



Lafayette Historical Society

NEWS

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

IT ALL BEGAN IN MAY.....THE "HOODS" OF LAFAYETTE.....THE DOWNTOWN

It all began in May, 1846, when a wagon train with fourteen families rolled out of St. Joseph, Missouri heading west. The wagon masters were Elam Brown and Isaac Allen, who did not survive the journey. Elam Brown led the rest of the way. He was going to Oregon to join his eldest son who had lived there since 1843 and reported that the land was good. Elam Brown's wife had died in 1845 leaving him with three more children. There were many hardships on the journey, including the death of Isaac Allen who left his widow Margaret and some of their 11 children to finish the journey. Later, Margaret and Elam would marry and found Lafayette together.

Upon reaching the split in the trail, one way to Oregon, one way to California, Brown was told that at that moment, there was very little forage or water on the northern route, so he decided to go to California instead.

While crossing the desert, Brown's wagon train joined up with another group travelling West, called the Donner Party. They traveled together for a while, but Brown felt that they were poorly organized and not speedy enough. Then the Donner Party decided to take a short cut to the Sierras, which Brown thought was dubious, so they split up. Brown's train was the last to cross the Sierras before the Donner Party was caught in an early winter snow.

After leaving Sutter's Fort, Brown headed for Santa Clara, and on January 2, 1847, was inadvertently caught up in the only Northern California battle of the Mexican-American War! Mexican regular army soldiers had taken some American sailors prisoner as retaliation for Americans squatting on Mexican land. American volunteers, Brown among them, were determined to free them. There was a two-hour gun battle with the Americans gaining control. An armistice was reached (there is a commemorative marker - Historical Landmark 260 in Santa Clara - for the battle) and as thanks for Brown's action, he was made Alcalde, or Justice of the Peace, for the San Jose area.

In the summer of 1847, Brown was whipsawing timber in the San Antonio Redwoods which covered the Oakland Hills from Montclair to Canyon. He was still searching for land as he had been ever since arriving at Sutter's Fort. Mexico was very vexed with Americans as they squatted on land they had no right to, and more and more of them were coming west. Mexico did not want a repeat of Texas, so they would not sell any land to Americans.

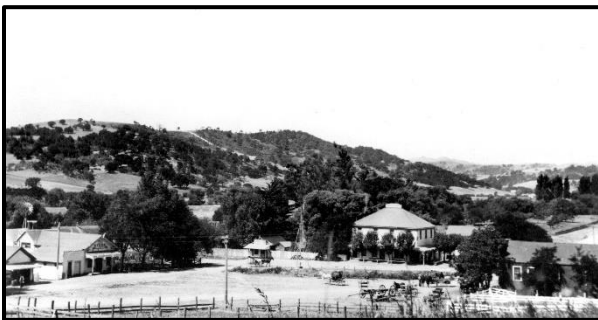
And now we come to Lafayette's origins! Close to Canyon was the Rancho Acalanes - Mexican land granted to Candelario Valencia in 1834 for his service as a Mexican soldier in the fight for independence from Spain. In the 1840's, Valencia sold the land to William Leidesdorff, a Danish national from the West Indies (not American). Leidesdorff willingly sold the land to Elam Brown. In 1847, Brown bought the 3,328.9 acre Rancho Acalanes and 300 head of cattle for \$900. He became the second non-Hispanic settler in Contra Costa County after John Marsh.

He felt that there was not enough water for crops, but that cattle would do well. His first homestead was in what is now Happy Valley. Unfortunately, as the year progressed, it was clear that there was not enough water at that location. He and his wife (Margaret Allen, the widow of the co-leader of the wagon train) moved to what is now Lafayette Circle – near where the Coop Restaurant is. By the next spring, he discovered that wheat thrived here! Within a few years, Contra Costa County was the greatest wheat-producing area in the state! Brown built a steam powered grist mill on Lafayette Creek behind the Park Theater which operated for many years.



In 1848, the war with Mexico was over, and in the terms of the treaty a great deal of western land became part of the United States, including this land. In 1850, due to the Gold Rush, there were enough Americans in California for it to become a state.

Elam Brown went from Lafayette to Monterey in 1849 as part of the constitutional convention to set up the state of California. He then served in the first two terms of the legislature of the new state. His input had a state-wide impact!



The town he created was not haphazard. The main reason it was needed was because of the redwood wagons from Moraga. They met the Oakland/ Martinez Road (Mt. Diablo Boulevard) and that was made the center of the new town. The Oakland/Martinez Road was also busy with produce, milk, grain, cattle, etc. going to market. There were hotels for weary teamsters and farmers, a grocery store, a blacksmith, and a school. Brown gave a small piece of land (a 100 by 150 foot triangle) at the intersection – today's Plaza Park. Brown laid out a plan

this to be the commercial center of town. In 1852, the federal census shows the population of the settlement as 76 men, women and children. In 1857, Benjamin Shreve, the first school teacher and by that time, the owner of the Pioneer Store, applied for a post office in the name of Centerville. It was rejected as there was already a community with that name near Fremont. His wife, Adaline, suggested the name La Fayette as she grew up in La Fayette County, Wisconsin. It was granted and La Fayette (later Lafayette) became a town.



Shreve's Store

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By the turn of the 20th Century, people from the other side of the hills came to Lafayette to camp because it was sunny and the Bay side was foggy. Soon they began to build small summer houses. Many of the houses on Moraga Boulevard and the Bickerstaff Road area began that way. Next, when the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern Railway, an electric interurban line, began serving Lafayette with four stops in 1911, the area became accessible for people to work elsewhere and for high school age students to go to school in Concord or Oakland. Homesites were promoted. The transition from agrarian to suburban had begun. At the beginning of 1937, the population of Lafayette was 4,000. It all changed later in 1937 with the opening of the Broadway Low Level tunnel. One year after the tunnel opened, 80 new houses were built in downtown. Lafayette School was so crowded that the overflow classes had to be taught in the Town Hall.

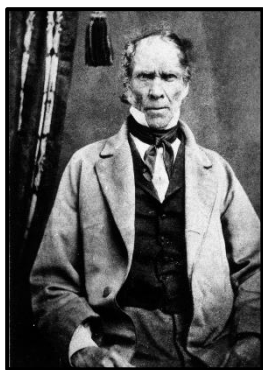
After World War II, Lafayette boomed. The population grew from 10,000 in 1952 to 21,000 in 1959. Housing developments continued through the 50's, 60's and 70's, creating the town we now know.

Lafayette History is full of fascinating and colorful characters! In the History Room on Golden Gate Way (the back of the Library), innumerable stories and pictures await: Jenny Bickerstaff, Peter Thomson (his road is misspelled with a "p"), the Hamlin family, and on and on. Look for the history of the next "Hood" of Lafayette in the October Newsletter.

~~~~~Laura Torkelson

## THE BRIEF LIFE OF BROWN'S MILL

As we know from the story of John Sutter's lumber mill at Coloma, lumber mills were rare in early California. So too, were flour mills. Thus enterprising men, seeking to fulfill local needs and seizing the economic opportunity, went into the milling business.



**Elam Brown**

One such man was "Mr. Wetmore", who brought with him to California two horse-power grist mills. His plans were thwarted. One mill was destroyed in the San Francisco fire of 1849, while he took the other "with the horse powers" to Benicia and in 1853 sold its millstones to "Esq. Elam Brown of Lafayette."

The railway horse-power Wetmore sold to Bethnel Phelps and Dr. Robert Semple, founder of Benicia. This was a great improvement over their scow-ferry which had been sailed across Carquinez Strait to Martinez, a treacherous crossing. This improved ferry was employed about a year until replaced by a small steamer.

Having acquired the millstones, Brown set up his flour mill, the first in Contra Costa County, by the creek about 132 feet from the eastern boundary of Rancho Acalanes and not far from the remaining millstone now seen in Lafayette's Plaza. Thus, local farmers could avoid the lengthy trip to the Sansevain mill in San Jose. At his new mill Brown sold flour for \$14 a barrel or at a reduced price if mud and dirt on the grain made it less desirable. Brown's Flour Mill operated until one night in March, 1865, when fire completely destroyed the mill and all its contents, including wheat and flour. Only "by the greatest exertion" were Benjamin's Shreve's store and home saved. The cause of this fire remained a mystery.



**Brown's Grist Millstone**

Now the history of succeeding mills accelerates. In 1866 Philander H. Standish, using the newest equipment, established the Lafayette Flour and Grist Mills and opened a Walnut Creek Depot at The Corners, there to receive grain and grist destined for the Lafayette operation.

Less than a year later, Standish and Captain Oliver C. Coffin of Martinez announced their "co-partnership", buying and selling grain and flour and operating Walnut Creek Warehouse.

Within a few years, a defective crown sheet of the boiler firebox at the mill gave way. Fortunately, the workmen were not injured, and the auxiliary safety valve put out the fire in the firebox. However, in 1870 Warren Brown took over "The Flour Mills at Lafayette", since Coffin and Standish could not meet the mortgage payments.



Next, Frank Hammett entered the picture, reporting in 1878 that he had leased the Lafayette Flour Mill, intended to hire a “First Class Miller”, and would guarantee satisfaction. All must not have been satisfactory for Hammett, however, for within a year Warren Brown leased the mill and all its equipment to C.F. Leavenworth for \$400 a year in gold coin with right of purchase for \$1500 in gold coin, less previous lease payments. Leavenworth, it was reported, would move the operation to Walnut Creek at the end of the milling season – but the saga is not quite over. In 1880 he moved the entire operation, including equipment, to Modesto.

As Frank Hough wrote to his brother George at Hough’s Springs, “Warren Brown has sold the mill to a man by the name of Leavenworth he is going to get another boiler he has taken the old one out and has got it on a wagon and Papa and Mr. (?) are going to take the boiler down to morrow he is going to run it here this season but he is going to move it down to walnut creek. Good knight.”

~~~From an article written by longtime Lafayette Historical Society Volunteer Ruth Dyer  
The major source of this material is The Dorothy Mutnick Collection. Her notes were taken from issues of the Gazette and the Contra Costa Semi-Weekly Gazette (1865-1880.)

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2020

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their memberships:

Joan Bruzzone
Mary Ann Hoisington
Bill Eames
Norma & Bob Evans

Sue Cross
Eric & Margaret Schreiber
Anne & Marshall Grodin
Don Jenkins
Emily & Ken Haas

Blake Hedlund
Marechal Duncan
Karin Eames
Sharon & Peter Lingane

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

ACALANES HIGH SCHOOL 1940-2020

In September of this year, Acalanes High School, the second oldest high school in Contra Costa County, will celebrate the beginning of its 80th year. Acalanes was selected as the name for the new high school because Rancho Acalanes was one of the early Spanish land grants located near the center of the high school district. Acalanes is probably the Spanish name given to a Miwok Native American tribelet in this vicinity who called themselves Saclan.



The formation of the Acalanes Union High School is due to the vision of far-sighted men and women who realized the need for a centrally located school to provide for the rapidly growing Canyon, Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda and Walnut Creek areas, served at this time by Mt. Diablo High School. The untiring work of many individuals and organizations served to transfer this vision into a reality.

Widespread interest led to a survey by the State Department of Education in 1937. Local groups circulated petitions for the establishment of the union high school. Presented with these petitions, B.O. Wilson, County Superintendent of Schools, called for a poll determining whether voters wanted a high school.

The overwhelming vote of 17:1 in favor indicated enthusiastic support. A special act of legislature

validated the poll, and on September 19, 1939, Acalanes Union High School became a legal entity.

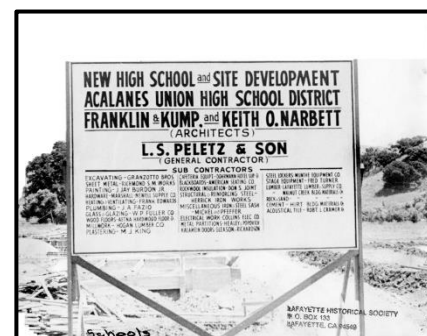
In the short space of one year, events transpired with amazing speed. The Board of Trustees was elected with J.E. Lawrence (Walnut Creek), M.H. Stanley (Lafayette) as clerk. Joseph Bronson (Walnut Creek), Melvin Jacobus (Orinda) and C.C. Morse (Canyon-Moraga) became Board members to carry on the good work.

After the new board was seated, its first major task was the most important – to convince area voters to approve a \$330,000 bond measure with which to finance the district's first campus – Acalanes Union High School. The plan met with overwhelming approval at the polls where the measure passed 884-195.

The 22-acre site, purchased from the Hunsacker family for \$14,000, was located on the Reliez Road, one quarter mile from Mt. Diablo Blvd and practically equally distant from Walnut Creek and Lafayette. Several factors contributed to the choice of this site: its low cost, good quality of the soil, its proximity to the center of population, electricity and gas availability, and the assurance that water could be purchased from EBMUD for school purposes. The low cost of excavation and the fact that the ground was not hilly and the drainage was good were taken into consideration.

Charles W. Franklin and Ernest H. Kump of Fresno were retained as architects with Keith O. Narbett of Richmond collaborating. Stanley Warburton was engaged as Principal and District Superintendent to direct educational planning.

Construction of the school was started on May 11, 1940, by L.S. Peletz and Son. L. Neilson of Lafayette was employed by the Board of Trustees to inspect construction details. The contractor had less than nine months to complete the project.



Landscaping, drainage and recreational facilities were worked on by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) at a cost of \$25,000 that summer. Workers cleared space for the buildings, the area of which was surrounded by fruit orchards and vegetable gardens.

Months of extremely intensive work in construction, planning, selection of faculty, securing of equipment and organization of a program were climaxed by the opening of Acalanes Union High School with a flag raising ceremony on September 10, 1940. There were 406 students enrolled as of October 18, 1940. For several years after its completion, the school was used as an example of the most advanced school design at national architectural conventions and in several of the nation's major architectural magazines.



A very full, eventful year followed, ending in a graduation ceremony for sixty-seven seniors. The rapid growth of the community during the past year made it necessary to build three new units. Elmer J. Freethy of El Cerrito was the contractor chosen by the board on the basis of low bid.

September 2, 1941, Acalanes Union High School opened again for its second year of operation with increased enrollment of 480 students and an addition to the faculty of six new instructors.



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