

Musical chairs in Fairfield

By Kristin Delaplane

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Benicia was the first county seat of Solano County. By 1858, it was clear a more centrally located county seat was needed to accommodate the growing population of the region.

With the many land grant disputes going through the court system, more and more people had reason to travel to the Recorder's Office. This was a time when people traveled by horse, carriage or foot, so having the government offices at an extreme end of the county made no practical sense.

Coincidentally, a Capt. Robert Waterman was in the process of planning the town of Fairfield, which happened to be centrally located. Waterman was born in Hudson, N.Y., in 1808 and had lived in Fairfield, Conn.

In 1820, he shipped onboard a sailing vessel as a cabin boy, eventually becoming master and owner of a full-rigged ship from 1833 to 1851. He sailed around the world five times. In 1846, he married in Bridgeport, Conn., and that same year he came to Solano County and bought four leagues of land. He and his wife, Cordelia, permanently located in Solano County in 1850.

Waterman was intent on establishing a township and he first founded Cordelia. Recognizing the importance of water transport, he had decided to locate a major town site on the Suisun Marsh and selected the site at the head of Cordelia Slough as being closest to the Sacramento-Benicia road. But Josiah Wing, having the same idea, claimed the Suisun Slough. His shipping port, being closer to the Lagoon and Vaca valleys, soon outstripped Waterman's site in importance.

Still determined to form a township of consequence, Waterman selected another area, had it surveyed and the plot filed for record in 1858. This was to become Fairfield Township.

It was at this exact time that it was decided to hold a county convention to determine which town would best serve as the county seat. The delegates met Aug. 7, 1858, in Suisun Township. There were delegates from Suisun, Montezuma, Fremont and Green Valley. It was decided that the vote would be for either Fairfield, Suisun, Vacaville or

Denverton.

Capt. Waterman of Fairfield offered 16 acres, known as Union Park, plus an additional four blocks for courthouse grounds. Suisun offered a lot 120 by 100 feet, known as Owen's Tavern, and \$5,550 in cash. Vacaville offered four blocks of land and \$1,000 cash. Denverton stood on its own merits, offering only the location itself. An election was held in September. Denverton received one vote. Suisun got 12, and Fairfield, 16.

A temporary courthouse was built immediately and the county records were removed from Benicia. Other buildings were rented from Waterman for the county officials. The Board of Supervisors - three men - immediately called for plans and specifications for a courthouse and jail. In January 1859, a tax of 50 cents on each \$100 worth of property was levied for a period of two years for the cost of construction.

Plans and specifications submitted by George Bordwell were approved in February. They called for a jail 35 feet square and a courthouse 40 by 50 feet with rooms for county officials and juries. Ten contractors submitted bids. Lark Richardson won with a low bid of \$24,440.

The highest bid was from A. Barrows at \$38,500. The next lowest to Richardson's was at \$27,200. Richardson was compelled to file a bond in the sum of \$48,880, the conditions being that the buildings be completed according to the plans and specs. The architect was allowed 8 percent on the contract price.

The jail was completed in November 1859 and the prisoners, who had been held in the Contra Costa County jail, were returned to Fairfield. The courthouse was completed the following April. Richardson was paid, including payment for extra work. The total cost, including furnishings, came to \$26,400.

From the 1850s through the turn of the century, the legislative responsibilities were basic: recording title to land boundaries, marriage, birth and school records, apprehension of criminals and collection of necessary taxes.

The first residence to be built in Fairfield was John B. Lemon's. He was also elected county treasurer at various times.

Lemon was born in Indiana in 1825. He came to California in 1849, settling in El Dorado County for two years. The first year he managed a store for Kelsey's Dry Diggings. In 1850, he operated a mercantile store in Greenwood Valley. That spring he returned to Indiana, married and returned to California driving a herd of cattle. In 1852, he and his wife settled in Green Valley. He purchased an interest in Samuels dry goods store in Suisun City. In 1861, he embarked in the occupation of sheep-raising, at which

he was quite successful.

There was considerable bustle during the sessions of the different courts, but the town of Fairfield was predominately residential neighborhoods with wide, tree-lined streets. The houses were enclosed by neat fences and well-kept gardens, vineyards and orchards. The housing was modest: saltbox houses from the earliest settlers. Square cottages. Sparsely decorated Victorian-era cottages and single-family cottages from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fairfield was traditionally a working-man's town. The commercial enterprises were on Texas Street.

By 1873, Vallejo had grown to more than 6,000 people, and E.H. Sawyer, who owned much land in Vallejo, was intent on moving the county seat there. He was backed by John B. Frisbee, Gen. Vallejo's son-in-law.

Their reasoning was that Vallejo, being bigger with better accommodations, was better suited. That Fairfield lacked accommodations and was a "dreary plain" with a population of only 400 people. In an election held in November 1873, Vallejo won, but a charge was immediately launched that more than 600 illegal votes had been cast.

A group called the "Divisionites" formed, headed by Vallejo's rival, Benicia. A counter bill was introduced to divide the county so that Vallejo was cut off. The bill was passed, but immediately vetoed as being unconstitutional. Gov. Booth let it be known that if a bill was introduced to keep the county seat in Fairfield, he would sign it. He did so on March 30, 1874, and the brouhaha ended.

In 1877, the Board of Supervisors issued a \$15,000 bond bearing 7 percent yearly interest for the "Courthouse Improvement Fund." The board also levied an annual tax for the bond's redemption. This was done to erect a fireproof addition to the courthouse for safe preservation of records,

The plans and specifications were prepared by Bordwell. The construction bid went to Richard and John McCann of San Francisco for \$11,597 for a 60-by-30-foot, two-story building with a steel bridge on the second floor joining the two buildings. Also, a wooden gallows was to be erected near the jail. In 1870, they proceeded to build the desired structures. After furnishing and extra work, the total bill came to \$15,400.

In 1908, the old jail was replaced. The new one was constructed in concrete with galvanized iron turrets and parapets. Gothic in style, it had the appearance of a medieval fortress.

The current courthouse, a stately, white granite building, was erected in 1911 and is a true landmark, impressive to the visitor and local alike. It is in the neo-classical Revival

style with a granite facade. A broad granite stairway leads up to the central entrance, which features three doorways, a large Doric colonnade with narrow end pavilions and a simple entablature. Elaborate iron lamps on pedestals flank the staircase.

The interior features marble paneling and stairs. When the courthouse opened, the Solano Republican announced: "After many years of patient waiting, the city officials at last are quartered in a building in keeping with the size and wealth of Solano County." It was also described as a "dandy quarter of a million dollar structure." The cost of the jail and courthouse combined came to \$291,000.

No ceremony marked the occupancy. The prisoners of the county were put to work moving the furniture. A temporary bridge was put in place between the upper stories of the new and old courthouses to cart the furnishings over.

The old courthouse was demolished into a brick pile. A certain amount of regret was expressed over the loss of the old building.

Waterman built his final house on his ranch in Fairfield. It is now restored to its original character, which includes Second Empire features and a bellcast mansard roof. It is located off Waterman Boulevard, "Ten Gate Ranch on Ten Gate Road."

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