two of them died young, Phebe at age 8, in 1832, and Emila at age 9, in 1840.

Besides their own children, Josiah also took on the guardianship of his nephew John and Phebe's nephew, Robert Montgomery Clarke.

Josiah and his family first lived on a farm near Brewster, which he enlarged frequently through additional purchases. During the mid 1830s, he also purchased farmland near Fairport, N.Y., and eventually bought property in South Perinton Township, Monroe County, New York, moving his family in 1837. That same year Phebe died sometime during the summer.

As a widower with four small children, Josiah saw the need to remarry quickly. He chose Mercy Foster Crosby Hurd (1808-1885), a young widow from Brewster who was distantly related to him. Mercy brought her five-year-old daughter, Mary Frances into the marriage, and was accompanied by several married sisters and brothers.

Josiah and Mercy had six children together, Josiah Jr., Phebe Laura , Mary Foster, Emma L., Wallace Morris, and Chillingsworth Crosby.

This large family continued to move westward over the next few years, eventually ending in Hillsdale County in Michigan. Late in 1848 or early 1849, news of the California Gold Rush reached them, prompting Josiah to return to Cape Cod and to the sea.

The increasing demand for sea transportation to California seems to have attracted Josiah. By March 1849, he is listed as sailing between Boston and Cuba. Finally, in November 1849, he took command of the barque Diantha and left for San Francisco on Dec. 5, 1849.

The Diantha carried 200,000 board feet of lumber, 80,000 shingles, 50,000 bricks, 30 casks of nails, 500 casks of cement, five tons of coal, bags and barrels of salt, dried apples and pork - all items desperately sought in the rapidly expanding town of San Francisco.

The immense number of people streaming into San Francisco required an equally large number of ships bringing needed supplies. During 1849 and 1850 alone, more than 600 Captains sailed from Eastern seaport towns into San Francisco Bay. Many of them abandoned their ship to settle down on land and open a business.

One of these enterprising men was Captain Wing on the barque Diantha. He reached San Francisco on June 23, 1850, 198 days after leaving Boston Harbor.

Part of his shipload had been transported and delivered on behalf of investors. But a large portion belonged to Captain Wing, who now turned his ship into a floating shop. He also had brought the wood frame for a house, which he proceeded to erect on Pine Street.

It is unclear what happened to the Diantha at that time, but most likely she was one of the many ships that was either dismantled or sank into the San Francisco Harbor.

Captain Wing continued to operate his business out of the Pine Street location. Early in 1851, he also purchased a 49-ton schooner, the Ann Sophia, and began to ferry hay and other cargo from San Francisco up to Sacramento.

Sailing the sloughs of the Suisun Bay, he discovered an island that made an ideal landing place to pick up hay, wheat and other commodities produced by settlers in the area.

I will continue Captain Wing's story in my next column.

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