

Sea captains end up ashore in Suisun area

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Like many pioneers, Capt. Josiah Wing came to California drawn by the Gold Rush and its famed opportunities for acquiring wealth in a short time.

Unlike many, Wing did not plan to go into the gold mines, but rather sailed a barque, Diantha, full of needed construction materials, to San Francisco. He arrived on June 23, 1850, and immediately set up shop, selling directly from the barque.

Among his shipment was the framework for a house, which he proceeded to erect on Pine Street. From there, he operated his profitable business.

The following spring, Capt. Wing purchased a small schooner, the Ann Sophia. The Ann Sophia is recorded to have arrived in San Francisco on Sept. 28, 1850, after a 276-day trip from Greenport, Long Island. Her owner,

Capt. Tuthill, sailed her along the coast to Washington and Oregon, but decided to sell the schooner to Josiah Wing and return to the East Coast.

With the smaller schooner, Capt. Wing began to sail up Suisun Bay and to Sacramento. Mostly he ferried hay, an indispensable commodity needed for the many horses, mules, donkeys and cattle. Strong demand and inflationary Gold Rush prices made this a profitable venture.

Farmers such as Mason Wilson were busy cutting and drying hay in 1851 for the San Francisco and Sacramento markets, selling hay at \$150 a ton. Mason cut hay in the Lagoon Valley area. He transported his hay to Cache Slough, where somebody - maybe even Capt. Wing - picked it up.

Upper Solano's other landing spot, Capt. Robert Waterman's Bridgeport harbor, was situated several miles farther away from the Lagoon Valley area and was more convenient for the Suisun and Green Valley farmers.

On his trips into Suisun Bay, Josiah encountered two men, Curtis Wilson and Dr. John Baker, at some time between September 1850 and late summer 1852. These two men had acquired a small island in Suisun Bay, which they used mainly to hunt elk.

They also had purchased the rights to have a wharf erected on Suisun Bay, although it

remains unknown whether they were ever envisioning a commercial venture or planned to use it for their hunting expeditions.

Capt. Wing on the other hand recognized the value of the little island as a stopping point between San Francisco and Sacramento to pick up his hay bales. On Sept. 15, 1852, he purchased from Curtis Wilson and John Baker roughly 600 acres, including a portion of the island, as well as the right to construct the wharf.

Only weeks before, on August 13, 1852, his second wife, Mercy, and the 10 children from his first and second marriage had reached San Francisco.

The closeness of the dates is fascinating. When one takes into account that Mercy and the children must have left Boston in late 1851 or early in 1852, one can speculate that Josiah had the idea to settle down on farmland early on and began to look for a good spot in Solano County sometime in 1851.

Although a sea captain by profession, he had also farmed extensively back on the East Coast, buying and selling farms over the years, steadily moving west, always into newly developed territory. His purchase here in Solano County followed a similar pattern.

Josiah moved his family to newly founded Suisun shortly after the land purchase. Wood was scarce in coastal California. Many early settlers had shipped wooden house frames from the East Coast to their new hometowns. Thus, Josiah broke down his Pine Street house, whose frame he had brought on the Diantha around the Horn, and reassembled it in its new location on the Suisun Bay.

With Mercy and the children in residence, the Wings became the founding family of Suisun City.

He immediately set about the construction of a wharf and a warehouse that also provided sleeping quarters, likely for employees. As the settlement was on an island, he also created a plank walk to connect to the mainland.

In 1854, he began plans for the layout of the new town, with assistance by John W. Owens. Suisun quickly attracted other businesses and grew rapidly.

Only three years later, news reporters of the Benicia Herald toured the area in September 1857 and wrote about the bustling little town: "At length the vicinity of Suisun City was reached, and to our great astonishment it was nothing more nor less than a point of high land in the tule, to be approached only by means of canals and bridges, reminding us of what is written of Venice, her gondoliers and bridge of sighs, although we would by no means draw a comparison at this time, such may

nevertheless be realized at some future period.”

The reporters “were struck with amazement at the amount of business transacted. The whole length of the town don’t appear to be more than that of one block of Benicia, where its width is about double that of First street, yet within this contracted space there are wagons, carts, buggies, cattle, horses, and men so closely packed together that it is almost impossible to pass.”

I will continue Josiah Wing’s story in my next column.

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