

Davisville - nearly Veranda City - founded

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Second in a series

From 1846 on, many land sale transactions were recorded, but for the most part, clear title of buyer or seller was impossible to determine.

In 1850, Jerome C. Davis, who was now age 27, married Mary A. Chiles, and one these land sales was to Jerome Davis. The couple settled on their farm on the north bank of Putah Creek in 1850.

Sometime before 1852, Davis relinquished his interest in the ferry business and his dairy had already "washed out to sea."

Isaac Davis, Jerome's father, was also in the area, and Jerome's success in ensuing years was due in great part to his father's able assistance.

Indications are that Isaac Davis was in Yolo County in 1850 and then went back East, returning in 1852 with his wife on a steamer.

Isaac and his wife lived with Jerome and Mary on the farm on Putah Creek. In 1851, Isaac was appointed associate judge of the Court of Sessions.

The Vacas and Penas (the Pena clan, as Vaca's partner, laid claim to Marcos' share) deeded many of these tracts, including selling some of the land back to Chiles.

In 1854 Chiles, who actually resided in Napa, deeded over his lands to Gabriel Brown and Jerome Davis, his two sons-in-law.

By 1852, Yolo County consisted of five townships. Washington boasted four hotels, two stores, three laundries and a post office.

The township of Fremont had a hotel, store, post office and three laundries. Cache Creek had three hotels listed. Other townships were Putah, Cottonwood and Merritt.

The total population numbered 1,440, consisting of 1,085 white males; 189 white females; 11 male blacks, three female blacks; 109 male Indians; and 43 female Indians.

In all likelihood the total Indian population was not counted.

Charles Green settled in the area in 1851, and as a partner in the "Big Ranch" gave these recollections of farming back in the early 1850s:

Our crop of 1852 was large, giving us a heavy yield, but we were much troubled in getting it harvested, as no machinery was in the country to be had. A few implements such as scythes, horse rakes and pitchforks had been imported in the year 1850 for gathering hay, and we were compelled to use these in harvesting our crop. We had ordered reapers and threshing machines from the Atlantic states, but they were not expected in time; consequently, early in the season we contracted the Bowstead, Wood & Co., Sacramento foundry men, to build for us an eight-horsepower engine and separator to be ready for the present harvest. A Mr. Root, an old threshing-machine maker, wishing one also for himself, engaged to make the patterns for the builders.

According to my recollections, Bowstead, Wood & Co. only made these two machines and they were probably the first manufactured in the state. We used the one made for ourselves, though very imperfect and expensive to run; paying for it the sum of \$1,400 in gold dust, the principal circulating medium at that time.

Mr. Root after having threshed for other parties in small lots, in the northern part of the county, came to the ranch with his machine to help us finish, as we feared the winter rains would set in.

We finally finished in time to have it hauled and stored in Sacramento where the great fire of November 1852 burned the entire crop, thus making almost a total loss for the season.

By 1858, the Big Ranch, owned by Champion I. Hutchinson and Charles E. Green, was quite the operation. It was producing barley, maintaining orchards and a vineyard and raising vegetables. There were brood mares and some thoroughbreds and 100 dairy cows.

Seventy men provided the necessary labor. Green gave this description:

When we first settled in the fall of 1851, we started a blacksmith shop, and as we advanced in farming it became quite an important feature of the ranch. We kept much of the time two forges going; always one. Generally a wagon maker and always a carpenter besides the blacksmith. All the plows, harrows and many of the wagons were manufactured on the place.

Jerome Davis had added to his land and owned 12,000 acres fronting Putah Creek. The house he built was 50 by 30 feet with an added wing 24 by 80 feet. He had a horse

barn 60 by 90 feet, a cow barn 40 by 100 feet, sheds and two dairy buildings.

His operation included a steam mill, an engine house for the steam pump and a manufacturing shop.

Davis had been pumping water from Putah Creek since before 1856. The pumping operation provided 864,000 gallons of water every 24 hours. The water was for the household, irrigation and watering stock.

Davis had 2,000 head of cattle, 210 horses and mules, 600 sheep and 150 hogs. He was a large producer of cheese with more than 250 dairy cows. His orchards consisted of 3,000 fruit trees of every variety. He was also harvesting grain and hay.

In 1858, Davis received the State Agricultural Society's award for Best Farm.

Sadly, life was not all sweet bliss for Jerome and Mary. Their only child, Amelia Susanna had died a tragic death at age 3 in 1855.

She was fatally injured in the mill when she fell off a moving belt. Jerome immediately had the mill torn down. As the mill is recorded as being on the farm in 1858, it is unclear if he actually tore it down or if he later had a new mill constructed.

Col. Chiles' other son-in-law, Gabriel Brown, had less flair for success. Brown mortgaged his farm twice, finally giving up 3,200 acres to Isaac Chiles, the colonel's nephew, for \$2,000. The last anyone heard of Brown and his family was when they moved to Los Angeles.

In 1874, Isaac Chiles died and his brother, Phinens, came out from Missouri to take over the farm. He also acquired his late brother's family when he married the widow.

The question of ownership of lands on the original Rancho Laguna de Santos Calle was of great concern to these farmers.

Determining ownership was without a doubt one of the worst cases involving land grants to come to the courts.

Jerome Davis traveled back East to personally plead not only his case, but those of his neighbors. It took a special law, the "Act to Quiet Titles of lands within the Rancho Laguna de Santos Calle in the State of California," to eventually resolve matters.

In 1864, those with less than 15 years on the land were to pay \$1.25 per acre to the U.S. Land Office to obtain a land patent.

In 1866, after the land issue was resolved, Jerome Davis deeded his homestead of 7,000 acres over to his father. Then he and his wife moved to Sacramento, where they lived the remainder of their days.

Jerome Davis died in 1881. Mary survived him, passing away in 1915.

The lands south and east of Davis, including Tremont, were also in question for many years. It was not until 1866 that the people of Tremont realized ownership of their land legally upon payment of \$1.25 per acre.

There was always a strong tie between the folks in Tremont and Davis, with the areas being only four miles apart.

The Tule Lake Road was the only road to the city of Sacramento, and it was only navigable in the summer months. It was a variable road that was recharted each year by the first wagon that made it through tules.

In wintertime, due to the heavy flooding of the region, residents were actually able to row across the swampland to Sacramento. One gentleman recalled that he rowed from his Putah Creek home to Sacramento to see a dentist.

The railroad that caused so many towns to go under, such as Maine Prairie, put other towns on the map. Clearly, Davis was established by the advent of the train.

In 1867, a group of five businessmen referred to as "The Proprietors of Davisville" purchased 3,000 acres of the Davis farm from Isaac Davis for \$80,000 and filed a town plat in 1868. Among the five businessmen was Frisbee of Vallejo.

Construction of the Davis depot began in July 1868, and the California Pacific Railroad line began service on Aug. 24 of that year.

The train ran from Vallejo to Davis, for a \$3 fare. Passengers at either end could catch stages, coaches or ferries to points beyond.

Located in the depot was a telegraph station, the lines already in place, having been run through the area in 1856 to service the Benicia-Sacramento line.

The town of Davis covered a 119-acre area. City streets were laid out, homes were being built and shade trees planted even before the town plat was filed.

By December 1868, 40 to 50 homes had been built. Garden fences were figured into each landscape, as livestock still roamed freely. In fact, livestock were not restricted

from the city streets until 1917. This was the case even though citizens had put up money for wooden sidewalks and graveled streets as early as 1869.

William Dresbach, a native of Prussia, was the tenant of the Proprietors of Davisville and he is considered responsible for naming the town Davisville. The alternative suggestion was Veranda City.

Dresbach built the first commercial structure, which served as a general store. For this, he goes down in Davis history as its first merchant.

When the post office was established, Dresbach was the postmaster, as well as the agent for Wells Fargo and Co. His business transactions often reached \$15,000 a month.

Settlers' nickname for Dresbach was "Solano Bill." He gained this name when he was postmaster of the old Solano post office, which had been established in 1862 in or near Solano House.

The Solano House was a stage stop located on the wagon road between Benicia and Sacramento and was just across Putah Creek from the Davis homestead and was thus in Solano County.

Some historical accounts have it that Davisville was originally within the Solano County border. This misrepresentation seems to arise from the fact that this post office served the residents of the area prior to establishment of their own post office.

Because the post office was not yet set up in Davisville by March 1868, it is recorded that the Davisville post office was located in Solano County. The post office was moved to Davisville in June 1868.

Next week: A look at law and order, church life, business enterprises and technological advances.

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