

## **Semple was beaten to the punch in naming rights**

**By Sabine Goerke-Shrode**

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In 1900, the San Francisco Chronicle commemorated California's 50th anniversary by interviewing prominent pioneer women. Among them was Frances Anne Cooper. She came to the Bay area in 1846 from Howard County, Mo. Her interview appeared on Sept. 9, 1900.

After a stay in Napa, the Cooper family moved in 1847 to a new settlement along the Carquinez Strait.

Its founder, Dr. Robert Semple, a dentist from Kentucky and one of the initiators of the short-lived Bear Flag Republic, had received an interest from General Mariano Vallejo in a five-mile stretch of land along the Strait. Here he founded a new city, which he planned to name Francisca after General Vallejo's wife.

The Alcalde of Yerba Buena foiled that attempt in January 1847 by naming his rival port and settlement San Francisco.

Semple had to settle on Dona Vallejo's second name, Benicia, instead.

Around that time, 21-year old Frances Anne married Dr. Semple.

"It used to be claimed that I was the first white woman married in California," she recalled in her interview in September 1900, "but Miss Yount was married in 1845 to Mr. Davis. ... Father had moved to San Francisco, now called Benicia, and had started a boarding-house. Dr. Semple, who was a native of Kentucky, owned nearly all the land where the town is now. In those days that was thought to be the coming city. The present San Francisco was but an insignificant group of tents occupied by Spanish people and bearing the name Yerba Buena. Governor Vallejo had made Dr. Semple a present of half of Benicia, believing that he would build it up."

Most likely, Frances Anne Cooper and Robert Semple had met prior to the family's move to Benicia.

Marriages were often arranged quickly, based on the availability of a preacher to perform the ceremony.

"I was married in Benicia in the fall of 1847. The ceremony was performed in the big

dining-room of father's boarding-house, which was decorated for the event. There were two other women in town at the time, besides mother and my sisters, and they and about 20 sailors were at my wedding."

"The sailors were as proud as could be and came all dressed in white suits. We gave them a supper affair and they all enjoyed it. The wedding was set for 9 o'clock, but it was a stormy, rainy night, and very dark. Ex-Governor Boggs of Missouri was to come visit Napa to perform the ceremony. We waited until 10 o'clock, and were just despairing of seeing him that night when he arrived. He had ridden horseback all the way through mud and water, and he was a very large, stout man, too."

Robert Semple planned to create the foremost deep-water port in Northern California in Francisca/Benicia. His vision for the growth of Francisca/Benicia also included a ferry across the Carquinez Strait, the first public transportation available to cross the Strait.

In The Californian he advertised: "The country around the city is the best agricultural portion of California. On both sides of the bay, the strait being only a mile wide, an easy landing can be made. The entire trade of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys ... must, of necessity, pass through the narrow channel of Carquinez, and the country is so situated that every person who passes from one side of the bay to the other will find the nearest and best way by Francisco [sic]."

Rates were \$1 for horse and rider, \$ 1 for each riderless horse and 50 cents for a person on foot.

The ferry was a financial success, according to Frances Anne.

"My husband, Dr. Semple, owned the only ferry-boat at Benicia. It was often said that he made money enough with it to sink that boat a half dozen times over, but he was one of the most remarkable speculators I ever knew, and went right through his money."

I will continue this story in my next column.

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