

## Early depot town faded away

By Jerry Bowen

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My interest in Solano County history began in the 1990s after I retired from Mare Island Naval Shipyard, and it grew by leaps and bounds when I met who I consider one of Vacaville's finest men ever to grace this community, Bert Hughes, at the Vacaville Heritage Council.

I began wandering all over the county, seeking out what was left of historic sites and photographing them for the future and I continue to do so even today.

Over the years, many of those sites literally have disappeared for many reasons.

On a nice day in September 1991, I was photographing a tree-lined section of Batavia Road with what appeared to be several old homes peeking from behind the bushes. I had seen the name Batavia near the old California Pacific Railroad tracks between Weber and Midway roads and until that day I had just assumed it had been only a railroad station.

I had been working hard that day and looked more disheveled and grimy than usual when a lady in a car pulled over and asked me what I was doing. I told her that I was interested in local history and was taking photos of this area for future record and research.

To my surprise she replied, "Well come on over to my house, sit down and have some apple pie while I tell you about the town of Batavia." Quite frankly, I wouldn't have invited a stranger who looked like I did that day into my home, but she did and I accepted.

The lady's name was Evelyn Seyman and she and her husband, Jim, lived in an historic home built by George Manchester Coulter in 1876.

Stepping back in time a little, the area that became Batavia was originally known as "Duke's Crossing." It had a train depot and hearsay says there may have been a couple of saloons along the roadside.

In 1860, two former residents, of Silveyville, John D. Duke and William W. Jenkins, sold their possessions and moved to Mississippi. From there, they had gone to Texas and were there during the Civil War.

They returned to Silveyville, finding it held better prospects to make a living around 1866.

In 1867, Thomas Dickson decided to settle in the area a little north of the slowly growing community at Duke's Crossing. At about the same time, he donated 10 acres to the railroad for a depot and other purposes. By 1868 the California Pacific Railroad through Dickson's land was in full operation with a depot called Dickson's Station.

Meanwhile, Batavia became a shipping center for grain after the demise of Maine Prairie. The Batavia plat map of 1868 shows it consisted of 20 blocks with 286 lots, 50 by 100 feet in size; 10 streets that were 60 feet wide, with 20-foot wide alleys through the center of each block.

By 1869, a number of citizens from the Suisun City area and Silveyville were moving to the newly located Dickson (Dixon) and Batavia, where they felt the farming opportunities were better.

Coulter and Co. constructed three large warehouses near the intersection of Batavia and Weber roads, close to the train depot. The first two were built in 1872, the third in 1880. Combined, they could house as much as 7,000 tons of grain, making it a fairly large operation.

George Manchester Coulter built a stately home near the warehouses in 1876 and it still stands today. The current owners, Mr. and Mrs. Seyman, whom I had the great pleasure to meet in 1991, had taken excellent care of the home since they bought it in the 1950s.

Meanwhile, in Solano County work had been progressing on what was alternately called the "Great Highway" or "Great Road" "from Sacramento to San Francisco." The route, via Davis, Dixon, Batavia, Vacaville, Fairfield, and Cordelia to Vallejo was chosen in May 1913.

The road progressed slowly, often held up by funding, rights-of-way and haggling over portions of the route. An early concern was the need for a causeway across the swamp from the Sacramento River to Davis. It was completed three years later in May 1916.

Batavia was granted a post office in 1890. It served the community until 1913, when the town began to decline as highways replaced the railroads as the primary means of transportation. Today, some of the old homes remain, but the rails, depot and warehouses are just another memory of the past.

The history of Batavia is sketchy and needs much more research but one interesting

item is about Nancy Geary. An 1898 leaflet that listed places to eat announced, "Mrs. Nancy Geary is prepared to furnish a wholesome meal at the corner of First and B Street and will treat her patrons well."

She was the former slave of the Duke family who brought her with them to California. By the time she arrived in Dixon, she had been married and lost her husband. She had two sons, Jeff, who died young and Frank, who worked at Mare Island around the turn of the century. Geary also worked as a midwife and nurse.

Notice of her death on July 18, 1910, stated, "Mrs. Nancy Geary, although of the colored race, among the older families, probably had as many sincere friends as any person in town, who will miss her especially in times of sickness. Until advancing age had laid its hand upon her, she had been a most capable nurse, and in many of the old families of the town there was never a sickness but she had been nurse, and a very tender, sympathetic and faithful nurse she always proved to be."

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