

Suisun City becomes 1880s commerce center

By Kristin Delaplane

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First of two parts

Suisun Township was the largest township in Solano County, consisting of about 110,000 acres; 10,000 of those acres were under water. The township was bounded all around by Elmira, Vacaville, Napa County, Green Valley Township, Benicia and the Montezuma Township.

The principle town was Suisun City. Then there were the islands: Joice, Grizzly, Hammond, Wheeler, Gray, Rich, Long Point, Rowe and Chips.

The island that was to become Suisun City was first discovered in 1850 by Curtis Wilson and Dr. John Baker when they sailed up the winding Suisun Slough for some unknown reason. The environment was mainly tules and mudhens.

Some historians have put forth a theory that Wilson and Baker made this stop on their way to the gold fields. Whatever the reason, they did record their find with someone, as their names appear in the history books.

At the site, they spied a herd of elk and killed one for their meal before leaving. They are never mentioned in history again. In 1851, William Moody and Morgan Hart acquired the rights to build a wharf at Suisun.

The next visitor was Capt. Josiah (a k a Joseph) Wing, who navigated his way up the slough in 1851 on the schooner Ann Sophia. Incredibly, little was written about Josiah Wing.

In his obituary of 1874, it was noted he had been born in Brewster, Mass., in 1798 and that he had sailed around the Horn, arriving in San Francisco in June 1850 aboard his ship, Diantha. Meanwhile, his wife, Mercy, and the couple's children stayed home in Brewster.

Wing built a frame house on Pine Street in San Francisco and set up a store on his ship selling building materials and basic goods he had brought with him: Lumber, shingles, bricks, nails, cement, coal, salt, dried apples and pork.

Back then, the San Francisco Bay was set up as a shopping mall. Wing purchased the Ann Sophia in 1851, making at least two trips hauling hay to Sacramento, probably from the Suisun Bay area.

Most likely, Wing was making these trips with some regularity, becoming familiar with the area and the opportunity at hand.

In August 1852, Mercy and the children sailed into San Francisco harbor. That September, Wing purchased the Suisun island wharf rights and 600 acres of land and marsh.

Family history recorded it cost him \$500. He relocated his Pine Street home to the island.

His daughter, Mary, who was 7 at the time, recalled what it was like when the family landed at the end of the slough. They walked to their new home and, as the area was covered with tall grass, her father had to walk ahead of them to clear the way for them. His son, Joseph (a k a Josiah), was then 14 years old.

The first order of business was building a wharf and warehouse, which also provided sleeping quarters for those farmers who would travel all day, hauling their grain for shipping.

His next task was getting willow logs, which were used to shore up the marshland that separated the island from the mainland, so wagon teams could make their way to the landing. Following on Wing's heels in 1851, John Owens and A.W. Hall set up a store.

The town was first known as The Embarcadero. One of the early shipments recorded in 1852 was a boatload of potatoes, an early Solano cash crop.

From the start, Wing envisioned the waterfront as a place to ship local produce to Sacramento and perhaps other locations.

To this end, for the next 14 years Wing's schooner Ann Sophia was constantly on the move carrying grain, which was hauled from the surrounding valleys to Suisun by 16- and 20-mule teams.

Wheat was the principle crop for more than two decades. Most of what is Fairfield today was grain and hay fields back then. Wing's shipping business was in direct competition with Capt. Waterman's port in Cordelia.

As it happened, Wing's location was more centrally located for the farmers of the

immediate area and the Vaca Valley, and so his port enjoyed the bulk of the business.

Following the first construction in 1851, a smattering of other commercial businesses started up.

The site was gaining a strong foothold as a major trade center and shipping port, and in 1854 John Owens and Wing laid out the plans for the town.

The plan included the Spanish-style town plaza surrounded by businesses with the embarcadero at the front and center.

Asa Crocker, a pilot on the Ann Sophia, opened the first eatery in 1854 and, following that lead, hotels and stores soon grew around the plaza.

Wing's city was an instant hit. The Solano Herald reported in an 1855 issue: "It is the point of embarkation of the produce of the county and has for the past few months been the busiest place in the county."

By then, the city had three stores and a steam flour mill. History has it that Wing added six vessels to his fleet to handle all the shipping trade.

The Rush family came to Solano County in 1852, setting up a ranching business near the Potrero Hills.

In 1856, Hiram Rush built a two-story brick mercantile building in Suisun City and, prodded by his brother, added a third story for the Masons. The Rush family also built a home in town that today stands on Morgan Street.

In 1857, the post office was established, being that it was on the four-mule stage coach route from Benicia to Sacramento. John B. Lemon, who also ran a dry goods store, was the first postmaster, serving four years.

A neighborly custom was for any rancher to pick up all the mail for his area and leave it at a closer point of call, such as Mankas Corner Store or the Rockville store-saloon.

The year, 1857, also marked the date the first church, Grace Episcopal, was erected. Prior to building the church, townsfolk listened to sermons of traveling preachers that took place at the Suisun Creek in the valley.

In 1861, the church was purchased by the Methodists, but was sold back to the Episcopalians in 1872. In 1876, the Congregation Church was constructed on Morgan street.

Not only a man of the water, Josiah Wing was an early pioneer land speculator. By the late 1850s, he is recorded as having sold some of his Suisun land, including the wharf.

In 1857, he purchased a 23-acre farm and the Wing family sold its original Suisun City home and moved to the farm, which was west of town. This was the wing home until 1874.

Despite this move and the selling Ann Sophia, Wing is said to have continued to work to make Suisun City a success. By all accounts, he was an active and well-liked man.

Reportedly, Wing possessed a robust constitution and was always in excellent health. His pleasant social qualities endeared him to all.

When the county seat was moved to Fairfield in 1858, many county officials made Suisun City their home and they walked to work.

The city was separated from the mainland by 100 yards of marshland, which was under water at high tide. A plank walk nearly a mile long connected Suisun City to Fairfield. The walk was raised and improved on, so that finally one was ensured dry feet, even at high tide.

The same year the county seat was located in Fairfield, the first newspaper in the county, Solano County Herald, a weekly, was relocated from Benicia to Suisun City. This newspaper was renamed the Solano Republican in 1869. Suisun City was the home of the paper for 65 years before it moved to Fairfield.

In 1860, the fire department was formed, its hand pump arriving in 1861 on the steamship Rambler.

The pump, built in 1857 in Boston, was purchased secondhand for \$1,600 from the San Francisco Fire Department. Reportedly, the town's active red light district raised the necessary funds.

For this auspicious occasion, the ex-chief and six firefighters from the San Francisco Fire Department delivered the pump personally. Suisun's "Union Boys No. 1" met the vessel and fellow firemen with three rousing cheers.

The acquisition of a fire bell did not run as smoothly. The "Battle of the Bell" began in 1863.

No one could agree on the right bell and "discussions" turned into heated debates. Finally a bell was agreed on, but when the brass bell arrived, the Fire Bell Committee

was thoroughly displeased. Suisun City history buffs say it was considered too small and was passed on to the school. The hunt for the appropriate bell continued.

After several more months of bickering, the Fire Bell Committee found a bell all could agree on. And it was only \$79! Such a bargain! All were elated.

The bell was made in 1862 and located in Seneca Falls, N.Y. Fearing that its massive 450 pounds weight would make it too difficult to transfer by land, it was shipped via the Horn. Thus the great bargain didn't cross over into the shipping costs. It cost a total of \$247 to bring the cast iron fire bell to Suisun.

Josiah's daughter Mary married Hilborn and they built a palatial home on Suisun Street in 1862. Sadly, in the mid-20th century the home was deserted, and torn down due to neglect in 1963.

As a trading center and water transportation point, Suisun City attracted people and cargo from long distances. This was the chief port of entry and departure for passenger travel. Tri-weekly trips to San Francisco were advertised with stops in Benicia.

A favorite pastime for children was going down to the embarcadero to watch the steamers and schooners. In 1865, the Herald printed the summer's shipping movements.

The totals were 8,892 tons of wheat, 2,778 tons of barley and 24,078 packages of fruit and vegetables.

The majority of this grain and produce passed through one of two warehouses; E.P. Hilborn and Co. or the Pierce Wharf. Steamers took the product out and came back loaded with mercantile goods.

It is said that Suisun City long had a reputation as one of the "wild" towns in Northern California, but many claim it was highly undeserving of that reputation.

It is true that as the town grew as a commercial center, it also became a hub for social activity. Hotels, saloons and stores lined Main Street.

The year 1860 marked the building of the Oriole Saloon. Today, the original bar is in place at the upscale restaurant, Main 627.

Mercedes Beck, great-granddaughter of Capt. Wing, had some definite recollections of her Suisun City. This was a city where the ladies dressed up, including hats and gloves, to stroll the streets and go shopping.

Many people came to town for a Sunday stroll and to enjoy a fine meal. This was not the picture of cowhands riding in to town and firing guns in the air, as they often did in Cordelia.

The hub of Suisun City was the Old Town Plaza, which featured a gazebo. City functions and activities, such as parades and dances, were always held there. Most Sundays there were band concerts featuring local talent.

As the embarcadero at Cordelia lost its shipping traffic, the wharf at Suisun City became the shipping point for the famed Cordelia cobblestones.

It also provided shipping for onyx and marble from Judge Swan's marble quarry. A prized possession were the handsome 40-pound clocks encased in Judge Swan's marble.

The first major fire to sweep through downtown occurred in 1868. Ten buildings in the central business district were lost including a saloon, bakery, the Pacific House Hotel, a dry goods store, and a boot and saddle shop.

It would not be Suisun City's last disaster, or its worst.

Next week - Suisun City suffers its worst disaster, but in spite of its losses, continues to be a center of importance.

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