

# Roadhouses in Early Placer County

There were no signposts and no maps. In 1849 and 1850, getting off a sailing ship in the fast-growing chaotic town of San Francisco after 5 or 6 months at sea, the Argonauts, on their way to California's gold districts, literally had no idea where to go nor how to get there.



## San Francisco Bay

Word of mouth was the currency of the day, some of which was reliable, some not. Generally, the gold seekers needed to decide whether to head for the northern mines or the southern mines. The northern mines, being closer usually were the choice. That meant heading to Sacramento. Then they needed to decide which river basin to follow: the Sacramento, the Feather, the Yuba, the San Joaquin or the American. It was relatively easy to find out about the small schooners and steamboats that traveled from the San Francisco Bay up the Sacramento River. There were hucksters of every type trying to lure passengers onto their boats. It usually cost around \$20.00 for a man and a small amount of baggage for the 150-mile trip. Twenty dollars would be about \$660.00 in today's money. It often took two days to make the trip.



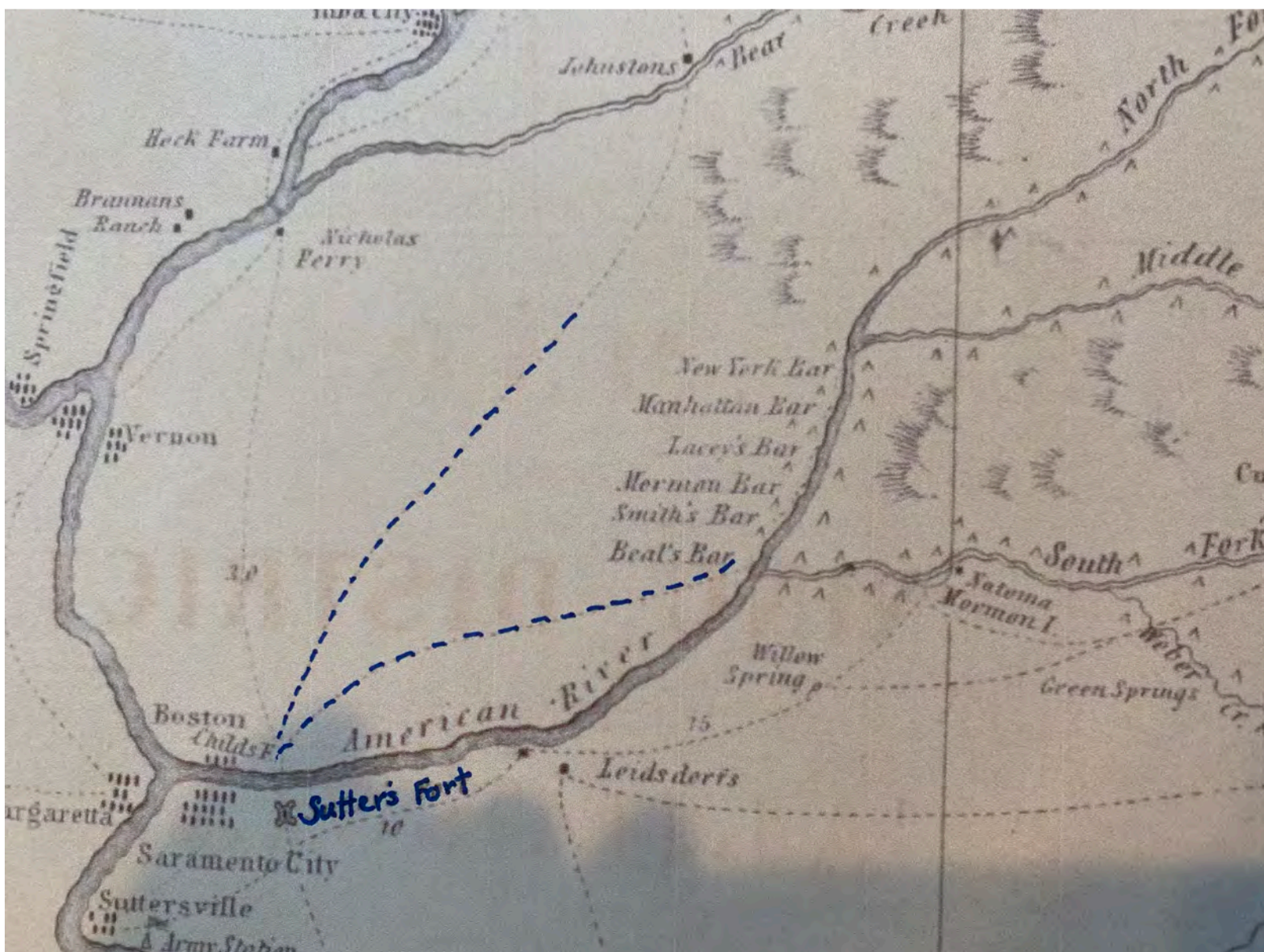
**This is a classic steamer that would travel the Sacramento River  
in the Gold Rush Days**

Arriving in Sacramento brought more decisions. In the early 1850s, rumors of gold in the Foothills and in the Sierra lured many. Generally, men (and men far outnumbered any women in the early days) could find a teamster headed up to the Sierras. The teamster would carry the baggage while the men walked. The teamster would charge about \$10 per hundred pounds for carrying freight to North Fork Dry Diggings (Auburn).

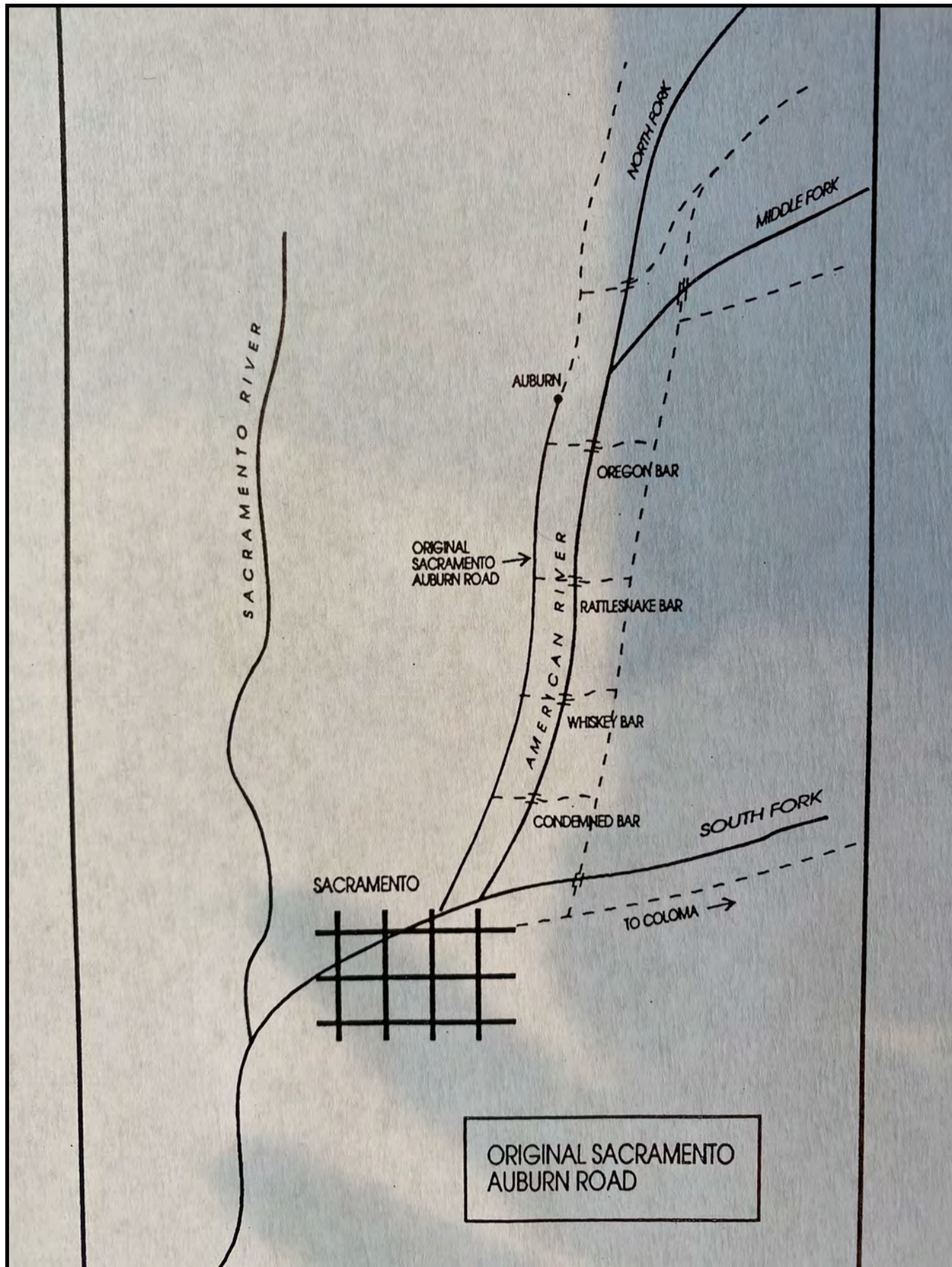
Teamsters began plying the route between Sacramento and what would become Auburn from the very earliest days of the Gold Rush. Goods and supplies were in great demand and Auburn was as far as wagons could go to get goods before transferring to mules to go further up into the remote mining camps in the mountains. Mining Camps on the lower river banks could be supplied by a short detour off the main route. The plains between Sacramento and Auburn were relatively flat and a broad trail developed. Initially, the route left Sutter's Fort or the Embarcadero and led to the South Fork of the American River then to the Mormon Island Camp, which was in its heyday.

Though many of the miners headed to the gold fields just stopped under a tree where there was water and grass and bedded down for the night, many looked for a roadhouse or inn. The first stopping places were very crude, oftentimes canvas tents offering the bare necessities of a little food, a lot of liquor and little else. The entrepreneurs eager to "mine the miners" very quickly realized there was money to be made and built up more substantial way stations to offer rest, refreshments and supplies. There were several notable establishments between Sacramento and the Placer County line including the Oak Grove House, the 6-mile House and 15 mile House.

**This map generally shows the main two routes from Sacramento to the gold districts.**



This map is from Leonard Davis'  
The Historic Sacramento to Auburn  
Road From Miner's Trail to  
Interstate Highway

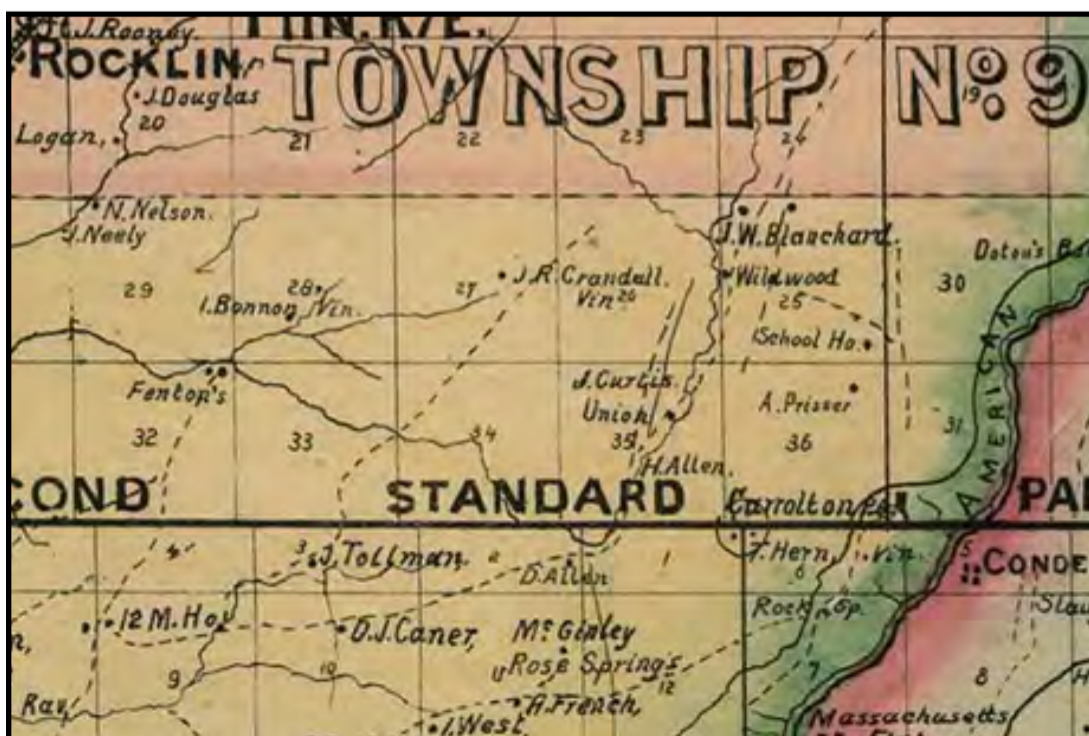


Both routes went through what is today Center Township to the Placer County line. The earliest route intersected with the old Mormon Trail cut-off, then headed off along the old path along the west bank of the American River. Branches led off to the more important mining camps on the river bank.

**This is the town of Mormon Island before it disappeared beneath Lake Folsom**



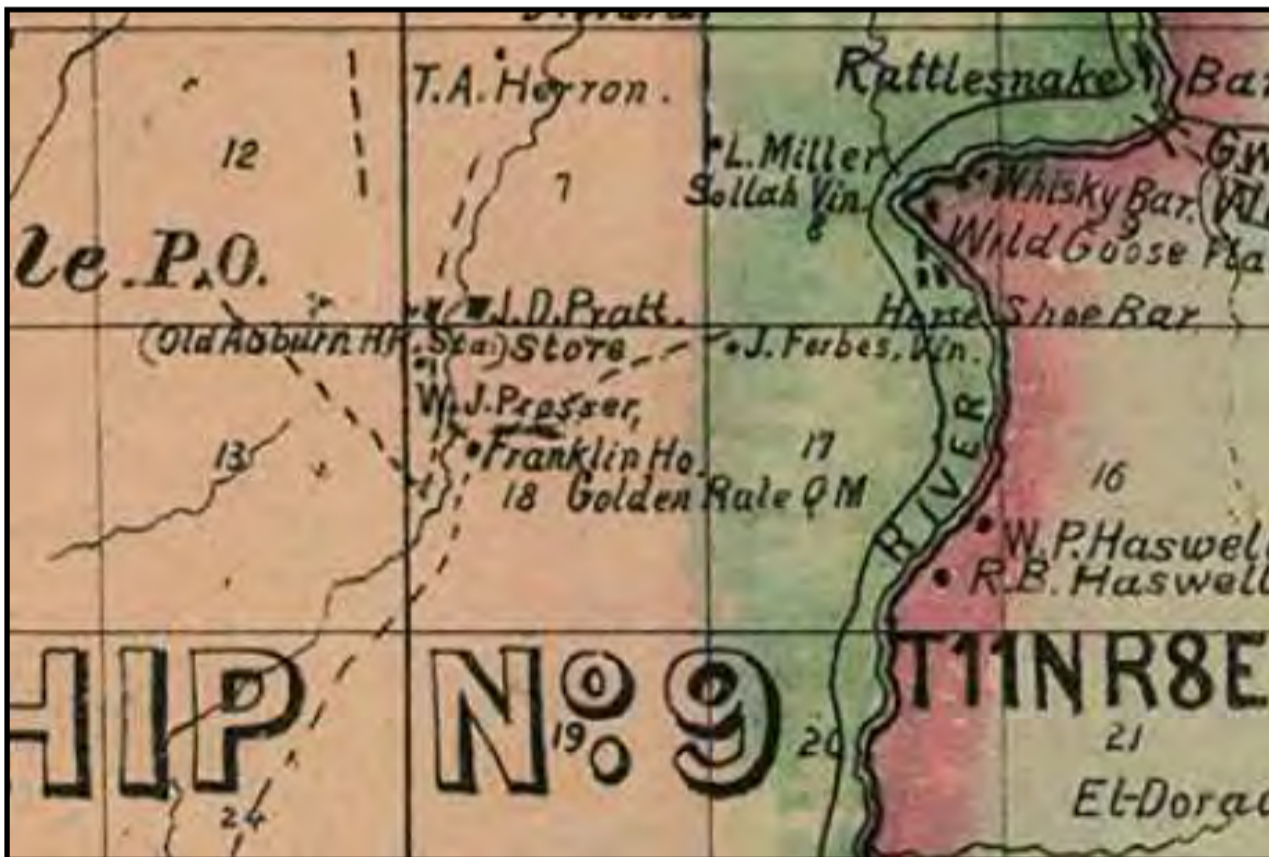
Following the river route to Folsom and past Mormon Island, without branching off to the camps on the river banks, the first roadhouse encountered would be the **Union House**. The Union House was built by John Curtis in 1854. It was located in what would come to be called Hidden Valley. The House was built of redwood and was about 40 by 50 feet in the shape of a barn. Notice the name J. Curtis by the Union House title in the Doolittle map of 1868.



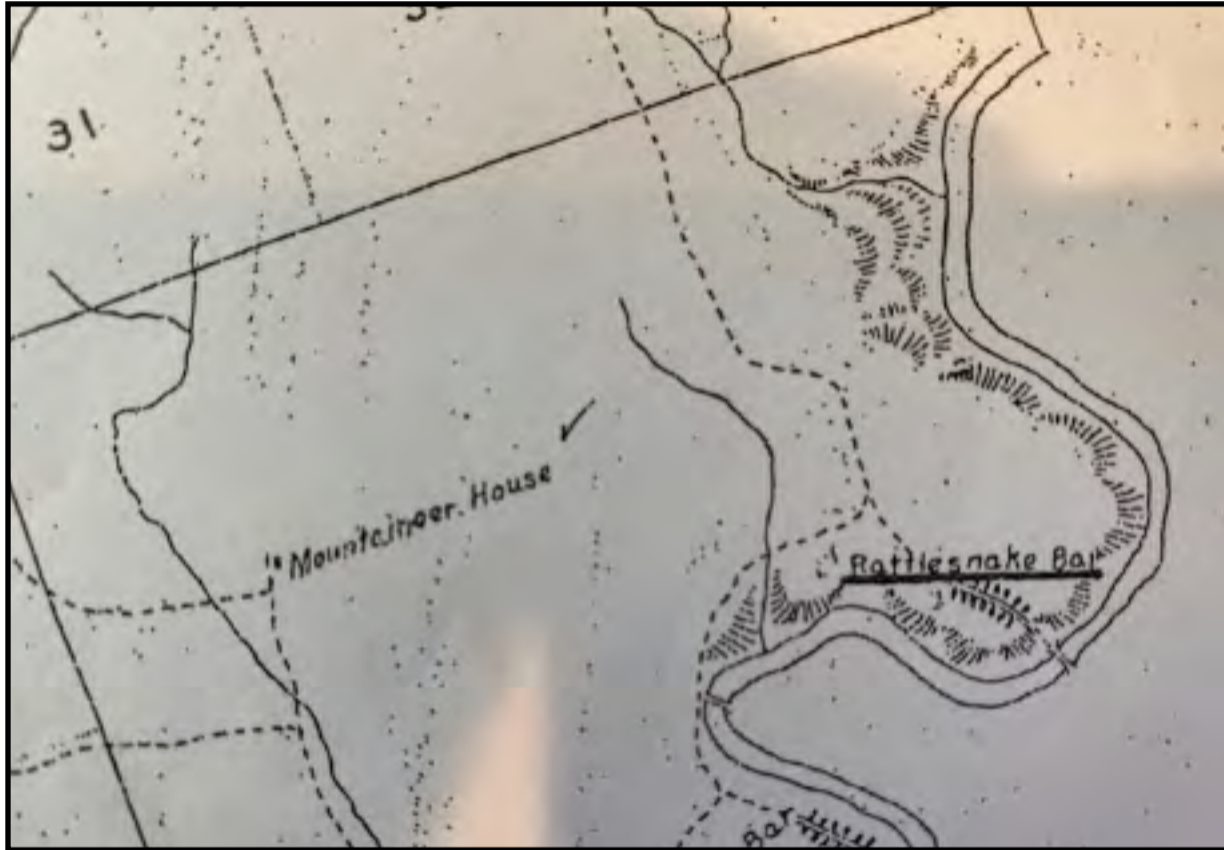
For the short time that it existed, the Union House was on the route of the Sacramento, Placer and Nevada Railroad. The House burned down in 1905.

The next large inn on Miner's Ravine was the **Franklin House**. There were two locations for the Franklin House. After it was destroyed by fire in 1875, a second house was built just a bit south of the older one. The original one was called the Miner's Hotel and Auburn's Harriet Crandall worked there for a while when she first came to California to join her husband John. They would be prominent Auburn citizens later on.

The original roadhouse was assembled in Massachusetts, taken apart, shipped around the Horn and reassembled on the site by the owner, John Wixon in late 1850. Wixon also owned the surrounding 640 acres with a large barn. The hotel eventually passed to his wife Electa after John died. She married Horace Mansur and they ran the inn for many years. It was destroyed by fire in October 1906.



The next roadhouse on the route to Auburn was the **Mountaineer House**. The log building was probably built by Jack Phillips. The Mountaineer House had a murky reputation. Phillips was aligned with the infamous Tom Bell gang. The gang was notorious for stage robberies and attacking and robbing individual miners. Phillips was arrested in 1856 and tried. Within twenty minutes the jury found him guilty of harboring and protecting criminals. He was fined \$5,000 and sentenced to "not more than two years" in State Prison. The Mountaineer House burned down in 1869.



The **Long Valley House** was in existence for many years. It was built in 1851 by Henry Holmes who would later be prominent in the lime business in Auburn. Holmes didn't own the House for very long, it was soon in the hands of the Crow/Threlkel family where it would reside for years. The Crow and Threlkel families were related by marriage and had come to California with the early Mormon settlers. The original house burned in 1856 but was instantly rebuilt. The Threlkel family became very prominent in fruit farming in the area.



When the mining on the river banks slowed down, a more direct route to Auburn and the high county developed. This was the "new" Sacramento to Auburn Road.

Printed in 1995, Leonard Davis' work on the historic road is still the authority on the subject, he wrote:

By 1852, it was reported " There is probably more travel upon the Auburn Road than any other of the thoroughfares running from Sacramento to the interior. This road, important as it was, was still hardly more than a trail, formed by the footsteps by miners and their pack animals as they picked their way over the most convenient route of the North Fork. In those days, when the only means of travel was by foot or team, it was necessary to have watering places at convenient distances along the route. The general course of the road, therefore, was dictated by the availability of good camp sites, where water could be obtained. The road, of course, was not paved, necessitating the changing of the course of travel along the way to avoid wet places and other pitfalls where wagons and animals might mire, and stall in the mud. This would require wagons to travel over a course in a general direction of several hundred feet in width. This meandering thoroughfare was estimated to be about forty-five miles long."



The above lithograph by G. V. Cooper is a perfect illustration of the what the old road must have looked like. Cooper was here in 1850-51 with John Letts. See Letts' *California Illustrated* for more Cooper sketches of early California.

Right at the Placer/Sacramento County lines was the **Halfway House**. This historic inn dates to the very beginnings of the Gold Rush. It was established by David Wilkie/Wilky or Wilkin and his wife. Davis asserts that Wilkie and his wife came from Scotland to the United States and lived on the very frontier of Missouri. They crossed the Rockies to Salt Lake, then to Oregon then to California. They spent the summer in the mines and when the rainy season came, they found themselves and their mules mired in the mud in this spot. They stayed the winter and constructed temporary accommodations for travelers which soon developed into the prosperous and popular Halfway House. Both John Markle in 1849 and John Letts in 1850 wrote about stopping at the Halfway House. A deed for Sutter County shows David Wilkie as owner of the Halfway House on the Sacramento to Auburn Road in 1850. By 1851, Franklin Brown was running a stage stop here and Jason and Jane Gerard were running the inn. It was a voting precinct for many years. By 1865 the assessment rolls show the owners as Williams and Allen and the 1864 Central Pacific Railroad map shows the Williams name right next to the Halfway House. By the 1880s Aaron Ross was the owner of record. According to Leonard Davis, who interviewed Mary Elizabeth King Brennan, long time local resident, the old house was a large place with an enormous ballroom that drew travelers and locals for miles around to dance the night away. In the 1990s there were still a few chimney bricks from the old house visible.

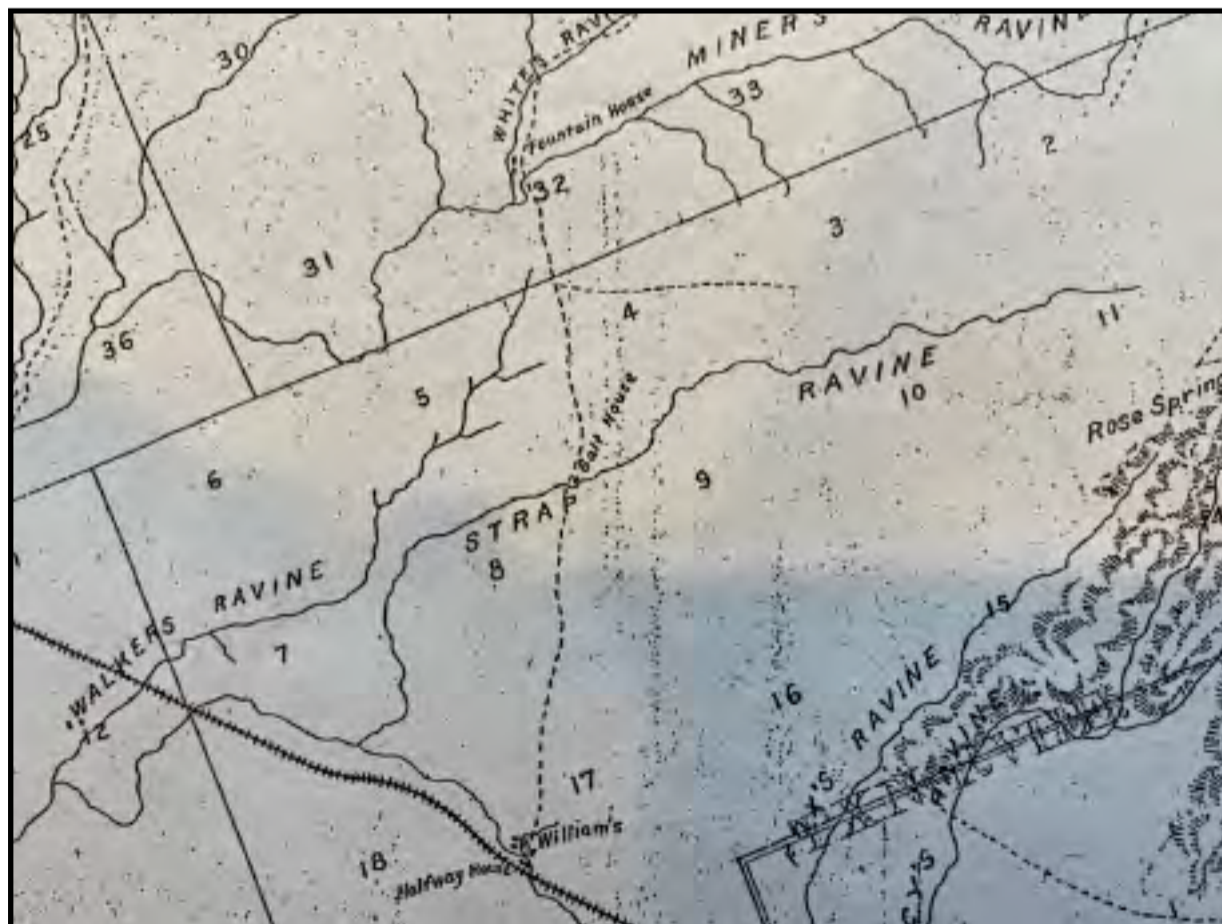




The Halfway House and the 12 Mile House are shown on the map above.

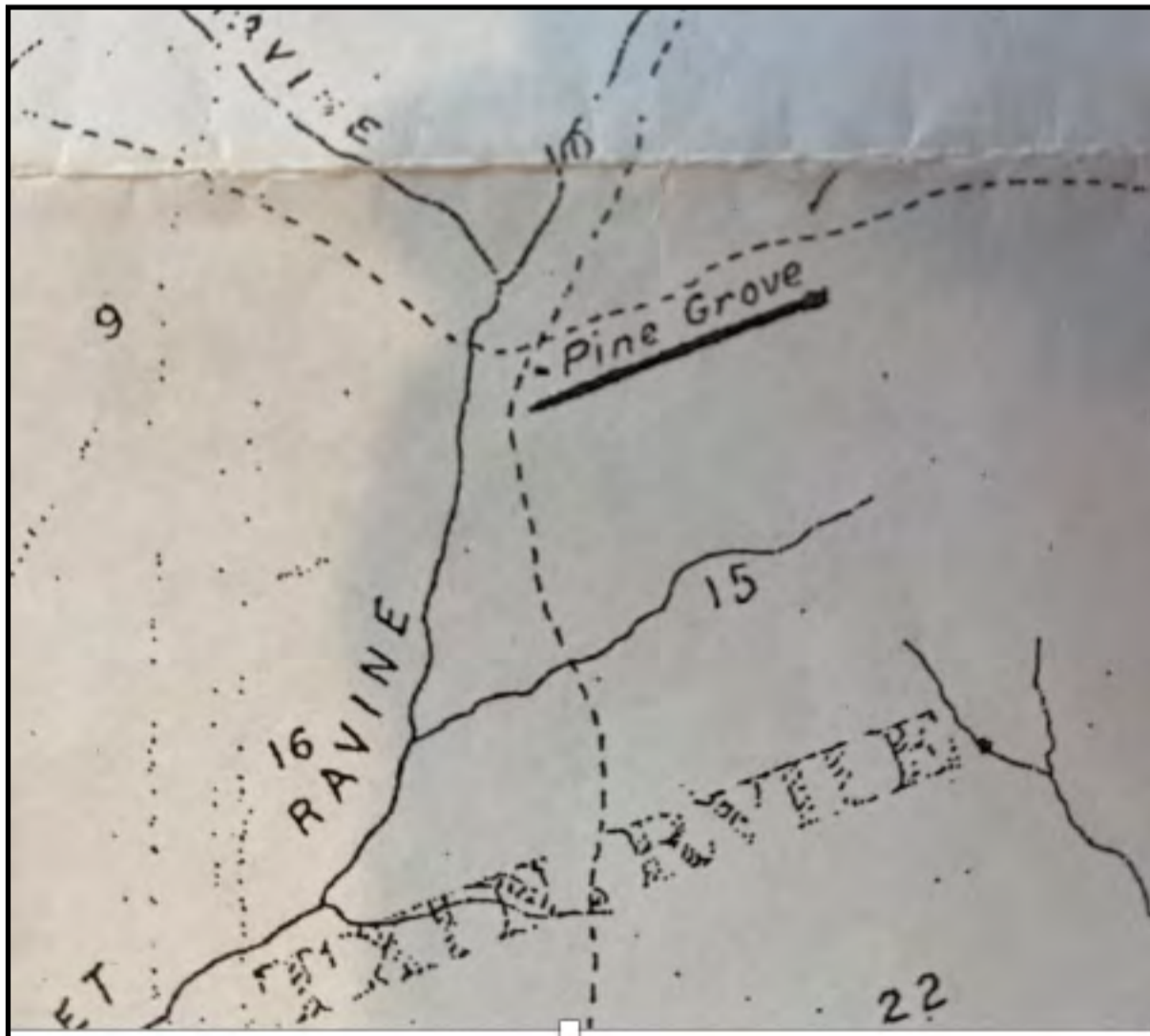
The next roadhouse on the route, sometimes called the Marysville Road, was the **12 mile House**. Not much is known about this inn. It shows up in a 1860 tax assessment with no owner listed and disappears in 1875 with a notice in the newspaper that it burned with the owner's body found inside. No owner was named.

The next roadhouse on the new road was the **Galt House** right on Strap Ravine. Not much is known about the Galt House. In the 1850s Daniel Vantrees was the proprietor. It was a voting precinct in 1854 and the last mention is found in 1860. Daniel and Rebecca would later own hotels in Roseville and Rocklin.

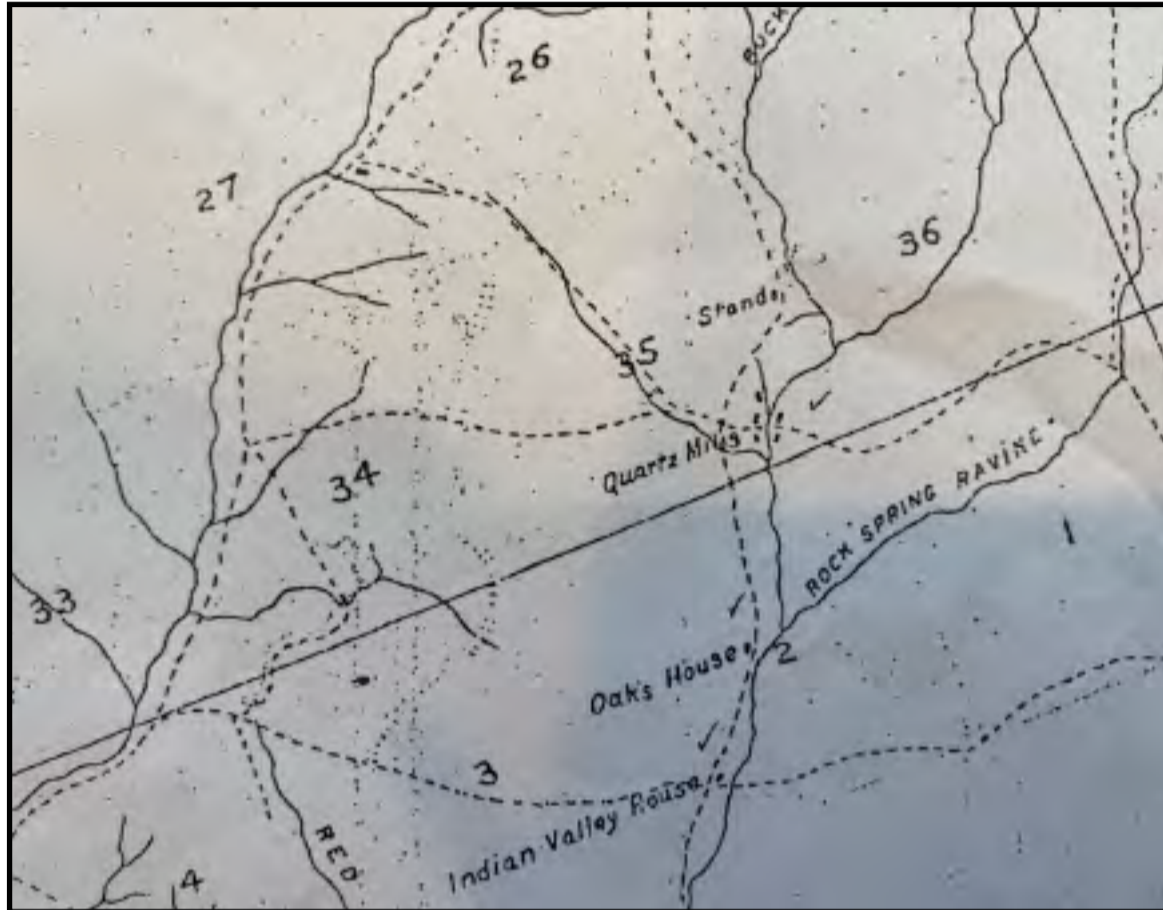


The **Fountain House**, shown above, was another inn that was built on the East Coast and brought in pieces to California and reassembled. It was owned by Castle and Hinkle in 1852. It was owned by William Prosser in 1884 and eventually ended up in the hands of the Cavitt family where it remained for many years. It was reported torn down in 1971 and the timbers used for a barn on the Cavitt property.

Further north was the **Pine Grove House**. The inn was built by William Dana Perkins before 1853. Perkins was at one time the Constable at nearby Rattlesnake Bar. When the Pine Grove House was here, the area was called Smithville. Perkins was known for throwing great balls in his huge ballroom. Crowds also flocked to the race track at the House. Perkins was a County Tax Collector and later would become the State Librarian. Perkins was also known for shooting Ned Conway, a partner in the notorious Tom Bell gang. In 1865, Sherman and Doty owned the House and it was valued at \$2,000.



The **Indian Valley House** was built before 1852. Samuel and Sarah Adams ran the House for several years. There were many ads in the local newspaper for balls at the Indian Valley House.



**Both the Indian Valley House and the Oaks House are shown in the map above.**

The **Oaks House** was run by Frank Logan from at least 1857 to 1864. The House is mentioned in several deeds but only as a locator.

Moses Andrews, a 49'er who became a very successful banker in Auburn, built a trading post and boarding house in Secret Ravine in 1850 to accommodate the miners who flocked to the gold discoveries along the Ravine. It was called the **Wild Cat House**. Its precise location is unknown.

Upon arriving at Auburn, there were several hotels in the town proper, The National, the Empire and the Auburn House were the earliest. Further up the Road were two important roadhouses. The **Traveler's Rest** was on the outskirts of Old Auburn's central business area.

Traveler's Rest was on the outskirts of Auburn near the gold rich area of Rich Flat. George Bishop and John Long built the inn in 1851. It was described as a "2 story, roomy, splendidly built place." It was a very successful and popular place for teamsters to stop to rest themselves and their teams. Bishop and Long planted vines and an orchard. Teaming and freighting changed with the coming of the railroad and they lost the inn in a sheriff's sale in 1863. Bishop had turned it into a private home a few years before. Eliza Carruthers bought the place. Bernhard Bernhard, a German immigrant, was also affected by the railroad coming, his teaming business was less profitable and he and his wife Rosa bought the property from Eliza in 1868. The Bernhards were able to make the property very successful. They made brandy and other liquors, had a profitable fruit orchard and grew other crops. The place stayed in the Bernhard family hands for many years. It eventually was abandoned and sat deteriorating until the 1950. It was sold to the 20th District Agricultural Association and plans were made to tear it down. The community, realizing the significance of the building to the history of the County and the City began an effort to save the building. The Place County Museum Foundation was formed and through hours of work by dedicated volunteers, the building was saved and sold to the county. It opened as a museum in 1982.



On the Illinoistown Road and at the end of the Auburn Turnpike and the crossroads to the high mountains was the **Junction House**. As early as 1851 Joseph Ferris and C. C. O'Flyng were the proprietors and probably the builders of the house. They applied for a liquor license in 1851. Mary and John Shannon owned it in 1854. Mary Fee Shannon was a poet who may have been the first published female poet in California although her poems were all about her home on the East Coast. Mary used the name Eulalie in her poems. She died in childbirth in 1854. John was a newspaperman. After Mary's death, John moved on. G. W. Gazley who ran several other hotels over time was an owner for several years. The Junction House was known for being near the site that the outlaw Rattlesnake Dick was shot down by the local posse. There was a large racetrack there in 1860. The house burned down in 1879 but was quickly rebuilt. Joseph Burtcher and family turned it into a private residence and were the owners from 1888 till the 1940s. The house sold to Gordon and Dorothy Hamilton in 1949. In 1966 Tom Raley bought the house and land for a shopping center. He tore down the house in 1967. The Historical Society placed a plaque on the property in 1988.

The Junction House sits at an important crossroads.

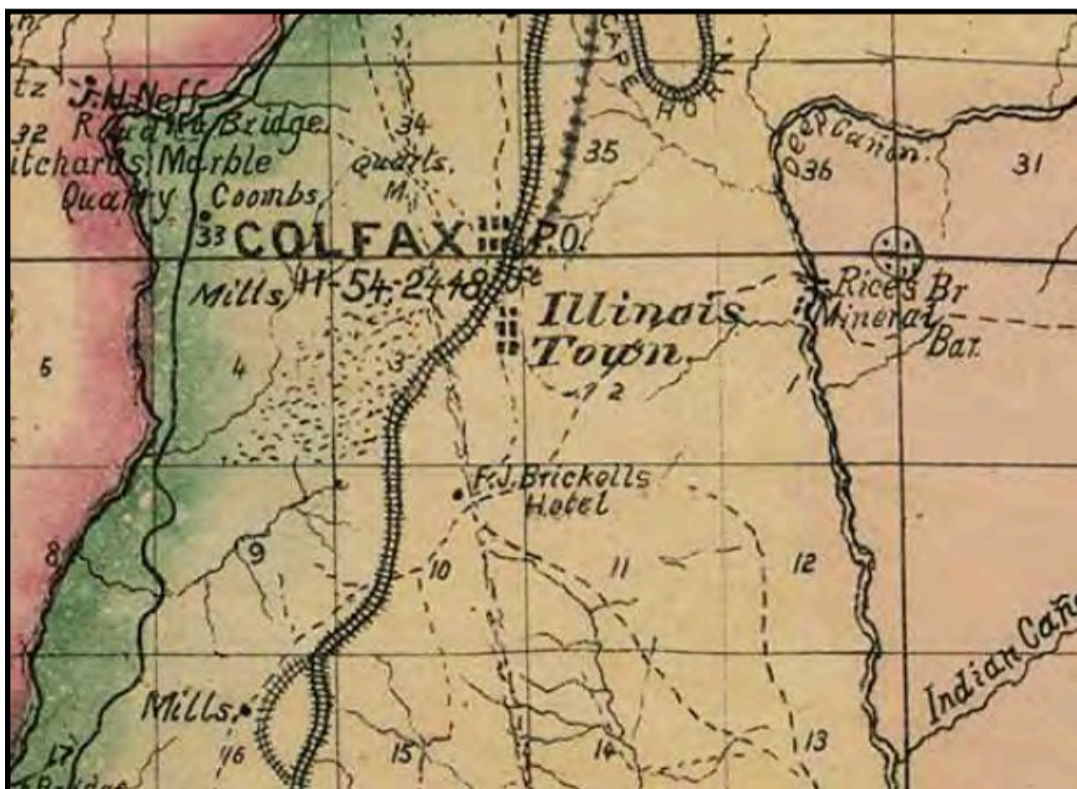


Headed up the Illinoistown Road is the **California House**. Wells Fargo express riders stopped here as early as 1852. It is mentioned in a deed in 1851. Arthur C. Neill was the owner for many years, the area around the California House was known as Neillsburg. After the Railroad went in this was a popular destination for special trains full of Masons to come for annual picnics. Arthur Neils was still the postmaster for Neillsburg in 1863.



Note A. C. Neil's name on the map next to the Cal. Ho.

A little further up the Illinoistown Road, on the outskirts of the town was **Brickell's Hotel**, sometimes called **Brickell's Michigan House**. The date of this House is a bit confusing. Wells Fargo express riders stopped here in 1854 but a notice in the local newspaper has an account of Edward J. Brickell building "one of the finest public houses in the county" in 1856. Perhaps replacing an early one? The Brickell brothers, Edward, Brazillai (Brazil), and Amiel, were all colorful characters. They were running a hotel in Sacramento in 1855 (adding to the confusion) when Amiel was murdered by his 15 year-old daughter's lover, the bartender at the hotel. The couple married on the prison brig a few days before the lover/husband was hanged at Sutter's Fort. Edward and Brazil were in the hotel



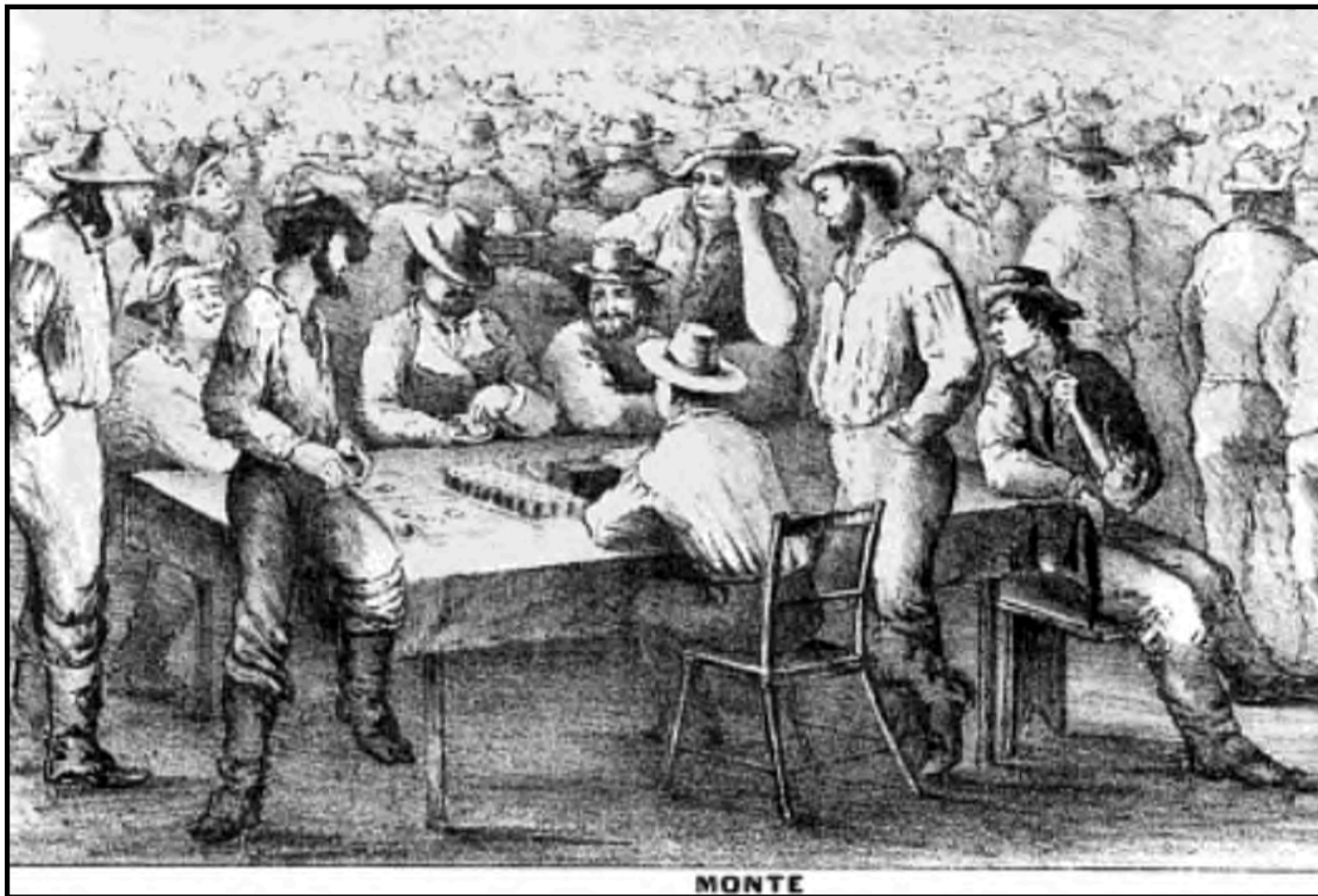
business and in the lumber and saw mill business. Both were extremely successful. The lumber mills made them millionaires. Edward's personal life is also a bit confusing. He married Rozanna Gragg and after her death he married her cousin and after her death he married Rozanna's sister. Leaving the Brickell family, the last mention of the Brickell's Hotel is in 1864 when Capt. Hersey gave a ball at "Brickell's old stand."

**F. J. Brickells Hotel in the above map is actually E. J.**

The geography of the county rises high into the mountains above Illinoistown and Dutch Flat. There were hotels in those towns early in the Gold Rush.

Down in the canyons of the North Fork and Middle Fork and on the Divide between them, gold deposits were rich and drew large populations of travelers. Leaving from Auburn, the first major roadhouse would be the **Grizzly Bear House**. J. D. Borthwick, Scottish physician, artist, and author, visited there in 1852 and described it as having an enormous grizzly bear skin hung on the wall of the large log cabin. He slept on the floor using his boots for a pillow. In that same year, Wells Fargo riders made their way to the inn and J. B. Nobel advertised that one half of the hotel was for sale. G. W. Gazley who worked at or owned several hotels in the County owned the Grizzly Bear House for the time in the late 1850s. There was a post office there in 1868. In 1870 Henry Benoit, a German shoemaker was owner of the House. Today there are said to be remnants of the rock foundation of the House on the Foresthill Divide Trail.





Borthwick also stopped at the next house along the road, the **U. S. House** or sometimes called the **United States House**. He described having lunch there with 60 or 70 miners. It was a mad crush to grab some food from the table. There were two “seatings” if they could be called that, as men grabbed for the food before they even sat down on the benches. But the table held a good supply of fresh beef, potatoes, beans, pickles and salt pork. Men ate mostly with their knives instead of forks and finished off their meals in mere minutes. After dinner, “a smart looking man” laid out five or six hundred dollars for a monte bank and miners gathered to gamble. Avery Haskins ran the 2 story frame house in 1855. By 1865 Andy Poland was the proprietor. The U. S. House can be seen on the above map.



A little off the road to Yankee Jims was the **Spring Garden House**. E. Brown was the proprietor in 1852. This House was described as “a paradise place,” a “beauty spot in one of the most beautiful valleys in the state.” It seemed to change hands quite a bit through the 1850s and 60s. There was a big gold strike near there in 1868 and as late as 1885, there was an article in the newspaper about wheat over six feet high at the Spring Garden Ranch.

The **North Star House** was on the road that headed toward Todd's Valley. The North Star was on the Wells Fargo route in 1852. William Randlett sold the ranch and House to Charles Randlett in 1855 for \$2500.00. Cook and Smith had a stage line and owned the House in 1865. By 1868, J. W. Dickinson's name is on the map below and in 1869 J. W. Dickinson is on the list of "heavy tax payers" in Placer County.



Foresthill and Yankee Jim's and Todd's Valley all had hotels of varying sizes as did the higher mountain towns like Bath, Michigan Bluff, Iowa Hill, and Damascus. From the early tent cities like the one that G. V. Cooper illustrated, roadhouses became an important element in the life of miners in the early Gold Rush period.







They were forever chasing a rumor of gold to be had at some far off location and off they would go, usually just with a blanket, a few tools, a skillet and little else. Roadhouses provided much needed shelter and food.

As time passed and as the gold disappeared, so did the roadhouses that served the traveling miners. Roads improved and wagons could travel further, there were fewer miners roaming the county looking for the next big strike. Most roadhouses just diappeared. The citizens of Placer County are lucky to have the Bernhard Museum still standing as a representative of these essential elements of the California Gold Rush.

April McDonald-Loomis

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