

Benicia born as port, spurred by Gold Rush

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Sunday, April 02, 1995

Information for this article came from the Benicia Camel Barn Museum, Solano County Genealogical Society, Benicia Historical Society, and Vacaville Heritage Council.

First of two parts

There was a time when you could order a house from Sears Roebuck & Co. The kit house would arrive in sections. All you had to do was reassemble it, hang up your "Home Sweet Home" handiwork and you were in your castle!

Benicia is no stranger to prefab housing. A tour of the town takes you by many such structures still standing after more than a 100 years. Maybe the reason so many of these homes have remained in tack is that most are fairly modest in style and size, and thus affordable and easy to maintain. Oddly, even the leading citizens of Benicia shunned building the grand mansions that characterized the wealth of the 1800s in many other Bay Area towns.

Benicia was the dream of Robert Semple. As a lieutenant, he escorted Gen. Vallejo back to Sonoma after the Bear Flag Revolt, in which Vallejo had been taken prisoner. When they passed through Benicia, Semple was duly impressed. Discovering that Vallejo owned the land, he convinced Vallejo to sell him a parcel, five miles by one mile, to establish a city. Vallejo deeded the land to Semple and his partner Thomas Larkin for \$100 and the town of Benicia, named after Vallejo's wife, was founded May 1847. Surveyors immediately set to laying out lots and streets. Benicia's town center was between West Sixth and East Second and K Street and the straits. First Street was designated as the main thoroughfare. This represented the hub of the town in the 19th century and many houses in this part of Benicia reflect those times.

Robert Baylor Semple was born in Kentucky. A man of many talents, he practiced law, medicine and the printing trade and even piloted a steamboat on the Mississippi. He was 6-foot-8 with large feet. His friends described him as "a man with a head full of brains and common sense and as honest as he was tall." What caught this intelligent man's eye about the site of Benicia was that it seemed to have all the advantages: A deep harbor. Accessibility to the interior valley. And easier to defend than San Francisco's harbor. The expectation was that Benicia would become a metropolis of Northern California, situated as it was at the head of the ocean and being in a position to command the trade from the interior rivers and valleys.

Semple constructed a small scow and began ferry service between the north and south shores of the straits. Shortly after, he built a better ferry. He charged an extra 50 cents for ferrying wild horses, which had to be lashed down during passage and were difficult to offload. He started out making \$115 a month. During the Gold Rush days he was making \$50 a day. He was already printing the first newspaper in California, aptly named the Californian. He married Frances Cooper in 1847 in Benicia's new hotel, California House, a large two-story adobe. The proprietor of the hotel was Maj. Cooper, the father of the bride. After his marriage, he went on to pursue his dream for Benicia. It was due in great part to Semple's persistence, constant promotion and industrious nature that by 1850 Benicia was poised to challenge San Francisco as a major port.

Most new inhabitants, circa 1847, were from the New England states. These early settlers of Benicia were obliged to live in tents and wagons before several adobe and small frame houses were erected. But with lumber \$300 to \$600 per thousand board-feet, the fact that there were no lumber yards and that carpenter's wages were high, the people of Benicia soon turned to prefab housing. They ordered their homes from back east. The houses were dismantled there and shipped in sections around the Horn. Time was also a factor. A house ordered in this manner would be in place within two years. A house constructed on site with hand tools would take around three years before it could be inhabited.

On West E Street, 129, 133, and 137, are a group of houses thought to be some of the first built in Benicia. These do not appear to represent the pre-fab houses that were erected soon after. Thus these houses represent early California construction.

Capt. Edward von Pfister was one of Benicia's early settlers. He was born in 1813 in Albany, N.Y., and engaged in the seagoing trade. Reaching the California coast in 1846, von Pfister decided California was the place to settle. He sailed to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) to pick up cargo to establish a general store. On returning, Semple sought him out to convince him to bring his cargo and move to Benicia. Von Pfister agreed. A timely arrival, he furnished the swallow-tail coats and white linen pants at \$15 apiece for the 12 men in Benicia's first big wedding, Robert Semple to Frances Ann Cooper.

Von Pfister opened his store in 1848. The building was a 40-by-25-foot adobe: a portion of the adobe remains to this day. It is thought to be the first store in Solano County. It was a gathering place by day and bar and hotel at night. Von Pfister often accepted "California Bank Bills," cow hides valued at \$1.50 each. Barley, corn and produce were also traded for merchandise.

It was in this adobe the first word of the discovery of gold was leaked. Charley Bennett, a trusted messenger of Sutter's, was on his way to Monterey with gold samples and a

land-lease agreement between Sutter and the Indians of Coloma. While waiting for the boat to San Francisco, Bennett stopped in at von Pfister's. In the course of conversation with some men, he spilled the beans about the gold discovery. The Gold Rush was on! Immediately, the majority of the male population of Benicia headed for the hills.

Edward didn't catch the gold fever, but rather stayed in Benicia and catered to the would-be miners on their way to the fields and the many miners who would over winter in Benicia. He married and went on to operate the California House Hotel. Later he became an elected official.

A New England saltbox house located at 123 West D St. was a prefab shipped from Maine in 1848. The "Saltbox" House at 145 West D St. is another prefabricated house from the East Coast, sent in sections to California to be reassembled during the Gold Rush days.

The Fischer-Hanlon residence is at 137 West G St. It was originally a hotel on First Street during the Gold Rush era. Little did Joseph Fischer know in 1849 when he arrived at Benicia this hotel would one day be his home. Joseph Fischer, a man of German descent from Switzerland, established a butcher shop and was successful. He went on to run cattle and owned a quarry. He married Catherine Hall in 1854. It was in 1856 that the hotel had a fire and he purchased it, moved it to its present location, adding porches, a kitchen with a wood-burning stove, servants quarters and bathrooms. When Catherine's sister visited her, she met von Pfister and they were married. The Fischer-Hanlon home was occupied by Fischer's descendants until 1969. The house has under its roof one of the only surviving Steinway pianos of three that were shipped to San Francisco in 1869.

Capt. John Walsh was a retired sailing vessel captain who settled in Benicia in 1849. This was when three identical prefab houses were packaged as kits and shipped around the Horn from Boston. One was for Capt. Walsh, one for Gen. Vallejo of Sonoma and the third was erected in San Francisco on Washington Square. The only one left standing is in Benicia at 235 East I St. Capt. Walsh's wife, Eleanor, was one of the first women to be registered as a "married woman doing business in her own name" in Solano County. She oversaw her husband's shipping interest in Chile and directed the remantling of this house. The house today is a bed and breakfast.

The Pacific Mail Steamship Co. arrived in 1850 with a fleet. They established a large wharf, foundry, machine shops and offices. This was the first large industrial enterprise in California. Sea-going vessels sailed right up to the shore to unload on land as the harbor was very deep at that time. Ships from all over the world were repaired and coaled here. Clipper ships moored here waiting for cargoes from the Vaca and

Sacramento Valleys. Often 50 to 60 large vessels lay at anchor off Benicia. Operations were terminated in 1868-69 as it became cheaper to contract work out rather than do it themselves. This put a big bite into Semple's dream for Benicia. Eleven years later the Pacific Mail buildings were taken over by a smaller company for manufacturing plows, wagons, mowers and harvesting machinery.

Washington House, 333 First St., was built in 1850. It had a lively history. It housed some members of the State Legislature when Benicia was the Capitol in 1853-54. It was at various times a hotel, a Chinese lottery, a speak-easy, a bordello and an artist's studio. It is now used for small shops and a restaurant.

Located at 110 West J St. is the Masonic Temple, which was erected in 1850. It was shipped around the Horn at the cost of \$18,000. Robert Semple donated the building and was the first Masonic Lodge Hall built in the state of California. It represents the Greek Revival style that was designated for important structures of the era. The lower floor was a county courthouse until 1852.

The houses at 129-137 East E St. are modest examples of the Greek Revival style. The house at 105 West G St. is a larger example and the most original house for this style is 235 West J St.

On April 3, 1851 Capt. John B. Frisbee of New York, who had been stationed at the old mission in Sonoma, wed Epifania, the second child of Dona Francesca Filipa Benicia Camilla Vallejo and General Don Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and was described as a "Castilian blonde beauty." The young couple went to Benicia to live and moved into a house that had been shipped around the Horn. Shipped in pieces, it arrived in Benicia as a kit to be assembled. It is no longer standing.

The early City Hall, a brick building in the Greek Revival style, was completed in 1852. It is located at First and G streets. It became the State Capitol building during a 13-month period from 1853 to 1854, Benicia being the third state capital of California. Inside are the spittoons, which dotted the Senate Chamber on the first floor and the Assembly on the second floor as the chewing of tobacco was practiced widely.

Next week the story of Benicia's arsenal, schools, and the end of its dream as a major metropolis.

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