

# Vallejo faces decline, gains business footing

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Sunday, June 04, 1995

Information for this article came from The Vallejo Naval & Historical Museum and Vacaville Heritage Council.

Second of two parts.

Last week we saw the beginnings of Vallejo and how the town first formed, its elation at being chosen as the state capital and subsequent disappointment at being removed as the state capital. How Mare Island became its source of revival and subsequent growth.)

White Sulphur Springs (now Blue Rock Springs Park) was established in the 1860s. It was a most elegant spa, featuring curative waters and eight bath houses. It became the recreation mecca for California governors and the social center for the elite of Vallejo.

It was the setting for Sunday School picnics and the annual Fourth of July parade and swimming party. It boasted a two-story hotel, a large dining room, a recreation hall, a bandstand, an outdoor dance floor and stables.

The site was first owned by Gen. Vallejo and then Frisbie, who fixed it up “with a taste which it would be next to impossible to excel, ornamented the grounds in a most lavish manner.”

He had the hotel embowered by roses and vines and added cottages, a bar, billiard room and a barber shop.

When summer came, many families would leave for the Springs’ campgrounds via the four-horse stage. Wagons would bring in fresh vegetables, fruits and meats throughout the season.

In 1859, the Good Samaritan Society and St. Vincent’s Benevolent Society formed. These women relieved and cared for the sick and needy up through the 1890s.

Started in 1867, the Good Templars’ Home for Orphans was one of Vallejo’s most successful institutions. It was a stately three-story building with mansard roof built on land known as the Hannibal Ranch consisting of 103 acres.

The facility dominated the landscape for 45 years, admitting more than 4,500 children.

In 1872, it founded a school that also accommodated some of the nearby local children.

In an effort to become more self-sustaining, vegetables and fruits were raised, fruit trees were planted and a small dairy was established. By 1881, it got into ranching with chickens and cows and grew hay as a side business.

Up to 1866, law and order was left to a justice of the peace and one constable. On July 23, 1866, a number of men were elected, thus forming a proper city government that included a president, treasurer, secretary, and two attorneys.

At the same time, ordinances were passed regulating the health and cleanliness of the town.

In February 1867, Vallejo was at last incorporated. Some major businesses started up at that point. Vallejo Gas Works was founded and light and heating were supplied to the residents. Gen. Frisbie started the Vallejo Commercial Bank and The Vallejo Chronicle was launched.

In February 1868, a main grouping of structures known as "Alpha Block" and situated in the heart of the business area at Georgia and Santa Clara was destroyed by fire. The loss was estimated at \$40,000 and was a blow to the city's economy.

Later that year, on Oct. 21, an earthquake caused some damage. A chimney was demolished, many yards of plastering were displaced and numerous household items were broken.

But the year was not without its good news. On June 24, railroad transportation between Vallejo and Fairfield and Suisun was inaugurated.

When news of the impending railroad first came, Vallejo started to display signs of real growth. Hotels, stores, shops and dwellings seemed to spring up in every direction, filling the landscape.

The town was on solid economic ground as soon as the railroad started to carry grain to Vallejo to be loaded on ships in her harbor. Vallejo once again seemed assured of success and for the next few years the city fathers began to relax as the city prospered.

A franchise was granted for street rail service. A steamer was making two trips a day to San Francisco. A grain elevator was built. (It collapsed in 1872 due to a weak foundation). A sizable flour mill was established.

The Pioneer Brewery, making steam beer, started up with an adjoining saloon. It eventually marketed beer successfully to neighboring towns.

More shops appeared on the scene including a candy store and a tea shop carrying imported teas. Vallejo boasted five schools and a town hall was built and became known for its “social functions.”

In 1869, the city borrowed \$50,000 to build a reservoir on Bolsa Hill so as to protect itself from fire. That project was abandoned with the formation of a water company, but the city fathers found other uses for the money: \$15,000 was used to plank Fifth Street; \$8,000 to construct a city hall; a considerable sum went toward a city park.

It was noted that in 1869, only one person at a time could be accommodated on the narrow planks that existed; one person would have to step down, being forced into the mud, sometimes a foot in depth.

Vallejo was beset with disaster once more—on Nov. 7, 1871—when a principal city block was destroyed by the demon fire. The fire started in a saloon and an investigation left little doubt that it was arson.

Damage was estimated at \$50,000. But the coffers were full and business was brisk, so decline to the economic structure was never given a passing thought by the people of Vallejo. And surely, with Gen. Frisbie as the continuous moving force, prosperity was assured.

Historians figure the population at this time to be around 8,000. Vallejo had a bustling railroad and shipping port and a naval center. There were 17 hotels, 16 grocers, six churches, seven schools, and, of course, numerous saloons. The fact was, there was not enough housing to accommodate everyone who wanted to move to this prosperous, opportunity-laden town.

In 1873, another schoolhouse was built for \$6,500 and the accommodation greatly relieved the previously crowded conditions. A diploma was designed and presented to the graduates of Vallejo High School that same year.

A record of teachers' salaries shows they were earning from \$50 to \$150 per month. In 1874, a census of schoolchildren 5 to 17 years of age showed: Boys, 800. girls, 762. “Colored” children: Boys, 13, girls, 3.

On July 3, 1874, a resolution was adopted to abolish the “colored” school and enroll all children in the regular school. Up until then, a school for African-American children was maintained in the rooms of the United States Hotel. Vallejo was the first city to

confront the segregation issue and take the lead. There was only one dissenting voice.

E.H. Sawyer, who owned much land in Vallejo, and Frisbie were intent on moving the county seat there. Their reasoning was that Vallejo, being a larger and more important with better accommodations, was better-suited.

In November 1873, Vallejo won the vote, but a charge was immediately put forth that more than 600 illegal votes had been cast.

The "Divisionites" formed and Vallejo was threatened with being cut off from the county. Quickly, a bill was introduced to keep the county seat in Fairfield which the governor signed and thus Vallejo lost her bid at being a center of government once again.

Vallejo was to suffer more disappointment. A state of decline began following the nationwide Panic of 1873 and subsequent depression.

Then, when the California Pacific Railroad changed its business structure, the Vallejo station was pretty much ignored in favor of Benicia with its large ferries which easily transported the trains. Then Port Costa supplanted Vallejo as the grain shipping center.

As a final blow, Mare Island cut back its force. Trade diminished and the population declined.

In spite of this the Vallejo Times came on the scene in 1875 with the name Solano Daily Times, and in 1876 a city hall was constructed.

But Vallejo's ups were followed by more downs, as seemed her destiny. In 1876, she lost her most prominent citizen and campaigner when Gen. Frisbie moved to Mexico, where he pursued business ventures that eventually made him a millionaire.

The city never really experienced a huge comeback through the rest of the century, but Vallejoans were a resourceful lot and Vallejo did develop a niche and some good business.

Five hotels continued to operate, the Frisbie House being the most prominent. It owed much of its fame to fact that Robert Louis Stevenson stayed there with his bride on his way to Napa.

In place of grain shipping, a flour mill, Starr Mills, started operation.

One of the largest businesses was Port Costa Lumber Co., which served as a point for delivery of lumber and distribution by rail or ship. It organized in 1886 near the railway station and a wharf.

Breweries did a brisk business. Besides the Pioneer Brewery, there was the Solano Brewery and the biggest, the Philadelphia Brewery, which was able to produce 80 barrels a day.

The proprietor hailed from Bavaria and the company not only made a steam beer, but also brewed a porter that it sold to many of the surrounding counties. However, its largest shipment went to San Francisco where its beer and porter were in great demand.

But what proved to really be a booming industry for Vallejo was brick works. The clay soil, that "gad-awful Vallejo mud," was a dark cherry red and lent itself to the brick and terra cotta industries.

San Francisco capitalists started up two such enterprises: Pacific Brick Works and Hydraulic Brick Works both established in 1890. Union Pressed Brick and Terra Cotta Co. also successfully made its entry into the market.

Social life by this time included a number of fraternal societies. Nineteen, including the Solano Chieftain's League, were listed in the newspaper.

In 1890, there were several bicycle clubs. This was a time when long-distance pedaling was in fashion. A 14-mile cinder track was fashioned between Vallejo and Napa for enthusiasts.

And so it was that Vallejo, if not the most prosperous city, was once again on a solid foundation.

In 1891, the gaslights were replaced by electric and Vallejo was ready to roll into the 20th century. But its history as a pioneering town was not to be forgotten.

Back in the year 1869, a group of men born between 1857 and 1859 formed the Vallejo Society of California Pioneers. Their stated purpose was to cultivate social intercourse, create a fund for charitable purposes and to preserve history.

For years to come, they did much to distinguish Vallejo's heritage and keep her unique time and place in history intact.

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