

## Jacob Hart Neff

Most people in Auburn are familiar with the old fountain that sits in front of the historic Placer County Courthouse. A few even know that it is called “the Neff fountain.” Very few, however, know the story of the man who donated the fountain to the City of Auburn in 1908.



Jacob Neff was born in Strausburg, Pennsylvania on October 13, 1830, when he was but a lad the family moved to Iowa territory and young Jacob was apprenticed to a blacksmith and learned that trade. As a young man of twenty Neff set out for the gold fields of California. --Placer Herald 4-3-1909

Jacob Hart Neff arrived in Hangtown (Placerville) on August 8th of 1850; he describes the trials of the five month journey, saying “suffice it to say that, after enduring unusual hardships, culminating in the loss of our stock....we arrived on foot.” He was very typical of the 49’ers who flocked to California hoping to strike it rich. The vast majority did not but Jacob Neff became a very successful miner and made several fortunes over his lifetime. He eventually turned to politics and became the Lieutenant Governor of the state.--Placer Herald 4-3-1909

Neff led a very busy and eventful life. Here is a brief break-down of his life and accomplishments by the decade.

Neff most likely made his first fortune in the very earliest days of the Gold Rush as he is said to have begun his work in California “with a rocker.” Although Neff stated in his autobiography that he “mined until 1863” as early as 1851 he obtained a liquor license in Elizabethtown. From his earliest days in California, Neff was very involved in the Masonic Fraternity. He was a charter member of Wisconsin Hill Lodge No. 74 and assisted in organizing Ionic Lodge No. 121 in Iowa Hill. He would continue allegiance to the Masons

throughout his life achieving its highest offices. Collection.museumca.org – Neff Loving cup, Placer Herald 4-3-1909 –S. F. Call 8-25-1898 – Retail Licenses

In 1863, he, with partners Ben Taylor and the Coleman Brothers began construction of the Illinoistown to Grass Valley toll-road. Towards the end of the 1860's, he ran for Sheriff of Placer County and won. He kept that seat from 1867 to 1869. History of Placer County pg. 128 & 162



In the 1870's he was running the Empire Livery Stable in Auburn and had a house where Bootlegger's Restaurant now stands. He was elected, on the Republican ticket, to the State Senate. He was part of the group of local men who constructed the Auburn race track in 1871 and was involved with both the Colfax and Auburn Masons. In that same year he helped organize the Auburn Brass Band and is reported to have purchased the instruments and music for the group. He owned the large armory building in Auburn and sold it to the band organization. In 1875 he became a member of the State Prison Board. Always involved in mining he was the superintendent of the Rising Sun mine near Colfax in 1875. Bill of sale Bk. A pg. 73 - History of Placer Co. – Placer Herald 4-15-1871 Deed Bk. T pg. 267

Never leaving the "gold business" he was involved with the hugely successful Pioneer Mine in Humbug Canyon in the 1880's. During the 1880's he seems to have maintained residences in both Auburn (the old Walkup place across from the Catholic Church) and remodeled an 1850's house in Colfax. During this period he and his nephew and partner, Henry Disque, owned a store at the Dutch Flat station. In 1887 Neff and several other Auburn men founded the Placer County Bank. In 1888 he and others were involved in seeking a franchise for establishing a gas works for the town of Auburn. --History of Placer Co. Argus- 5-12-1888 - Assessment Rolls – Argus 9-20-1899 – District Court # 3177 – Superior Court # 583

Always known for his generosity, Neff presented a bell to the congregation of the new Episcopal Church in Auburn in 1890. Perhaps Neff's greatest success was his involvement with the California Miner's Association. In 1891 he organized a miner's convention in Auburn with the aim to establish a state organization. He was successful and was president for six years. He is credited with forming an alliance

between the valley's farmers and the miners with the Caminetti Act of 1893. The animosity and litigation between the two groups had been increasing hostile for many years over the amount of debris resulting from hydraulic mining that inundated the valley's rivers and streams. It has been estimated that 1.5 billion cubic yards of debris washed into the central valley. The Yuba River once navigable between San Francisco and Marysville became impossible for steamboat travel and the bed of the river rose to above the elevation of the town. During the 1890's, Neff was also involved in the Morning Star Drift Mine in Iowa hill and the Rising Sun mine near Colfax. Both of these were very successful enterprises. Placer Herald 12-27-1890 – History of Placer Co. pg. 217 – Morning Call 1-28-1894 – Yuba – Sutter wiki.org – Edward Benjamin – Mines Book – 1899 pg. 406 Placer Herald 11-1891

In 1899, Neff was elected Lt. Governor under Henry T. Gage. It is said that "he went into politics with a good name and came out with a good name." He moved to San Francisco in 1900 when he took office. Along with him were his nephew Henry Disque and Thomas Woods, his long time mining partner. Never forgetting his devotion to Placer County he donated the fountain to the City of Auburn in 1908. S. F. Call 3-29-1909 – Placer Herald 8-8-1908 – Placer Herald 5-16-1908

Neff died in San Francisco in March of 1909. Special cars were added to the train to the City to bring the hundreds of Placer County friends to Neff's funeral. The accolades to Neff at his passing are very telling. The San Francisco Call dubbed him "one of the most highly esteemed citizens of California. The Call also noted that "the poor know where his fortune has gone." Delivering his eulogy, the Rev. George Adams noted, "He had a natural way of winning men's hearts, but above all his fellow men believed in him. It is a great thing to be beloved, but a far better thing to be believed in."--S.F. Call – 3-27-1909

--April McDonald, Auburn City Historian

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