

Auburn: The Boom Town That Did Not Bust

The gold camp of Auburn was much like the mining camps of Newtown (near present day Lincoln) and Elizabethtown (near Iowa Hill). All were founded on an initial gold strike and very quickly attracted miners, merchants, saloonkeepers, and even gamblers. Elizabethtown was settled in the fall of 1850 and was deserted by 1854. Newtown was founded in 1855 and within a few years it too had been abandoned. What made Auburn different? As with the other two towns, the “easy” placer gold was soon played out and most of the miners moved on to the next “big strike” location. Auburn however maintained its population and even grew to be the most substantial town in the County.

Claude Chana was the first to find gold in the Auburn area in May of 1848, probably very near the Dr. Fox statue of Chana in Old Town. Chana very quickly moved on. Nicholas Allgeir with several Indian workers arrived next but they also didn't stay long. Joe Woods and Tuck Warner came on the scene in late 1848 and found the extensive gold deposits at Rich Flat, above today's Gold County Fairgrounds area. Gold was also found in Old Town in what was called the “plaza” where several ravines converged. *Davis: 6*

Miners flocked to an area and with them, came the merchants. While most of the miners quickly moved on, many of the merchants in Auburn stayed. J. W. Wadleigh was one of the first merchants. His store was a wooden frame covered by a cotton awning, possibly canvas from the deserted schooners in San Francisco Bay. Wadleigh sold everything at \$1.00 per pound or per bottle except pickles: the principal scurvy preventative of the time sold for \$80.00 per bottle. *Davis: 10*

By the time Hiram Hopkins arrived in July of 1849 there were only a few miners in the area. Two Chileans on Rich Ravine, a short distance from the American Hotel (Shanghai/Auburn Alehouse) and one miner on the main Auburn Ravine near the turnpike bridge. Most fortune seekers had left the camp and headed for the rich strikes along the North Fork and Middle Fork of the American River. *Davis: 10*

According to Leonard Davis, Auburn was situated in a “particularly poor location.” In his thesis he quotes a contemporary that came through the camp and states that Auburn was “just about the hilliest, roughest, unattractive looking spot in that section of the country.” Yet in July of 1849 William Gwynn and Hudson M. House established trading posts. Prices went down and beef could be purchased for \$.30 per pound and lard for \$.50 per pound. Other merchants followed and the first log house was erected. New stores were opened by Walkup and Wyman, Dutch Phillip, Elliott and Bailey, Julius Wetzler and Robert Gordon. *Davis: 11*

The winter of 1849 was the turning point in Auburn's history, its moment between slipping into obscurity only to be listed in Gudde's “Mining Camps of California” or becoming a permanent settlement.

Most of the miners at the river existed in “precarious tents, brush huts and cloth houses. The hot, dry summer left them unprepared for the harshness of the coming winter.” Davis

relates that “forks and tin dishes rusted, flour became wet and caked, coffee was a sodden mass. Morning found the miners ...soaked in blankets that did not have a dry fiber.
“Davis: 13

Many miners in the river canyons scabbled to build more substantial cabins in the winter of 1849-1850 but most fled to the nearest settlement: Auburn. An anonymous writer drafted a letter to the Placer Times and stated:

“This sudden visitation of the liquid element has entirely checked operations and taken miners all aback; and there being so few of the necessaries of life within their reach, it is thought there will be a general rush for this place (Auburn) and San Francisco very soon...” Placer Times Nov. 25, 1849

Merchants and hotelkeepers were quick to react to the influx of miners seeking shelter from the inclement weather. Several large public hotels were built. ““They were built of logs and roofed with shakes...within each was a great fireplace, a bar, gambling tables, a kitchen and a boarding house. Davis: 14

The miners were fairly stranded in Auburn the winter of 1849-1850 as the rains came in deluges and the roads to Sacramento became virtually impassable. That same anonymous writer noted:

“The roads are altogether impassable for teams and for packing, it requires all the vigilance of the driver to keep the animals on their feet. To get up and down the high hills... it is altogether impossible for four legged animals to “propel” at all. ”Placer Times Nov. 24, 1849

Nancy McCormick’s family had arrived in September of 1849. That December her husband John left for Sacramento for supplies, he and his team were swept away in the floodwaters of the raging American River. To support herself and children Nancy opened the Auburn House. By 1852 Auburn boasted several fine hotels: the Empire, the National, the Auburn House, the Traveler’s Rest, the Mansion House, the Crescent City Hotel and the Stage House. *Placer Times Nov. 24, 1849 – Nancy McCormick file – Davis: 14*

Another factor that helped secure Auburn’s future was its location on the road coming out of Sacramento. San Francisco was the main port for incoming supplies and from there steamboats brought the goods as far as Sacramento and Stockton and as far up river as Marysville. Sacramento was the source of most of the goods coming into the Auburn area. William Gwynn, H. M. House and Walkup & Wyman, the early merchants began running freight wagons to Sacramento City. The round trip usually occupied three days, “one day in going down light and two days incoming back loaded. “ Davis: 29

The route from Sutter’s Fort and later from the Embarcadero in Sacramento City to Auburn was the main trail into Auburn and then to the further camps in the hills or on the riverbanks. In the earliest days, Auburn was found to be the furthest that a freight wagon

could travel. Arriving at Auburn, supplies headed to the distant camps were loaded on to men's backs or onto pack mules for the journey over steep, rocky, narrow trails. Freight charges for the trip were \$10 per hundred pounds in good weather but sky rocketed to \$30 to \$40 in bad weather. John C. Boggs, later sheriff of the County, recalled that a barrel of sauerkraut that he paid \$10 for in Sacramento City sold in Auburn that winter for \$150. (Some accounts say \$120.) *Placer Herald 9-2-1905 Placer Herald 12-8-1906 Davis: 8 & 15*

Mexican muleteers were among the first to take advantage of the lack of roads and the need for every type of provisions desired by the miners. Miners needed food, liquor, clothing, bedding, tools, medicines and hardware: every conceivable item needed to be brought in and "pack trains were indispensable." "In 1852 there were more than 16,000 mules valued at more than \$800,000 in the northern counties of California. By 1855, the California mule population swelled to over 31,000." *Mulemuseum.org*

Mexican mules were considered far superior to mules arriving from the eastern states. American mules were most often used for draft or pulling while Mexican mules were used for packing. The Mexican mule could carry about 350 pounds while the less sturdy American mule could carry only 250 pounds. Mexican mules were stronger, tougher and possessed more endurance. The average train consisted of 40 to 50 mules with two muleteers. They were led by a "bell mule" who was often white, the other mules would stop and start as guided by the "bell mule." Packing the mules was a painstaking job, sometimes taking hours. Balancing the load was critical as an unbalanced load could lead to the mule and cargo crashing down into steep canyons. *Mulemuseum.org - Hutchings California magazine Dec. 1856 pg. 120-121*

In a letter to the Daily Alta in July 1859 one miner wrote:

"During the day we passed along the steep and craggy side of mountains, where a single misstep would be a rapid journey to eternity. A great many mules and horses were lost here: their carcasses, with sometime the pack, could be seen hundreds of feet below."
Daily Alta California July 4, 1850

Within a few years the network of trails developed into roads. The terminus of wagon freight moved further into the county. Auburn maintained its preeminence as a transportation center because of the convergence of roads centered in town near present day Central Square. "The first was the main road from Sacramento that ran to Illinoistown (Colfax), the second branched off the Sacramento- Auburn road to Grass Valley and Nevada City, the third extended northeast to the camps on the Foresthill ridge, the fourth passed down Auburn Ravine to Ophir and Virginiatown, and the fifth ran along the ridge above the American River to Folsom and Sacramento and connected with the roads coming down from El Dorado County." *Davis: 30*

The early roads followed the paths set by foot travel and the mule trains. Road building was difficult and expensive. Davis noted: "Tremendous difficulties were encountered in transforming treacherous, threadlike pack tails into roads." Early roads required "a great

expenditure of money and labor.” The lack of governmental infrastructure to fund road building led to the rise of private road building. “Tolls roads became the foundation of commerce in the Sierra.” Davis: 30 - Byrd: 28

In 1859 the County Assessor listed the main turnpikes and bridges in the county and their assessed value:

Auburn & Yankee Jim’s Turnpike Company - \$18,000
Horse Shoe Bar & Pilot Hill Turnpike Company - \$5,000
Stony Hill Turnpike - \$2,500
J. H. Baker’s Turnpike Road - \$2,000
Auburn Turnpike Company - \$10,000
Mile Hill Turnpike Road - \$5,500
Indian Canon Turnpike - \$1,800
Yankee Jim’s & Wisconsin Hill Turnpike Company - \$4,000
Mountain Spring Turnpike Company - \$2,000
Mineral Bar Turnpike and Bridge Company - \$13,000
Placer Herald 1859

To get an idea of the traffic coming through Auburn, consider this item from the Placer Herald in July of 1859.

“As indicative of the immensity of the freight business through this place, we will state, that on Thursday morning twenty- eight loaded wagons, averaging four tons of freight each, passed through town on their way to the mountains, within less than two hours time.” Placer Herald 7-23-1859

In that same year the Herald estimated that nearly 200 hundreds tons of freight passed through Auburn daily. *Placer Herald 9-3-1859*

In addition to the freight wagons coming through town and the less frequent pack trains, stagecoach and express companies were established in Auburn almost immediately.

Consider the miner carrying only his pack and a few tools, perhaps alone or in the company of a few other men, literally stranded on some lonely riverbank either waiting for the rain to cease or the river to fall. Many diaries of the time relate the intense loneliness of the miners and the lack of contact with the outside world. George Stone, in a letter to his sister recalled his days freighting on the Foresthill Divide in observing a 4th of July celebration from high in the mountains in July of 1854, he wrote:

“I say when I thought of these enjoyments that I had left behind, to lift and tug at heavy loads, to trudge along the dusty road, to sleep alone upon the stony ground, three thousand miles from friends and all that cared for me, for the first time my heart gave way and had I wings, not oxen nor merchandise, no thought of gain would have kept me from crossing the continent to the Eastern shore.” Placer Herald 8-19-1911

Davis states “The gold seeker...after making his pile, was generally speaking, interested mainly in two things: news from home and transporting safely the precious metal he obtained.” *Davis: 32*

The early Express Companies filled both these needs. The post offices were few in number and the mail slow and irregular. Sam Holladay, the camp’s first Alcalde, recalled walking from Auburn to Sacramento then taking a boat to San Francisco looking for any mail from home. *Davis: 32 – Holladay Lecture transcripts*

Among the first Express Companies in Auburn were Gregory’s Express and Hunter and Co. They were followed by Adams & Co. and eventually by Wells, Fargo & Co. The Express Companies provided many services for the miners; they could not only send and receive mail on a regular basis but could transport gold with full insurance coverage. Auburn became the “express center for Placer County.” *Davis: 34*

The Express men of our town are now reaping a golden harvest. Thousands of dollars’ worth of dust are bought every week. Upon the rivers, especially, they make heavy purchases every few days.”
Placer Herald 11-12-1853

John Q. Jackson the 23-year-old agent for Wells, Fargo & Co. wrote home in 1854:

“What I have to do is quite confining, staying in my office till 10 at night, buying (gold) dust, forwarding & receiving packages of every kind, from and to everywhere, filling out drafts for the Eastern Mails in all sorts of sums, from \$50 to \$1000...”
Wellsfargo.com

Jackson forwarded over 750 pounds of gold in one month in 1854. He shipped 150 pounds at a time explaining that was “about as much as one like to shoulder to and from the stages.” *California History Fall 1991*

As early as June of 1852 John Eagle wrote:

“...when you write, which I wish you to do as soon as you receive this, direct to Auburn, Placer County, Upper California. Direct all letters to Auburn...the only government Post Office in the County.”
Eagle Letters – Archives Collection

The Placer Herald in October of 1852 reported that “800 letters left the Auburn Post Office for the States this last mail.” The U. S. Mail service did not initially have their own carriers and used the Express Companies. *Placer Herald 10-1852*

As well as the Express companies, stagecoach lines were established very early in Auburn, and it became “the chief distribution point for the mines.” William Gwynn, the merchant, established a line as early as June of 1850. His stage ran 3 times a week from Sacramento City to Auburn. *Davis: 35 – Sacramento Transcript June 10, 1850*

According to Davis, in 1852 there were an astounding 8 stage lines running to and from Auburn. These were:

United States Mail Lines

Ophir and Auburn Main Stages

Brown and Parrish's Mail Pilot Line

Sacramento- Ophir and Auburn Daily Accommodation Line

Charlie Green's Pioneer Peoples Accommodation Line

Auburn and Yankee Jim's Daily Express

Auburn and Illinoistown Stage line.

Davis: 36

The Placer Herald reported in July of 1853:

"Travelers, all seem to be on the go... Birch's line started for Sacramento with no less than twenty-one passengers ... the same day the Yankee Jim line came in with 14 passengers." The article mentions the line to Marysville, the Mountain Line to Coloma, the Illinoistown Line and the Nevada stage. "We venture to say there is no town in California of its size that is better accommodated with traveling facilities than Auburn. A traveler can start North, East, South or West and be put through on the "fast line." Placer Herald 7-2-1853

Another factor that influenced the growth of Auburn was its designation as the County Seat in 1850. Originally Auburn was in Sutter County and by an election, thought to be influenced by ballot stuffing, became County seat. Historian Steele wrote: "The favorable location of Auburn, its preponderance of population and the inexhaustible powers of voting possessed by its citizens and partisans decided the contest in its favor by a majority considerably exceeding the entire population." *Thompson & West: 94*

In 1851 when Placer County was formed, Auburn became the County Seat. The amount of activity that centered in the Courts and in the Recording offices was astounding. A citizen of the County came to Auburn to file a deed, claim a homestead, or file a mining claim. Brands for animals were recorded, married women could record and declare personal property or the right to become a "sole trader", business licenses, liquor license and gambling licenses were applied for at the County offices. All kinds of statics were collected and recorded at the County Seat. *A Brief History of Recording Public Documents*

The deed books housed at the Placer County Archives show 555 deeds recorded from 1851 to 1854. The Land Claims Books lists 496 claims from the same period.

The Courts for the County drew large numbers of citizens. A Court of Sessions trial in May of 1859 summoned 18 jurors from all over the county. W. H. Lewis and I. N. Stratton from Foresthill, L. Millington from Brushy Canon, John Hattam, G. Webber and L. Holton from Yorkville, J. H. Bastow and R. R. Martin from Yankee Jim's, B. Murphy,

James Dodd and J. H. Pickering from Iowa Hill, I. Isaacs from Illinoistown, Geo. Decker, I. L. Keck, D. Hicks and Hosiah Groff from Todd's Valley and W. H. Lowell, Chas. Smith and Ruben Hurd from Bath and S. W. Bowman from Dardanelles. In the trial of a stage robber in 1860, some 18 men from all over the County were summoned as witnesses. *Court of Sessions – May 24, 1859 - Court of Sessions February 3, 1860*

As well as Court business, citizens came to Auburn to send and receive telegrams. In September of 1852, merchant William Gwynn opened the first telegraph office in his store. By 1855, the County had established the County Hospital for the indigent in Auburn. *Knox-McDonald*

In the 1860's the local hotels posted their daily arrivals in the newspaper, each hotel would receive as many as 20 new visitors a day. *1860 – Placer Herald*

The amount of traffic passing through and destined for Auburn in the early years of its existence was astounding. Many writers mention the roads clogged with freight wagons, roads so heavily trafficked that freight wagons ran by day and passenger stages ran at night.

Auburn, although located in an inconvenient landscape, and stripped of its gold within months, managed to hang on and avoid the boom and bust cycle of so many gold camps in northern California.

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