

FAIR OAKS HISTORY

The San Juan Grant

Aside from a few scattered contacts by the earliest explorers and trappers, it was probably Spanish soldiers who, in 1808, were the first Europeans who reached the American River area. They were likely exploring territory for new Missions or in the pursuit of Indian slaves who had run away from the Missions along the coast. The eventual Spanish, and subsequent Mexican claim to the area was broken up as the Mexican Governor of California, Manuel Micheltorena, thinking that this area was an unimportant province, began issuing large private land grants in the 1840s to American settlers in order to discourage raiding by the Native population and to facilitate large cattle grazing operations, as well as for the establishment of pueblos and towns.

One of these grants, the twenty thousand acre San Juan Grant, bordered the lower American River. Scatterings of transient hunters, trappers and “49ers” had set up small camps in the area, and the land had changed ownership several times, often because the owners were unable to pay the taxes assessed.

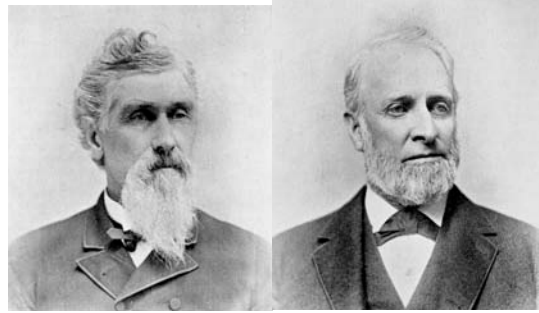
The need for water during the surge of “49ers” and other early inhabitants of the area was met by the construction of a canal, called the North Fork Ditch, which had a life of just about 100 years. It was dug in 1854 and 1855 by the Natoma Water and Mining Company, a predecessor of today’s San Juan Water District, and ran some thirty miles from the diversion dam just east of Auburn to a final termination in what is now Fair Oaks. The purpose of the ditch was to bring a consistent flow of water to mining sites along the river, and also for general water needs such as irrigation. Placer mining for gold was taking place at this time all along the river on the gravel bars and the flat bench lands above the river, and water was needed to separate the gold from the earth.



North Fork ditch

While the initial surge in population in the American River area was driven by gold, the introduction of irrigation allowed the value of ranching and agricultural production to exceed the value of all the gold ever produced in the state.

A successful miner and business man, Frederick Cox, along with a partner, cattle and water magnate Crawford W. Clarke, purchased a portion of the San Juan grant and cultivated a part of this tract to wheat, with the balance used as a range for stock. Cox prospered and became popular. He was chosen by the people to represent them in the Legislature of California. In 1873 Clarke purchased the 6000 acres



Frederick Cox and Crawford Clarke

that were to become Fair Oaks. He was loath to part with the land and the water rights to it until C.H. Howard, from a Midwestern publishing and land promotion company, induced him to sell, or perhaps contractually allow the company to sell, the valuable tract in 1895.

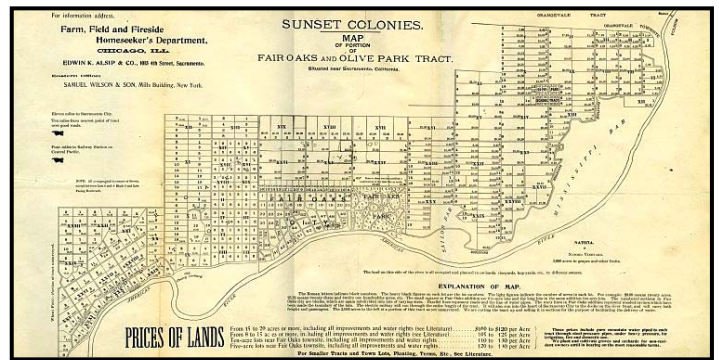
Clarke was persuaded to proceed because there was pressure from the civic and business leaders in Sacramento who were anxious to break up some of the large land grant ranches that surrounded the city, in order to make room for more settlers. They were particularly anxious to have this tract opened up because it offered an available location for suburban homes, away from the flat (and often flooded) river bottom lands of the city. This tract, with its billowy roll, magnificent oak trees, and a beautiful river with a rapid current and high bank boasting a wide vista, would be an ideal spot for a suburban villa.

The Development of the Fair Oaks Colony

Though it had been more than twenty-five years since the Gold Rush was over, most easterners still perceived this far western state as a land of natural wonders, human discomforts, high prices and virtual lawlessness. It took a lot of encouragement by promoters to lure the eastern tourists and potential settlers to reconsider these misconceptions. Just as other land promoters and developers did throughout California, Howard's Chicago firm, the Howard-Wilson Company, under the auspices of "The Farm, Field and Fireside" publication, proceeded to subdivide, promote and develop these 6,000 acres of hills and dales along the American River which had been part of the San Juan Grant.

It was this area that by 1895 helped give California its new reputation. Howard's land development company extolled the "peculiar character and wonderful fertility of its soil and its

favorable climate.... which, while offering health and comfort, at the same time holds liberal inducements of prosperity to the thrifty”. This description, along with a few promised improvements, such as roads, railroads and provisions for power and water, induced many from the Midwest and the East Coast to join special train excursions from the company’s home base in Chicago to view and purchase these lots for farming, ranching, or to simply build a home on and maybe retire to. The land, advertised as one of the developer’s “Sunset Colonies”, was sold in five to twenty acre tracts.



An 1897 plot map of Fair Oaks

According to one account, Fair Oaks was named after a city in Virginia. The developer, a Union veteran whose full title was General Charles H. Howard, felt the area reminded him of Fair Oaks, Virginia, where his brother General Oliver O. Howard fought and lost an arm in an 1862 Civil War Battle there. Charles also named Howard Street in Fair Oaks in honor of his brother.

Agriculture in Fair Oaks

Early investors and colonists coming to this area were shown the prosperous orange groves in Orange Vale, a neighboring community that had been started about ten years ahead of Fair Oaks and was going through a farming boom, particularly with its successful orange groves. This was one of the reasons that so many orange orchards were started in the new Fair Oaks colony. The oak-studded hills gave way to fields of agriculture. Water from the North Fork Ditch provided somewhat reliable irrigation for this effort.

Another selling point for Fair Oaks was the fact that in 1893 there had been big freezes in Florida and Southern California, which ruined their oranges. Consequently, this whole area was in demand, especially after claims were made that the winters were mild and “free from injurious frosts”, and the summers were pleasant and not oppressively hot. Orchards of all types sprung up throughout the community. The trees were bearing fruit by 1893, when four carloads of fruit shipped out from the area. Early shipping relied on horse drawn wagon transport to the rail yards in Folsom or Sacramento.

Building the Bridge

The natural seasonal fluctuation in the flow of the American River was such that it allowed the early residents of the area to essentially walk across the river occasionally in the dry summers when the flow slowed to a relative trickle. Most of the year, however, the river was crossed, when needed, by various means of transportation. The native residents used boats made from woven reeds, or they poled flattened or hollowed-out logs along and across the river. Hudson Bay trappers also used hollowed-out logs as canoes on the Sacramento and American rivers. Explorer and trapper Jedediah Smith crossed the river in 1828 near the present location of the Guy West Bridge in a boat made from animal skins. In the 1840's, Captain John Sutter used a variety of small wooden boats to transport goods up and down the river. During the gold rush, various sailing and steam-powered vessels navigated as far upstream as Brighton (a site near the California State University of Sacramento campus) to deliver supplies and transport miners.

By 1897, three hundred permanent settlers resided in Fair Oaks. As the community grew, there developed a need for better communication with the outside world and a faster way to ship the increasing volumes of produce that the new colony was producing for markets in the East. At the time, the Orange Vale and Fair Oaks area was competing with Southern California as the citrus center of the world.

Investment in the area began to diminish, however, leading the Howard-Wilson company to withdraw. A group of local and out-of-state businessmen and investors then formed the Chicago-Fair Oaks Association in 1898-1899 to seek support for the "Sunset Colony" by lobbying government and other potential investors and helped in the successful realization of the



Train depot at south end of the bridge.

construction of a bridge at Fair Oaks over the American River in 1901. Soon after, a spur was built up from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks that ran about a mile south of the river, and a depot was built near the south end of the bridge. A turn-table located between the depot and the river served to head the train engine back. The train service spurred the budding fruit colony to grow and prosper.

Fair Oaks grew rapidly with the completion of the bridge and railway. The Fair Oaks Fruit Company incorporated in 1902 and built a warehouse to export its fruit, and by 1906 was shipping out 150 carloads of oranges and 50 carloads of lemons a year. Olives and almonds were also major crops in the area.

During the exceptionally high floods of March of 1907, the piers of the bridge were undermined and the first Fair Oaks bridge collapsed. Because the bridge had become so important to the local commerce, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors agreed that a temporary bridge should be built as soon as possible while the new permanent bridge was planned and constructed. A ferry system was used while the temporary bridge was being built.

Construction on the new bridge began later that year. Because it was a wide crossing – nearly 700 ft across – and because of the need to minimize the number of piers in the dangerous current, very long main spans and special construction were devised specifically for the bridge. The 200 foot spans were quite daring for their time. The approaches to the new taller bridge also involved bringing in tons of rock and gravel that took some time. Another rush of high water in early 1909 took out the temporary bridge, but by then foot traffic was allowed on the new bridge. It was apparently late in 1909 before the bridge was open to fully open to traffic.



The “new” Fair Oaks Bridge, as seen from the Bluff today. It has served for over 100 years and survived a number of high-water episodes.

By around 1910, the main train from Sacramento to Folsom stopped coming up the spur to the Fair Oaks depot. Instead it was met regularly by a little motor car which took people from the Fair Oaks depot to the main line.

Fair Oaks Grows Up

Fair Oaks continued to grow with a tremendous building and population boom, and it became a typical small town and agricultural community. By 1911, mountain water was piped to every home – and there were two hundred of them, with an estimated population of one thousand people. Three thousand acres were planted to citrus and deciduous fruits. A series of

devastating freezes destroyed much of the fruit crop in the early 1930s, however, and wiped out the area as a major producer of citrus fruit in California. This took a heavy toll on farmers already burdened by the Great Depression.

The Impact of Gold on Fair Oaks

Other than a few settlers left from the Gold Rush before the Fair Oaks colony was formed, the residents of Fair Oaks did not enter in to much of the actual claiming of gold. It was early in the gold rush days that the river beaches of Fair Oaks and Folsom were mined by transient gold seekers. The Chinese followed after the first miners, but many went back home with their gold, leaving behind the distinctive sluice ditches that can still be seen at various points along the river between Folsom and Fair Oaks.



A sluice ditch mars the bluff across from Sailor Bar.

Gold did, however, enter into Fair Oaks history in that many of its men worked for the dredging companies which began operating in about 1903 or 1904, when the construction of a gold dredge was started in the American River at the lower end of Sailor Bar. This was a wooden boat fabricated and constructed on the site. When it went into operation the destruction of rich farm



A dredger operating along the river

land along the southern boundaries of Fair Oaks began. Another dredge was built a quarter mile from the Southern Pacific Railroad depot around 1905-6. Several large ranches were destroyed, along with the huge Natoma Vineyard which covered several thousand acres on each side of Folsom Road, as well as many thousands of acres of grain land

south of the Folsom Road. While this land was not in the Colony, during the harvest season it gave employment to a great many men, women and children from Fair Oaks. There were some farmers who did not want to sell to the dredgers and they tried unsuccessfully to prevent the dredging company from destroying the rich crop land.

Dredging made a lasting mark on the landscape, and as one early resident later lamented, “The hundreds of acres of orchards and vineyards one could view from the bluffs were much more pleasing to the eye than the rock piles that meet your view now.” Other old timers remembered the gold dredges howling day and night as they “gleefully gobbled up the grape vineyards and charged at the bluffs as they scraped the bars along the American River”. At one time there were 250 men working down on the river. During the wars and depressions Fair Oaks as a whole never suffered too greatly from the lack of anything because the gold continued to be a significant source of revenue, producing more than \$100 million during 50 years of dredging operations.

The dredges worked the area until up in to the late 1950’s and the last of them was disassembled and sent to South America in the 1960’s. According to an early resident, “the main reason for the end of this era was that there was just not enough open ground left in our area for them to work any longer.”

After dredging was discontinued, the land was left covered by row after row of dredge tailings, creating millions of softball-sized rocks piled in furrows 50-feet high and hundreds of yards long. The dredging operations had “roto-tilled” the soil a little too deep (sometimes up to 100 feet deep). It left the layer of rich soil under a deep the covering of cobbles. Natomas Consolidated, a consortium of various dredging companies, set about to restore the land to usefulness. Intending to turn the land back to orchards, they attempted to dispose of the thousands of acres of cobbles. The cobbles were found to be the most excellent material for road building. By 1910 they were shipping 15,713 railroad cars of crushed rock and gravel per year. That is about 50 cars each day of the week except Sunday. By 1911 they had the largest rock crushing plant in the United States.

Some of this crushed rock was used to build what is known as macadam roads. This type of road is built by layering rock and pressing it down into a soil roadbed and rolling it. Later these were oiled. (Folsom Road, running the twenty miles from Sacramento to Folsom, was the first oiled road in the State of California.) The concrete material manufactured by the plant was used to build many of the buildings in the Sacramento area and throughout the Sacramento Valley.

According to another resident of the time, “the sound of the rock being crushed was a steady grr-rrr-rrr-r, like a great ocean from where we lived. I remember it as the Pacific Coast Aggregates. The rock crusher was down and over the old bridge to where the railroad station was to the south of town. The rock crushing plant was on the left and to the right was a neat little row of company homes. (Some years ago, an inquiry to the Natoma Company revealed) that they had plans for the Gold River area. The Natoma Company had never given up the idea of redeeming the dredge land. We now have our neighbors to the south – Gold River.”

Unsuitable for farming and with little other productive uses, the miles of mounds of dredge tailings that remained south of Folsom Road (now known as Folsom Boulevard) were determined to be a suitable site for the rocket testing activities of the Aerojet Corporation after WWII. In 1951, ground was broken on what grew to be the 25,000 acre site which the corporation bought from the Natomas Mining Company, and for a while, Aerojet was a major employer for the area, with 23,000 employees at its peak. This in turn created a large housing boom in the surrounding communities, especially Fair Oaks and Orangevale.

Fair Oaks Today

While the agricultural and gold dredging eras have passed, along with the heyday of the Aerojet facility, Fair Oaks, with a population now nearing thirty thousand, has kept its flavor as a traditional small town in the unincorporated part of Sacramento County. Many of the early homes and business structures still survive as part of the core of the town center, known as the ‘Fair Oaks Village’ area, and feral chickens (to the chagrin of some but to the delight of many) rule in the heart of the village. Narrow, hilly and tree-lined streets still meander through town, many without sidewalks, and some lead to the outlying areas where most of the orchards and farmlands have given way to homes for commuters and retirees – just as the early planners of the community envisioned.