

A man of vision, Frisbie made a difference in Vallejo

By Nancy Dingler

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John Frisbie, the man responsible for the growth and development of the city of Vallejo in the mid-1850s, was a man of vision and ambition.

He was born in Albany, N.Y., in 1823. He graduated from Albany Academy and went on to study law alongside Leland Stanford. Stanford would build his fortune in California, joining Huntington, Crocker and Hopkins, the "Big Four" of the Central Pacific Railroad.

Frisbie enjoyed a lucrative law practice while showing interest in military style drills. He was elected captain of the Van Rensselaer Guard, acknowledged to be the best drilled in the state of New York. Following his passions, Frisbie recruited a company to fight in the Mexican War. Frisbie and his recruits joined the New York Volunteers under Colonel J. D. Stevenson for duty in California, arriving in San Francisco on March 5, 1847.

Capt. Frisbie was given command of the Sonoma Barracks in 1848 and remained there until mustered out. The Sonoma Barracks was Vallejo's headquarters, so it was easy to see how Frisbie would have become acquainted with the family.

After his discharge, Frisbie persuaded Vallejo to open stores in Sonoma, Napa and Benicia to outfit the miners. In 1849, he ran a mercantile brokerage in San Francisco with his brother, Eleazer.

Even though he was not a delegate, Frisbie took part in the Constitutional Convention of 1849 held in Monterey. He helped develop the political future of California. He also ran for lieutenant governor, but lost.

In 1850, Vallejo gave Frisbie power of attorney over all of Suscol Rancho, which amounted to 84,000 acres. Frisbie could bargain, grant and sell land on the Rancho. He sold substantial portions to San Francisco capitalists, who with the aid of Frisbie and Vallejo, made the new city of Vallejo the capital of California. In April 1851, John Frisbie married General Mariano Vallejo's eldest daughter, Epifania, fondly referred to as Fannie. Vallejo, up until 1848, had been the most politically and financially powerful person in Northern California.

Frisbie worked tirelessly to establish the legitimacy of his father-in-law's land grants. It would turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

Frisbie learned that the United States was investigating sites for a Pacific Coast naval base. A commission had been appointed and had decided to locate a navy yard in Sausalito. Frisbie lobbied for a new commission, which after a thorough investigation, recommended Mare Island. The U.S. purchased Mare Island in 1854 for its West Coast Navy yard.

Gen. Vallejo deeded the town of Vallejo to Frisbie in December of 1854 for \$25,000. For the next 22 years, Frisbie promoted the City of Vallejo, engaging in enterprises with energy and perseverance. By 1876 he had invested in a livery stable, the Maine and George Street wharfs, a wharf in Contra Costa County, schooners on the bay for transporting freight, the Vallejo Water Company, the Vallejo and Benicia Telegraph Company and numerous other profitable enterprises.

With the Civil War blossoming in the east, the U.S. made sure that California, was secured for the union. One of the newly established military units, the Vallejo Rifles, was mustered in on Sept. 8, 1861. Frisbie was appointed the first captain of the unit. He was appointed to the rank of general by Gov. Leland Stanford in 1862, a title which was to remain with him for the rest of his life.

One of Frisbie's most important contributions toward improvement of Vallejo was the Bernard Hotel, which was completed in 1872. The hotel, one of the finest in the state, had eight stores on the street level and forty rooms on the second floor. In 1876, the family moved into the magnificent residence that had been built at the corner of Sutter and Virginia streets.

Frisbie spent 15 years before the land commission, the courts and Congress, attempting to secure his claim and his father-in-law's claim that the land grants they held were legal and the squatters who had taken over vast tracts of their holdings were to be evicted. Finally in 1868, President Andrew Johnson signed patents issued by the Congress, making their claims legitimate. It was a costly victory, which saw the sale of most of Vallejo's holdings to pay for the lawsuits.

Frisbie had embarked on many important enterprises. These required expenditures of large sums of money, much of which was borrowed. Some of these investments proved lucrative, others did not. Frisbie held 18,000 shares in the California Pacific Railroad. The railway collapsed and Frisbie's Vallejo Savings and Commercial Bank closed its doors and went into liquidation in 1876. To satisfy the debt, he sold all his holdings, including his home, the Bernard Hotel and all his other property. No depositor lost any money and the bank reopened. Frisbie, however, had lost everything.

Frisbie borrowed money from his brother-in-law, Patrick Lynch, so he could go to New York with the hope of re-establishing himself financially. Rutherford B. Hayes was

president at the time. The Hayes administration did not recognize Porfirio Diaz as the president of Mexico. Frisbie left for Mexico with the idea that he could win favor with Diaz. Frisbie assured the president that he could represent him in Washington and resolve the problems between the two countries.

While in Mexico, Frisbie received a telegram from Sen. Conkling calling him back to Washington to testify before the congressional committee on Mexican affairs. In the meantime, Frisbie's family had moved to Mexico. At 54, Frisbie began a new career.

The Hayes administration at last recognized the Mexican Government. The grateful Diaz gave Frisbie an abandoned gold mine in addition to a large fee. Frisbie also secured a concession from the Mexican government to build a railroad from Mexico City to Cuernavaca, for the Huntington-Stanford Railroad and agent for the Pacific Steamship company in Mexico.

Fannie made frequent trips to Vallejo, enrolling her children in California schools. She was not fond of living in Mexico and in 1899 she re-purchased the home her husband had built in Vallejo in 1876. Frisbie joined Fannie in the winter of 1899, the first visit to Vallejo in 21 years. In 1901, Fannie and John celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at their San Nicholas Rancho, a sugar plantation in Mexico. Frisbie died in May at the age of 86.

He was worth more than a million dollars. He had acquired interests in railroads, banking, stock raising, dairy farming, sugar mills and an electric light and power company. At the time of his death, he was survived by three sons and four daughters, all married and all residents of Mexico.

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