

The Novato Historian



The Quarterly Publication of the
Novato Historical Guild, the Novato History Museum,
and the Hamilton Field History Museum

Preserving Novato's History

Feature Section

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April-June 2012

The Novato Historian

Volume 36, Number 2

Knoxville 94945

by Mike Read

The fact that most of present day Novato was once the Rancho de Novato is fairly common knowledge and so are the names of the men who have owned the property. However, one name not seen often in historical accounts of Novato is that of Dr. Reuben Knox. There was a time when the doctor very nearly became the owner of Novato Rancho. If his plans had succeeded, Novato might have become Knoxville.

Below is a talk given 9-19-73 to the Marin County Historical Society by Dr. Robert Thomas (great great grandson of Dr. Knox) and letters written by Dr. Knox to his wife.

Reuben H. Knox, was born in Blandford, MA, in 1801. He graduated from Columbia U. College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1826, and soon set up practice in North Carolina. (Kinston in Lenior Co.) There he married and fathered five sons.

After the death of one child and his wife, he married again, to Eliza H. Washington (Grist) and moved his family to St.

Louis, Missouri. There, he fathered three more sons and a daughter, and there three more of his sons died. Of the sons who lived to maturity, one became a lawyer, and two became physicians.

Reuben's oldest son was Joseph A. Knox, a

senior in Geology at Yale in 1850 when Reuben organized the trip to California in 1850. The Knox party was composed of Dr. Knox, his two sons, Joseph A. and Henry, two cousins, Reuben H. and Richard F. Knox, and six black slaves. At Salt Lake City the party was joined by a stepson, Franklin Grist. The trip was meant to be of a year or two duration at the most, and he would then return. His wife and two small children returned to North Carolina to await his return.

The Knox party assembled at Old Fort Kearney in Nebraska, and set out on the morning of May 20, 1850. After a most difficult and interesting trip, they arrived at Hangtown (Placerville) on Sept. 14, 1850. Starting



Reuben H. Knox, MD and Eliza H. Washington (Grist) Knox

with 11 wagons, 70 mules and horses, they lost the last of them in Nevada and the Sierra Nevada mountains, and, walking over the mountains, they arrived at Hangtown with but 28 mules.

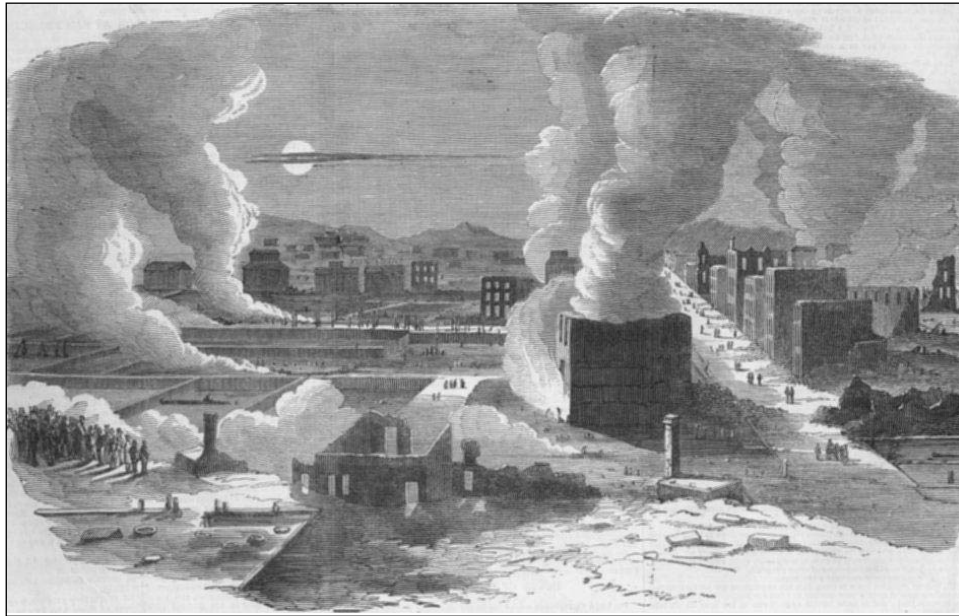
On October 14, 1850, Dr. Knox would write, "We purchased a sail boat in Sacramento capable of carrying from one and a half to two tons weight and came down here (San Francisco) on our own hook to lay in stores, etc. The wind being ahead have been all the week in getting down, having some very rough weather and constant head winds with the exception of half a day."

He also wrote, "He is very anxious (his son Henry) to get settled and on a farm, which by the way is one of the best kinds of business here, and yielding far more abundantly than the "gold diggers." Onions, for instance, which can be raised in great perfection and abundance here as well as most garden vegetables, are selling readily at 62 ½ cents per pound, tomatoes 20 to 25 cents per pound, and so on.

As Dr. Knox saw it, his trip had two objectives, the one being to liberate the slaves in California, the other to make a good business profit. To the latter end he shipped large quantities of goods to California, starting them from New Orleans several months before their Sept. arrival in California. So much of his merchandise was lost en route that he possibly did not have much chance for profit from this business, but he did operate a store in San Francisco until May 4, 1851. On that early May day, San Francisco burned down in one of its most disastrous fires. It is probable that the total Knox merchandise was lost in that fire.

At Rancho again, May 11 in a letter he wrote: I reached home on Saturday evening (May 3rd), my dear, a week ago out all night as it seems I am destined to be whenever I go or return from the town.

The fog was so dense when we were coming up that we could not find the mouth of the creek and were running about in Pablo Bay in search of it 9 or 10 p.m. until day break and the fleas kept us awake all night. After writing you a few lines at the commencement



San Francisco fire of 1851

of this letter, when I reached home I was nearly "used up," being four days without an hour of sound sleep altogether."

May 12. "We have news of another awful fire in San Francisco, more destructive than all that have heretofore occurred there, laying waste all the business part of the City, and as usual with me here, I came in for a share, about two thousand dollars worth of goods being stored in the basement of the store we occupied while in business there burned down, but I have enough to think about here and enough work to do so I will not bother about that.

Our vegetables look nicely. Beets and the like outgrow anything I ever saw, and should they continue to do so through the season, must attain an enormous size. Your sweet pumpkin seed are up and the other seed all up too, except the lettuce, as one of the hands during my absence pulled all up except that for weeds. Please send me a little more Palatine seed and I will sow it in the fall, guarding it more carefully."

San Francisco May 14, 1851 – He writes "The recent fire of which you will see awful accounts in the accompanying paper assisted me in the disposal of goods which cost at least two thousand dollars, to

which the expense of getting here, interest on the first cost, etc., may be added. One thing among those disposed of in the wholesale way I shall miss very much as I had intended to put it in operation at the ranch where it might have been made very profitable, viz the circular saw mill. But burnt goods being as surely gone as drowned mules, I think crying or grieving after either will never bring them back, so following your good advice, I shall do neither. In you I possess such a treasure that pecuniary disappointment shall no more give rise to despondency – that is if I can help it – and having taken such impressive lessons, and attended so fine a school for this purpose during the past twelve months, I think I ought to be proficient in this branch ere long. What say you?”

From the ranch, May 18, 1851 – Dr. Knox writes – “I am again seated in my lonely room at the east window to commune awhile with you and the dear little ones...

You hope I have secured the ranch which Frank gives such a glowing account of, etc. I have only rented it for the present season but have the preference over all others when it is ready for sale. Capt. Simmons the owner, made an assignment last summer for the benefit of preferred creditors and those who were not included are endeavoring to break it up. Mr. Billings (as in Billings MT.), one of the assignees and also his lawyer and brother-in-law says the case will not be finally disposed of before fall, if then. He appears anxious that I should have it unless he has a much better bid from others will not dispose of it. Capt. S. held it at \$80,000 and it was assessed higher than that. The price the assignees have set it is \$40,000, but I do not think over half of that could be had in cash for it now. The stock is worth from 12 to 15,000 here and would bring \$40,000 at the east. I shall have no means of purchasing unless the crop succeeds well and my losses cease, but think that I could within two or three years realize \$100,000 at least from it in case I purchase. A few months will decide the matter and none of use know what a few months or even a day may bring forth. I see no possible way not to retrieve my numerous and heavy losses in California, but to do it here, and I shall be perfectly contented, while it was necessary to remain, were you all here. I would not for a moment think of a permanent abode so far

away from all our relatives and friends, and my own business will compel my attendance in St. Louis in 1854, early in the season.”

Dr. Knox was not too terribly dismayed by his various misfortunes. It is true that his original business hopes had failed him, but by now he had developed other interests. He owned a large merchandise store back in St. Louis, and was independently wealthy, or at least well-to-do. Therefore, he had the means to proceed with other interests, and that other interest was the Rancho Novato in Marin County. At sometime in the spring of 1851 he rented the Rancho from the assignees of Capt. Bezer Simmons (who died Sept. 26, 1850) and moved his family to that ranch for the purposes of farming it while he negotiated to buy it.

Dr. Knox completed this letter on May 27 in San Francisco – “Started (from the ranch) on Saturday morning and did not reach here until yesterday having run aground in quite a gale and being unable to get off for nearly 40 hours during which time the wind was blowing almost a hurricane, and we had no shelter, being in an open boat out in Pablo Bay – the coldest day I have spent in the State was Sunday in that situation. Mr. James F. Graham was with me, he having gone up when I was down before. ... Mr. Graham will return with me today.... I hope, however, we shall soon all be at the ranch and I thereby relieved of a great deal of anxiety, care and trouble. This California life is a desperate one to make the best of it as we have been since arrival here.

I could be happy with you and all at the ranch and no other way. All continue perfectly well and Mr. Graham says Fran and Richard are so fat they can hardly find clothes large enough to wear...

We are much in want of hands to cut hay, etc., and I have been out trudging over half the city trying to hire. Have two who promised to go up with us, but it is quite uncertain whether they will... This is the best kind of hay and sells readily at 100 dollars per ton, but so many are cutting that the price may be very low before I can get any in market...

I am closing this letter, my dear, on board the steam boat Buncia commanded by Captain Hight who lived in one of our houses on 10th Street (property in St. Louis) and left without paying. Cannot get a cent of the hundred dollars he owes me. Our little

boat lies near and the wind blows so hard I shall not leave until it abates and remain on board the Buncia in a warm berth until that time..."

During that spring he became one of the first commuters to San Francisco from Marin County,



This is a photo of the hay scow Alma ca. 1900. Alma is a typical example of the boats described in this article. Interestingly, Alma has been restored and maintained and still sails on San Francisco Bay.

traveling frequently to San Francisco to take care of his business interests there. To commute in this way he traveled on boats built to ascend the streams that flowed into the Bay in those days, ships with relatively flat bottoms and almost no keels. Such ships sacrificed stability and were very prone to capsize in rough weather and waters. The next day, Reuben was drowned, thus ending the possibility that the Rancho Novato would become Knox property.

At 7:20 P.M. on May 28, 1851, aboard the two-ton sloop, which he owned, he was traveling with his nephew, Reuben H. Knox, and did exactly this "in the mouth of San Pablo Bay, and the two of them and three other persons were drowned. The exact location of the accident is unknown to me – it could have been in the Raccoon Straits between the Tiburon peninsula and Angel Island, but it could also have been elsewhere, so far as I know.

Daily Alta California reported on Monday Morning, June 2, 1851 - Melancholy Accident – Five Men Drowned – A boat of two or three tons burthen,

loaded with iron machinery, sailed from here last Wednesday, bound for a rancho on San Pablo Bay, formerly owned by Capt. Simmons, and recently occupied by Dr. Reuben Knox, of St. Louis, Missouri.

About fifteen miles from here, at half past seven o'clock, P.M., between Points San Pedro and San Pablo, the wind blowing heavily and a high sea running, the boat swamped and sunk, and all but one of the passengers were drowned. The persons drowned were Dr. Reuben, of St. Louis; John Allen, of Burlington, Vt.; James F. Graham, of North Carolina, nephew of Hon. Wm. Graham, Secretary of the Navy; a Mr. Davis, of Maine, and an Indian boy (was Camilo Ynitia's son, Juan Pablo, 21 years old).

These persons, although good swimmers were unable to contend with the force of the waves and tide, and after a struggle of a few moments, sunk. Mr. C. Wheeler, of New Bedford, was the only person in getting on shore in an exhausted condition. A coat and a number of small articles belonging to Mr. Graham, were washed ashore and found, but none of the bodies have yet been recovered.

Dr. Knox has two sons in California. This is one of the most melancholy accidents which we have ever been called upon to record, and the sad news arriving in the Atlantic States will carry with it sorrow to many hearts as it has here to those who knew the unfortunate men. Any information that may lead to the discovery of the bodies may be communicated to Dr. V.J. Fourgeaud, of this city, by whom it will be thankfully received.

In July 1852, the ranch was sold to Archibald Peachy for \$28,500 and, in December of 1852, it was sold by Peachy for \$35,000. Reuben had not been far wrong in his evaluation of the ranch.

The history of the Knox trip across the plains and their affairs in California have been published in three 1960 issues of the "North Carolina Historical Review."

The Novato Museum has a book in its library called "A Medic Fortyniner (Life and Letters of Dr. Reuben Knox 1849-51)". It totals 82 pages and is worth the time to read. There, it is well documented, that the Knox family did live on the Rancho Novato, and that Joseph A. Knox continued to rent and farm the land there after his father's death.