

# Loss of Capitol, decline of port end dreams

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Information for this article came from the Benicia Camel Barn Museum, Solano County Genealogical Society, Benicia Historical Society, and Vacaville Heritage Council (Part 2. Last week was the story of the founding of Benicia in 1848 by Robert Semple, who purchased the land from Gen. Vallejo. The first news of the Gold Rush was in Benicia. The town grew as a major hub for travel to all points. It was a major port for sea-going vessels. Benicia was the state capital for 13 months in 1953. Many homes were built during this booming era, some of which still stand.)

The history of the Benicia Arsenal dates back to the days when military transportation was by horse or foot and firepower was cannon ball and gunpowder. The original Army barracks established in 1849 became the U.S. Benicia Arsenal in 1852 and was the first arsenal in California. Its purpose was to supply Army troops on the Pacific Coast, who were on exploring expeditions and searching out marauding Indians.

Among the early officers were Col. Silas Casey, the famous Indian fighter; Capt. Lyon, who became a famous general and met his death on the battlefield at Lexington; Gen. Johnston, who resigned from the Arsenal in April 1861 to join the Southern forces in the Civil War and Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Comm. Matthew Perry's squadron of 300 men visited arsenal in 1854. It remained a garrisoned post until 1898 when the last troops were moved to the Philippine Islands during the Spanish-American War. Though closed down permanently in the '50s, many of the old buildings remain intact. These military buildings are well marked and can be reached from Military East.

The Guard House, constructed in 1852, is famous as the setting for the trial of a young lieutenant charged with a minor infraction of military regulations. The officer was found guilty as charged. His name was Ulysses S. Grant.

The Clock Tower Fortress was built to command the Carquinez Straits and protect the post from Indian attacks, which never came. The structure is set up for rifle practice and cannon fire. The clock was made by Seth Thomas.

The commandant's home is a 20-room classic Georgian mansion with 14-foot ceilings and brick walls. The woods for the wainscoting, parquet floors, paneling, stair rails and balustrades were shipped around the Horn. From 1906 to 1911 Stephen Vincent Benet, the writer and poet, lived here with his parents when his father was the commanding officer.

The Camel Barns are hand-crafted, sandstone buildings. Though constructed as warehouses, there was a brief period when these buildings were used for stabling a herd of camels imported in 1856 from the Near East as an experiment in the transportation of military supplies across the Southwest desert. In 1863 the camels were sold at auction. One of the Camel Barns is now a museum.

The Powder Magazine is one of California's finest examples of the stone-cutter's art. French craftsmen were brought in to do the work. The stone walls of this building are 4 feet thick and the interior Corinthian pillars were hand carved. The Post Hospital is also constructed of sandstone blocks.

In 1852 the "Family Boarding School for Boys" was established. In 1855 it became the Benicia Collegiate Institute, the first law school of California. The cost was \$150 per semester, 22 weeks. In 1867 it was sold to Dr. James Lloyd Breck and became the Episcopal College of St. Augustine. It was operated as a strict military school stressing discipline for mind and body. Joseph McKenna was a student, later becoming the associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. The campus was presided over by Bishop J.H.D. Wingfield from 1876 to 1898. All that remains is his old home at 36 Wingfield Way.

In 1853 the Young Ladies Seminary opened. The cost for five months was \$200 for board and tuition. Studies included Latin, French, Spanish, drawing, painting, embroidery and the fee was \$20 per course. Vocal/musical instrument studies were \$50. Nothing remains of this early school, but the director moved to establish what is now Mills College in Oakland.

Passengers disembarked from the stagecoach line to travel by river steamers. Naturally Benicia was the major stop on the straits for the Sacramento and Stockton riverboats. Benicia was also the transfer hub for all points.

The American Hotel was advertising in the newspaper for some of this trade in the early 1850s. Following is a newspaper ad with spellings of the day intact. "This house is built in the most modern style, with plastered walls throughout and everything adapted for the comfort of the travelers or pleasure parties. A carriage is always in Attendance, upon arrival of the boats, to carry people to and from the same free. Napa, Sonoma, and Suisun Stages start from this House every morning. Connected with the House is a "Livery Stable" furnished with all kinds of vehicles and good saddle horses, with large and roomy stables and yard for staling stock, etc. C.M. Davis, proprietor."

Mrs. Frisbee's Boarding House was situated next to the American Hotel. Mrs. Frisbee cannot be positively identified as a relative of the captain's, but may have been. The following is a newspaper advertisement for her place. "The subscriber having fitted up

her house in the most comfortable manner is prepared to accommodate travelers and regular boarders with well-furnished rooms on liberal terms. Her table will be supplied with the best the markets afford. Napa, Sonoma, and Suisun Stages start from this house every morning. E.H. Frisbee. December 31, 1853.”

The Solano Hotel, the Sawyer House and Mrs. Gate’s Select Boarding House carried similar advertisements.

The church on J Street, St. Paul’s, was built in 1854 and was the first Episcopal cathedral in California. The base of the construction was shipped from back east and was reassembled as money was available. The roof and ceilings were built by the Scandinavian shipwrights from the Pacific Mail and Steamship Co., as there were no other builders in Benicia until the late 1860s. Their nautical heritage and know-how is reflected in the structure. The arching beams and ceiling resemble an inverted ship’s hull, which is exactly what it is. This form was adopted by the innovative shipwrights as a way to fashion a roof with a steeple. The window over the main altar was designed in New York City. It was brought by rail to Missouri and then by stagecoach to Sacramento and San Francisco where it was assembled. Then it was shipped to Benicia.

The rectory next door to St. Paul’s at 120 East J St. is a typical New England “saltbox” house, the type that were built in New England. This house was built in 1790 in Torrington, Conn. It was purchased by Capt. Julian McAllister in 1864, dismantled and shipped in sections around the Horn. The rectory still has the original fireplace and staircase.

The California Pacific Railroad began in 1868. The railroad cars were transported from one side of the straits to the other on the ferries Port Costa and Solano. The train ferries that left from here were the largest in the world. The Transcontinental Railroad Depot, at the foot of First Street, was completed in 1879. On Dec. 28, 1879, the car-transfer ferry Solano began lugging entire trains back and forth across the Carquinez Straits.

Alamo Rooms, located at 123 First St., was built in 1868. It was a house of prostitution, although some literature says it was a rooming house and restaurant for the railroad men. It was also a brothel during the 1940s and ‘50s and has an invisible door upstairs for quick hiding. Today it is a restaurant.

In 1870 Benicia’s population was 1,656.

Though Benicia tended to shun building grand mansions, Hastings broke the unspoken rule. Built in 1881, his house with 21 rooms would have impressed even a San

Franciscan. But by many Benicians it was considered an aberration and was referred to as "Hastings' Folly." Ultimately it proved too large to maintain and was sold for \$10,000. It was finally demolished in the early 20th century.

The Crooks House at 285 West G St. was built in the late 1880s by J.E. Crooks and his brother William, president of the People's Bank in Benicia and mayor from 1924-1940. The architectural style reflects the taste of that era, Stick-style. There are other representations of this style. The dominant styles from 1880 through 1910 were the Stick-style, East Lake and Queen Anne. 281 West I St. is a Stick style built in 1890. 140 West I St. is a Queen Anne style built in 1890, more lavish in style than the Stick-style with shingling and heralding. 288 and 186 West J St. are Queen Anne cottages built in profusion in Benicia in the 1890s and 1900s. The house at 172 East G St. is a mix of styles. Many cottages were built in pairs like 149-159 West G St. and were built circa 1900 and painted in contrasting color. The house at 140 East G represents housing 1899-1900 and was built by Pat and Ellen Leery. It was occupied by the same family at least through 1987. Further examples of the popular Stick-style and Queen Anne homes can be viewed in smaller homes on West J Street.

The Riddle Fish house at 245 West K St. was built about 1900. It is in the Queen Anne style and occupied by the young couple, Franklin and Henriess Riddle Fish. Mrs. Fish was a painter. The house is still standing and features a mahogany staircase and stained glass windows.

Jurgensen's Saloon was the haunt of Jack London when he lived in a houseboat on the waterfront in Benicia. "Tales of the Fish Patrol" and "John Barleycorn" were based on his experiences in this area. The saloon was presided over by Mr. Jurgensen, who dressed in an elaborately decorated jacket as he served his guests. What is left of the original Jurgensen's is the top floor. It is located at 100 First St.

The Wassmann House, a Victorian style built in 1899, is at 640 East Second St. It was built by the grandfather of Harry Wassmann. Harry Wassermann worked at Travis and has lived in no other dwelling his entire life. He was raised in this house, brought his wife and raised his family in this house and now spends his retirement years in this house.

Benicia never reached the expectations Semple had. The loss of the state capital ended any hopes of becoming a center of government. With the advent of rail, the harbor never became the hub envisioned. When the Pacific Mail Steamship Co. shut down, the city was left with only tanneries as its industry. It was reported in 1879 that building had ceased in Benicia and that it was a dying town. Nevertheless, Benicians hung in making the best of the changing times that was throwing them a curve ball.

Benicia was the principal tanning center of the Pacific Coast with three major tanners, but that industry ceased by 1928. Another major source of income for Benicians was fishing. This attracted a population of Scandinavians, Portuguese and Greeks. With the coming of the railroads, a salmon cannery was established and they also canned sardines in the later 1800s. Benicia also boasted the first fruit cannery in California. Truck farms were another source of income as small family concerns.

Shipbuilding boomed from 1885 to 1903 when Matthew Turner's yards produced several hundred wood ships. Some of the yard's famous ships were the Lurline, built for the Matson Lines, and the Equator, built for Robert Louis Stevenson.

The huge ferry steamers Solano and Port Costa carried trains and passenger cars, but with the advent of bridges spanning the Straits, these income producers also ceased. Robert Semple would have been sad to see his vision virtually collapse. But today, we can tour Benicia and for brief moments envision the town the way it was in those glory days.

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