Benicia was known as the ‘Athens of California’

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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This column continues the story of Frances Anne Cooper Semple and Susan Cooper Wolfskill and life in 1850s Solano County. Their stories appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle on Sept. 9, 1900 in commemoration of California’s 50th anniversary.

The Cooper family came to Benicia in 1847. The settlers immediately set about to create their new community.

“In 1848 and 1849 we had a school in Benicia,” recalled Susan Cooper. “Father (Major Stephen Cooper) started it and got seven pupils to come from a distance and board at our places. They were Clements Harbin from Napa, whose family afterward owned Harbin Springs; Nanny Harlin from Martinez, and Lucy, Carmelita, Ellen, Joe and Goyla Knight from Knight’s Ferry. The other pupils were my two brothers and myself and my two sisters, Mrs. Calmes, who is now dead, and Mrs. Roberts, now of Oakland.”

As one of the earliest settlements in the Bay Area, Benicia developed into the main center of education. The first public school opened its doors in 1849 in the Presbyterian Church, run by the Reverend Sylvester Woodbridge, Jr. Susan Cooper’s recollections of a school in 1848 likely meant that families hired a private teacher as a precursor to the public school.

Other schools followed.

One of the more famous ones was the Benicia Young Ladies Seminary, founded in 1852 by 12 prominent Benicia residents, including Dr. Woodbridge and the Reverend Samuel H. Willey. It grew to become one of the most respected schools of its time.

Due to the excellence of its public and private schools, Benicia acquired the nickname “Athens of California.”

There were only a few settlers in the area in the early 1850s. People traveled long distances to visit each other and to stay connected.

For young girls, such as Susan, the few occasions to meet and mingle with other families created cherished memories.
“In 1849 and 1850 our only source of social amusement was dancing. And such dances! We used to ride horseback miles to attend them. I rode all the way from Benicia to Sonoma, about thirty miles, and then danced all night. And the only music for these balls was the fiddle.”

The Cooper family left Benicia in 1852 and moved to the Green Valley area, where they settled for the next three years. They then decided to move to Colusa. In 1856, Susan married John Reid Wolfskill and moved to the Wolfskill’s ranch near Winters.

Frances Anne and Robert Semple also left Benicia at that time. Their dream to create a bustling port ended when the Gold Rush emptied the town.

Robert Semple already owned large portions of Colusa.

“Dr. Semple had an idea that he could make a fortune out of the land,” recalled Frances. “So we went up there. We were the first white people in that part of the State. There was a big rancheria of Indians right in what is now the heart of the town of Colusa, hundreds and hundreds of them.”

Increasing numbers of settlers eventually drove the native Indian population away. “Little by little, as more white people settled in Colusa, the Indians moved back farther from civilization. They disappeared somewhere.”

The Semples farmed their land, growing crops that sold for high profits in the growing cities of San Francisco and Sacramento.

Frances Semple recalled a rare early visit to Sacramento and the appalling conditions she encountered there.

“When I first saw Sacramento it was an apparently endless sweep of small tents, not a frame building anywhere in sight. That was in 1850. It was a terrifying place. I was frightened. Men were gambling on all sides. They were shooting and cursing and yelling. The noise and uproar were awful.”

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