

## Two different towns of Cordelia

By Jerry Bowen

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According to Thompson and West's 1878 Atlas of Solano County, Cordelia is the second-oldest town in Solano County. The same information was provided in the 1879 Wood-Alley History of Solano County. Since then, writer after writer and historian after historian has repeated this as fact ... including me.

Now, after doing some of my research for this article, I have to wonder. Checking out your "facts" just never ends.

Let's see now: Benicia was laid out and a plat map filed in 1847. In fact, Benicia is the second city to be incorporated in California, San Diego being the first.

Vallejo existed before 1850 and had a post office in 1851.

Vacaville's plat map was filed in 1851.

Archibald Ritchie bought a large section of the Suysun (Suisun) Land Grant in 1853. Captain Waterman bought a portion of the property from Ritchie about the same time. The first hamlet of Cordelia was named after Waterman's wife and had a post office by 1854. With just these few facts, the claim that Cordelia was the second town in Solano County can hardly be true.

So with that in mind, I'll continue with this piece and no longer claim that Cordelia is the second-oldest town in Solano County. But ... Cordelia does have an interesting history worth exploring.

Cordelia wasn't always called by that name and it was not even in the same place it is today. The original location was about a half-mile from its present location, on the other side of I-80. Today, nothing visible remains to indicate a town was ever there.

Waterman believed that a site at the head of Cordelia Slough and its creek would be the best place for a town with facilities to ship farm products. Cordelia Creek, unlike the head of the other waterways, was close to the old Sacramento-Benicia road, which led to the upper Suisun and Green Valleys. Waterman felt there was little risk in his enterprise, since he was under the impression that he held title to all other possible sites and could exclude any competitors.

Unfortunately for him, he had not adequately explored the area for other navigable sloughs and creeks with access to the Sacramento River. In 1850, two Americans sailed up Suisun Slough and discovered an island with slightly higher ground. A little later, Captain Josiah Wing sailed to the same island and decided it could also become a shipping point.

The original terms of the Suisun Grant, part of which Waterman owned, specified only dry land up to the edge of the marshy areas as the boundaries. Since this piece of property was an island separate and within the Grant surrounded by marsh, it did not legally belong to Waterman.

Wing was able to establish an “embarcadero” on his “island” in competition with Cordelia. Its location allowed it to draw on a larger region for commercial and shipping activity since it was five miles closer to Lagoon and Vaca Valleys than Cordelia.

As the settlement extended eastward from Rockville in the late 1850s, much of the Suisun Valley trade came to Wing’s facility, which soon became known as Suisun City.

By 1852, the traffic at Wing’s embarcadero required the construction of a wharf and a warehouse. These facilities were expanded, a general store and other buildings went up, and in 1854, Suisun City’s streets were laid out. The Solano County Herald reported in November 1855 that the town also possessed a steam-powered flour mill. Six vessels were constantly employed to serve Suisun City.

But Robert Waterman was not so easily outdone. In 1856, he laid out another town just north of the marsh which separated Suisun City from the mainland and named it Fairfield, after the Connecticut town in which he was raised. To ensure Fairfield’s success, Waterman donated land and offered to pay for some of the new county buildings if the town would become Solano County’s seat. He knew the designation as a county seat would foster growth. History has since proven he was correct in his assumptions, even though it wasn’t until 1903 that Fairfield was finally incorporated.

Suisun City, on the other hand, was incorporated in 1868 and remained the dominant trade center of central Solano County until the time of the Great Depression.

The original town of Cordelia continued to lose trade. The final death blow was yet to happen. In June 1868, the Central Pacific Railroad bypassed Cordelia, entering Suisun City from Vallejo via Jameson Canyon. In anticipation of the arrival of the railroad, Cordelia was already slowly being abandoned as early as 1862. Bridgeport, named after the birthplace of Captain Waterman’s wife, Cordelia, had already been in the process of building a half-mile south in advance of the arrival of the railroad. A wharf was also constructed, providing the new town with both waterway shipping and rail

facilities.

When Bridgeport submitted an application for a post office, it was turned down because another town held the same name in Mono County. The town was renamed Cordelia, although many of the original settlers there resented the change and continued to call it Bridgeport.

With the railroad you would think that Suisun and Cordelia would gain new prosperity. But it wasn't to be. The railroad also provided market access to the rest of the grain-growing regions in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley. With easier shipping access to other grain-growing regions, Solano County's importance was diminished. In addition, Solano County farmers had not been rotating crops and the once-rich soils were suffering as a result.

Solano slipped into a depression that historians called the "Terrible Seventies."

But not all was lost. New industries began to take hold. Cordelia would continue to prosper to some degree because of its location, although not as much as Suisun City. But ... that is fodder for future articles about the historical community of Cordelia.

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