

Capt. Wing steered Suisun City's early course

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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After his successful business venture in San Francisco during the Gold Rush, followed by the acquisition of the schooner Ann Sophia, Capt. Josiah Wing acquired a plot of land on Suisun Island in 1851.

There he erected a wharf - or embarcadero - and a warehouse, brought his wood-frame home from its location on Pine Street in San Francisco, and relocated his family from their East Coast location.

With wife Mercy, and the 10 children from both their marriage and his previous marriage, the family became the founders of Suisun City.

The embarcadero quickly grew into a bustling business district, especially for the farming community in the upper county area. During the first summer of 1851, the settlement's first store opened, operated by John W. Owens and A.W. Hall.

Records of 1852 note shipments of potatoes, another of the early local attempts to develop a variety of agricultural commodities.

In 1854, Capt. Wing began plans for the layout of the new town, with assistance by Owens.

By 1857, the old wood-frame home became too small for the Wing family. Never hesitating to acquire new land and to settle anew, Capt. Wing purchased a 23-acre farm west of the town, built a new house and moved his family. This would remain their home until 1874.

An early settler, James Thomas Wells, recalled in 1925 "There was not much here" except a slaughter house and Captain Wing used to have the wild grain around here harvested and then take it down to San Francisco in his schooner. Allen Miller and J. B. Lemon, his brother-in-law, were already settled here, having come to California in search of gold.

"They were then engaged in stock raising. Wing's schooner used to carry away the grain which was brought in from the valleys, being hauled to Suisun by teams of sixteen to twenty mules. I can remember when the stagecoaches came in here, one line running from Benicia to Fairfield and the other from Napa to Sacramento."

By 1855, the Solano Herald already said about the flourishing town: "It is the point of embarkation of the produce of the county and has for the past few months been the busiest place in the county."

Early pioneers such as John M. Jones, Asa Crocker, John W. Pierce and the Stockmann brothers, took advantage of the opportunities the rapid growth offered.

Much of the early development occurred around a Spanish-style town plaza, which was located next to the embarcadero and was surrounded by a variety of businesses.

Crocker, who had been one of the early pilots on Wing's Ann Sophia, decided to open up an eatery in 1854.

In 1857, Colonel D. D. Reeves and his brother, C. P. Reeves erected the town's first brick building - a blacksmith shop.

In 1860, R. D. Robbins arrived with only a few cents in his pocket. He died years later, founder and owner of the Bank of Suisun National Association, as a millionaire several times over.

In 1868, residents petitioned the Solano County Board of Supervisors that steps be taken to grant the country town the rights and privileges of a city. On Oct. 9, 1868, the Board of Supervisors voted to incorporate Suisun City.

Increasing prosperity allowed the Wings, like many families at the time, to employ a number of servants to run the family home and farm.

Among the earliest servants mentioned is Adam Willis, whose personal history illustrates an often-ignored aspect of California history. Willis was of African-American descent and came to Solano County as a slave.

The census of 1850 mentions 962 African-Americans in California. Many of them were slaves or had come to California as slaves and eventually had been set free.

L. B. Mizner undertook the census count for Solano County. He counted a total population of 580 people, with 21 identified as Negro or Mulatto. Of these, 14 of them were described as slaves from Missouri who had contracted to work in the state, to be freed after five years.

Two years later, the abstract of the 1852 census lists the African-American population in Solano County as follows: "Negroes, male - 26, Negroes, female - 2, Mulattoes, male -35, Mulattoes, female - none." The census did not have a category indicating

how many of them were slaves.

Willis was one of these local African-American pioneers. He was born in Missouri in 1824 and was later either inherited or bought by the Vaughn family in Saline County, Mo. In 1846, Maj. Singleton Vaughn decided to move west, accompanied by Willis. Vaughn first settled in Woodland and then moved to Benicia.

In 1852, he decided to bring his whole family. Willis, then age 23, was put in charge of the overland trek.

Willis remained with the Vaughn family until he was given his freedom on Sept. 25, 1855. The letter recording his manumission recently was discovered in the Solano County Historical Archives and will be part of an upcoming exhibit at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco.

Once free, Willis set out as a cook, working in the Suisun area. One of the families he cooked for was that of Capt. Wing. Willis also worked as a cook for various other families, several hotels and the Solano County Hospital in Fairfield. He died Nov. 20, 1902.

I will finish Capt. Josiah Wing's story in my next column.

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