

Auburn's 49ers

Stories of the brave men
and women who came to California
for gold in 1849 and early 1850.

VOLUME FIVE

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*“ The whole tract of the mountainous land is
impregnated with gold
but it is verrey hard to be got.”*
Isaac Annis - 1849

Introduction

The general story of the 49er's is well known. In 1848 and 1849, young men, excited by the news of the gold discovery, flocked to California. Initially, the area around Auburn was rich with opportunity. Spanish Flat, near present-day Nevada Street, Rich Flat, near the Gold Country Fairgrounds, and the Auburn Ravine and its tributaries all yielded substantial amounts of gold in the first few years of the Gold Rush.

One of the most common attributes of the newly arrived would-be miners was their propensity to move about following rumors of the next "big strike." As such, not very many 49er's stayed put once they arrived in California and few left a record of their time here.

When we started researching for this project, John Knox and I were hoping to identify maybe 20 forty-niners who came to Auburn in 1849 and early 1850. So we were astonished to find over eighty men and women who came to the Auburn area in the first years of the Gold Rush. Most did not stay but they still left a record of their time here.

Each story is a unique tale about a pioneer who came hoping for gold. Though they rarely found it, they ended up loving California and cherishing the memories of the biggest adventure of their lifetime.

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Richard Gordon Rapier

1832 - 1887

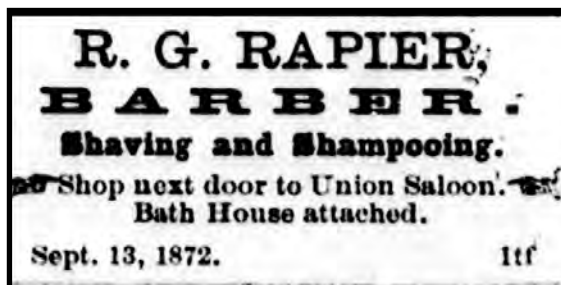
The story of Richard Rapier is unusual because we have more records than are usual for a black man during this period of time. Rapier was freeborn to a former slave in Florence, Alabama. His father was a successful barber.

At the age of eighteen years, Rapier heard the siren song of the Gold Rush and joined a wagon train headed across the Plains. Rapier was in charge of the mules on the journey that lasted four and a half months. They arrived in Placerville in September 1850.

After trying his hand at mining for a time, Rapier, like so many other would-be-miners, turned to a profession to make his living. He took up the trade as a barber. The date he arrived in Auburn varies according to which account is used. Some say as early as 1851, but other accounts indicate he didn't arrive here until 1863.

One of the reasons we know so much about Rapier and his family is the treasure trove of family letters gifted to Howard University and turned into a biography *"In Search of the Promised Land, A Slave Family in the Old South"* by preeminent historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger in 2006.

Rapier had three brothers. Henry proved to be a scoundrel and was arrested for murder in Auburn in 1856. Another brother, John had a medical degree and was one of the very few black doctors in the Union Army. His youngest brother, James, was involved in politics in both Tennessee and Alabama and was



a one term Congressman.

In 1863, Rapier purchased nearly all the furnishings of John Bradford's barbershop in Auburn. Later he would buy the building and the adjoining bathhouse.



Rapier bought the Bradford lot in 1863 and the lot marked XI in 1870.

Rapier's barbershop was a popular gathering spot in Auburn. He was known as "a great reader and an interesting talker on any current event with a good memory for political history."

Much of Rapier's knowledge must have come from the many periodicals and newspapers he subscribed to and kept in his barbershop for all to peruse. In his probate, there is a list of subscriptions he held: *the Charleston News*, *the Montgomery Advertiser*, *Harper's Weekly*, *the New York Police Gazette*, *the New York Ledger*, *the Sacramento Union*, and *the Placer Republican* among them.

Rapier married Henrietta Stans in 1868 but she seems to disappear from the official record soon after. There were two children born to them but by the 1880 census, Rapier was listed as single and living at the American Hotel.

Rapier died in 1887. His funeral was "largely attended" by the town folks.

George Washington Reamer

1827 - 1892

A book could be written about George Reamer and his Gold Rush experience. He arrived with 47 other “affluent young men” on the bark *Isabel* on August 5, 1849. He was part of the New Brunswick and California Mining and Trading Company. The men were mostly from Reamer’s hometown of New Brunswick, New Jersey. They purchased the ship they came on and were led by the local town doctor, Dr. Augustus Taylor.

The around the Horn journey was harrowing. Most of the men had scurvy because for some reason all the anti-scurvy provisions were secured in the bowels of the ship where they were unreachable. After they arrived, they bought a lot about three miles from Sutter’s Fort and constructed a building to house Dr. Taylor’s medical office and a grocery store. Several of the members of the Company died from the effects of scurvy and several immediately set out to return home. Reamer stayed but according to accounts “sought both health and riches in the mines.” By 1851, the entire company dissolved.

On his own, Reamer was successful mining on the American River in 1850 and 1851. By 1852, he was working in the Foresthill area. He worked tirelessly for six years before discovering the New Jersey Mine. From that mine he took “over one million dollars in profit” over seven years. That would be multi-millions in today’s money.

By 1862, no doubt with plenty of money in his pockets, he returned to the East Coast and married Sarah Macdonald from New York. They quickly returned to Foresthill.

In 1868, Reamer bought the Bear River and Auburn Water and Mining Company at a Sheriff’s sale. Shortly

after, in 1871, he and Sarah bought the R. O. Cravens house in Auburn for \$2,000 and moved into town.



George and Sarah had three children. George continued to consolidate his water and ditch holdings buying the American River Mining Company in 1870. He soon began work on an enormous dam project on the North Fork. He had a large force of men and invested over \$200,000 in the dam. The huge dam was almost complete when a winter storm brought torrential high water and destroyed the entire project.

It was a huge loss for Reamer. In 1875, he sold all his ditch and water companies to Frederick Birdsall for \$42,500, about one million today.

Reamer went back to the Foresthill area to begin mining again. His relative success is unknown but probably he was successful again for in the early 1880s the family moved to Berkeley. George continued coming to Foresthill to work and died there in 1892. After George's death,

Sarah became a noted figure in the society pages of the Oakland and San Francisco newspapers. She was president of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association, a women's group committed to the improvement of society and winning the vote for women. She represented the group at conference in Paris in 1895. Sarah was also a member of the prestigious Oakland Club and a patroness of the Saturday Night Club. In 1900, her name appeared in the list of the Oakland 400, a designation of her position in high society. She was noted as a "literary woman." She was also a talented musician, composer and a linguist "of ability."

She traveled extensively in Europe and was in the process of building a holiday home in Carmel-By-The-Sea when she died suddenly in 1910.

Charles Frederick Reed

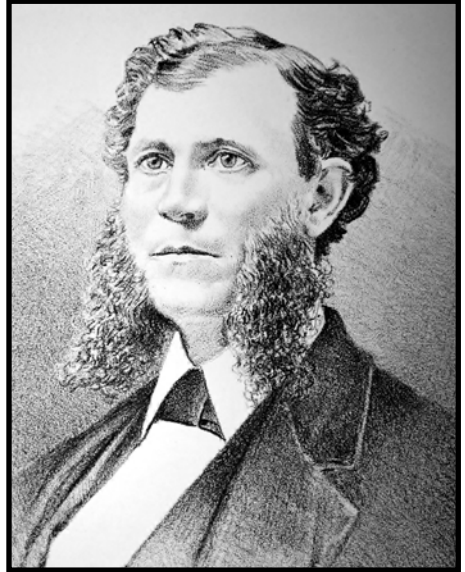
1826 - 2898

Born in Massachusetts, Charles Reed was a man destined to rise in society. At age sixteen he was appointed to the West Point Academy by Daniel Webster, but he resigned before graduating and soon was employed as a civil engineer for several railroad companies and a canal company.

Reed joined a large party going overland to California via Mexico and arrived in April 1849. By May he was in Wood's Dry Diggings mining right on the Plaza in today's Old

Town Auburn. According to accounts, there were only thirteen other miners here along with the Native American wife of one of the miners. The men were taking out about \$200 a day per man from the ravine. Reed got his supplies on credit from the store, a tent-like structure, and by the end of the day he paid back the storekeeper. According to the legend, he had some money left over and bought a bottle of whiskey "to treat the boys."

With money in his pocket, Reed traveled to Knight's Landing on the Sacramento River. It was an important steamboat landing spot. There he met the daughter of the town's founder, Carmelita Knight and they married in 1853. That same year he laid out the townsite for Knight's Landing.



Though he had mining interests, Reed primarily was interested in agriculture. He was elected president of the State Agricultural Society. He was influential in getting the moribund society back on its feet. He was elected to the State Assembly in 1864 where he served one term. In 1869, he organized the Sacramento Valley Reclamation Company. In 1874, he was elected president of the Board of Reclamation Fund Commission. His various efforts were responsible for reclaiming large tracts of swamp land and building levees. In 1878, he was chosen to be a delegate to the State Constitutional Convention.

Along with his years of public service, he cultivated his own property to become "the Wheat King of California."

Reed and Carmelita would have seven children.

In 1885/86 Reed made some kind of bad deal which eventually cost him "a cool million" and he lost most of his property. Undeterred, Reed came back to Auburn and set to mining once again. He was hugely successful becoming the owner of the Gold

Blossom and Drummond quartz mines. They were said to be "the richest in old Placer."

The Reed home at 225 Aeolia Drive still stands today.

Reed died here in 1898.



Siffroid Eugene Francois Roussin

1815 - 1857

Siffroid Roussin was no wide-eyed young man enchanted by the rumors of gold lying in the streets of California. He was an esteemed sheriff and farmer with a wife and four children living in Ste. Genevieve, Missouri. They were part of the well established community of French-Canadian settlers. They were prosperous and even owned five slaves including one female named Caroline.

Nevertheless in 1849, Siffroid left all this behind and set out overland for California. It is unknown what he did when he first arrived in California but by 1852 he returned to Missouri to get this wife and now five children. With them came Siffroid's two brothers and the Roussin's slave Caroline. Upon reaching California, Caroline was a free woman but she had an agreement with Siffroid that in return for her passage across the Plains she would work for him for three years. In the spring of 1853, Caroline married local barber, Chesterfield Jackson. Jackson paid Roussin to get Caroline out of her contract.

Siffroid and his wife Catherine quickly became prominent citizens of the fledgling town. By 1853, they owned a meat market, a slaughterhouse, and had corrals and cattle. Roussin joined E. G. Smith and Stephen Woodin to form one of the first water companies to bring water into the town.

Roussin seems to have had his hand in several other businesses besides the butcher shop. At one time he owned the Beehive Bakery and Coffee Saloon, the Kentucky dry goods store and for a short time even owned the Orleans Hotel.

Tragically, Siffroid died at the young age of 41 in 1857. Catherine, raised in the egalitarian community of the French-Canadians, was used to handling money and business affairs. After Siffroid's death, she bought out the other partners in the water company and still ran the

Auburn Meat Market. She owned several pieces of property in town including several houses she rented to members of the Chinese community.

Unfortunately, Catherine too would die at only age 47 in 1863. Their oldest son, Sylvester drowned at age 24 and their daughter Hattie had her throat slashed by a lunatic while she was cutting wood at her home in San Francisco.

A tragic family tale.

*Siffroid and
Catherines
son,
Sylvester,
had been
admitted to
study at
Santa Clara
College in
1856.*

SANTA CLARA COLLEGE, CAL.		
<p><i>W. L. C. Robinson</i> For Master Sylvester Robinson For next with Santa Clara College,</p>		
1856	Dr.	Cr.
Sept. 1 st 1857	Balance due as per bill sent on July 1856	158 40
Jan. 24 th	Half tuition for next, also wages, expenses, tuition, washing, stationery, postage	216 50
March 28 th	Check on account	1 00
June 24 th	Book and paper for next year	25 00
		7 50
		210 04
		300 00
		110 04
<p>State of California } County of Santa Clara } Gregory Means as one In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and Seal at the City of San Jose, this 1st day of Nov. 1857. Notary Public for the State of California.</p>		

Harriet Anne Threlkel Page Scott

1847 - 1913

Hattie Threlkel's family were among the hardy pioneers who joined their extended family and a party of other Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints families (family legends holds that the Threlkel's were not professed Mormons but Harriet's grandmother and grandfather converted to the church in 1841) who were leaving the religious persecution of Missouri for California in 1846.



They got as far as Pueblo, Colorado where they had to spend the winter. In the spring of 1847 they came into the Salt Lake Valley. It had been a hard journey especially for Hattie's mother Martilla who had young children and was expecting her third child. Tragically, before they even had the walls put up on the pioneer fort, the Threlkel's young son was found floating in an irrigation pond. He was the first death in the Valley. Three days later Martilla gave birth to Harriet Ann; she was the second white child born in the Valley. Some accounts say she was the first white child born in the Valley.

The family spent the winter of 1847 and 1848 in what would later become Ogden, Utah. They left for California in the spring of 1849. By that winter they were in Greenwood, El Dorado County. In 1850 they were mining at Mormon Island.

In 1851, the families settled in Long Valley along Rattlesnake Road where they built the Long Valley House. It was an important way station and stage stop. Hattie's father George planted one of the first orchards in the

county. The family orchard prospered growing peaches and pears.

In 1870, Hattie married Azor Page. He had a store and depot at the Penryn Railroad Station. They later had a hotel on the corner of Page and Main Streets in Newcastle. Azor died in 1884 and Hattie married Robert N. Scott in 1885. Never lucky with husbands, Robert died in 1888 leaving Hattie with four of his children from a previous marriage and one of their own.

Hattie, with her extended family, lived at the Long Valley House until she died in 1913

Edmund Dana Shirland

1830 - 1900

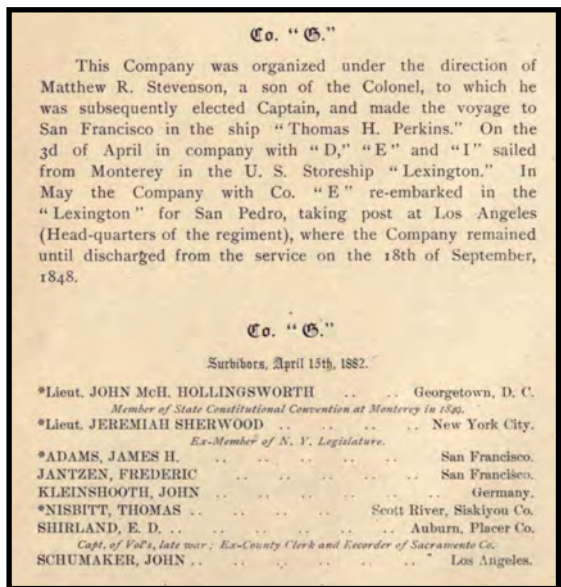
Edmund Shirland was only sixteen years old when he left his birthplace in New York to join up with Col. J. D. Stevenson's First Regiment of New York Volunteers to fight in the Mexican - American War.

They left New York in the fall of 1846 and arrived in California March 6, 1847. Shirland's Company G was posted to Los Angeles. They disbanded in September 1848, just in time for the California Gold Rush.

By the spring of 1849, some of the former members of the Regiment were mining on the North Fork of the American River.

How successful Shirland was we do not know. But he must have made a name for himself for in 1854 he was named a delegate to the Democratic County Convention.

In 1858, he married Cornelia Allen in Sacramento; by the 1860 census he and Cornelia were living near Folsom. Shirland was working as a butcher.



With the Civil War consuming the nation, Governor Leland Stanford summoned Shirland and commissioned him to raise a company of cavalry. Many men that had mined with Shirland joined up to serve in Company C First California Cavalry. Shirland was commissioned as captain. He is credited with capturing Fort Davis from the Confederate Texans. His men stood on the saddles of their horses and vaulted over the walls of the fort and fought with sabers in hand to hand combat to take the fort. Shirland and company also captured an Apache Chief, Mangas Coloradas, in Texas. After gallant and heroic service, he was mustered out in 1864.

Fort McLane, January 22nd, 1863.

Captain.

I have the honor to report that in compliance with your orders, I left your command, (then en route to this place) with twenty men of Co. "C," 1st Cavalry, Cal. Vols., on the evening of the 14th instant for "Los Pinos Altos Mines" in pursuit of a notorious Indian Chief "Mangas Colorado." Traveling most entirely by night I arrived at Pinos Altos before day, on the evening of the 16th Inst., but Mangas receiving some intimation of my coming fled. I however succeeded in capturing him on the afternoon of the 17th inst., and brought him to this post on the following day. . . .

I am Captain Your Obt. Servt.
(Signed) E. D. Shirland,
Capt. Co. "C" 1st Cav. C.V.

When he returned to California, he lived in Sacramento and was elected County Clerk. While there the Shirland's young son Charles, age 6, was drowned in the basement of the home they lived in. After this tragedy, Edmund and Cornelia would have three additional children.

The family came to Placer County in the mid 1870s, and with Dr. S. P. Thomas, Shirland purchased a large ranch and went into the business of raising Angora goats for wool. Accounts indicated that Shirland and Thomas were the first to bring this type of goat into Placer County.

For some reason, this did not prove to be a successful venture. Shirland declared bankruptcy in 1884. Little is

known about Shirland's activities after the bankruptcy, but he would eventually sell his large ranch and it would later be broken up into a subdivision called the Shirland Tract.

Shirland died in 1900. Cornelia died in 1908.

The Shirland Tract area with Folsom Lake in the background



William B. Skellinger

1820 - 1886

Shortly before he died in 1886, William Skellinger wrote an entertaining and informative article for the *Placer Herald* about his experiences in Wood's Dry Diggings (Auburn) in 1849.

Born in Connecticut, we know little about Skellinger's life before his arrival at the Embarcadero (Sacramento) in June 1849. In his letter to the *Herald*, he related an hilarious account of a fellow traveler, J. M. Letts, a New York dandy that traveled with him to Wood's Dry Diggings that summer.

Letts' traveling outfit was "a neat suit of blue cloth gracefully fitted, a white shirt, clean necktie, starched collar, boots finely polished, kid gloves and silk umbrella." Letts traveled with a black servant. Very early in the trip Letts found himself plunged into a river while crossing on the back of his servant. It didn't take long for Letts to exchange his fancy clothes for a hickory shirt and overalls. Skellinger recalled that after this episode Letts "became a most agreeable traveling companion." His servant soon departed to mine for himself.

Letts would travel around California making sketches and then returned to New York to publish *California Illustrated* in 1853. Needless to say, Letts' version of meeting "Scillinger," as he is called in the book, is a bit different from Skellinger's newspaper account.

Letts noted in his book that his friend "Scillinger" came from Santa Fe and faced many hardships so we can assume Skellinger came overland via the southern route.

When they got to Wood's Dry Diggings, Letts described it as "a place on the Oregon Trail with three tents and no water." The men didn't stay long and went down to Horseshoe Bar on the American River to mine. There they made a rocker and soon were mining in the river.

Skellinger called it “easy work.” They were finding two to six ounces of gold a day per man.

Skellinger soon bought “an outfit” from Sam Brannon and erected a steam saw mill on Weaver Creek. He also planted potatoes.

Skellinger’s account leaves out a lot of information. We only know that at some point he returned east to New York, married Emily Christianson, a women much younger than he, and they had two children.

When they returned to California is unknown, but their third child was born here in 1877.

Skellinger opened the Excelsior Lime Works two miles above Clipper Gap in 1885. He was producing “some very excellent lime.”

Skellinger died in Meadow Lake, Nevada County in 1886 just a year after opening his lime works and after sending in his article to the *Placer Herald*. Emily died in 1925 in Alameda County.

Another Lime Kiln.

The Excelsior lime works, just opened up about two miles above Clipper Gap by W. B. Skellinger are turning out some very excellent lime. A kiln has just been burnt of about 800 barrels. The easy access of the stone and the nearness of the works to the railroad will give Mr. Skellenger quite an advantage in producing this staple article. The lime business in this county promises to become important. This makes the second new works put in operation this year.

Edwin Guy Smith

1822 - 1897

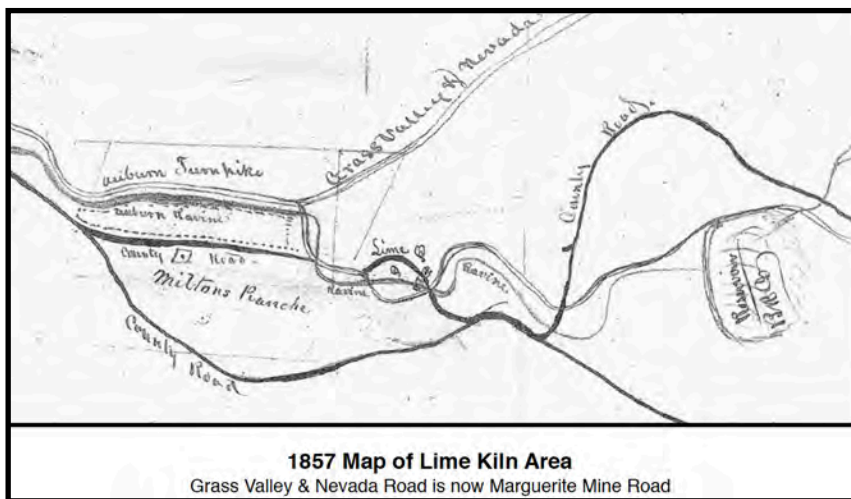
Edwin Smith was born in Waterford, New York in 1822. He came around the Horn to California in 1849. Like most men, Smith mined for a time, but by 1851 he bought the Long Valley House from Henry Holmes. The Long Valley House was five miles from Auburn. It was an important stage stop and hotel. Soon after he sold it to Robert Crow.

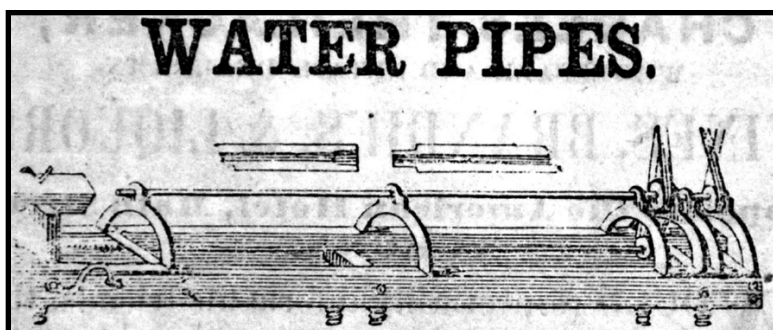
In 1852, he was appointed Justice of the Peace and Associate Judge for the new county of Placer. In 1853/54 he was elected County Treasurer.

In 1855, he partnered with Stephen B. Woodin in Auburn to bring water to the town. They formed the Smith and Woodin Water Works Company. By 1857, they had pipes laid all over the north part of town.

Smith and Woodin were bringing water from a spring on the Milton Ranch in the Lime Kiln area into town.

Map courtesy of John Knox





Wycoff log boring machine used to make water pipes.

Smith had likely married Hannah (no maiden name could be determined) in New York before 1847. We don't know when she came to California. They would have two children.

Hannah Smith died in 1877. In 1879, Smith's sister Carrie and her husband Tabb Mitchell both died and their children came to live with Smith. By 1880, Smith had remarried and lived in Sacramento with Elizabeth Austin, her son and the Mitchell children.

Smith worked for a brandy and wine company and was a distiller for a time.

In the late 1880s, he went to Nevada and worked as a mining engineer. Later he returned to Placer County and worked at the Gold Blossom Mine in Ophir.

Smith died in Auburn in 1897.

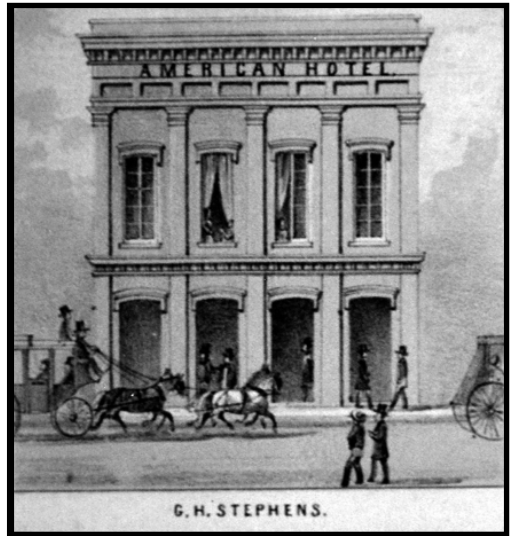
Susan Smith
about 1813 - ?

There is so much about Susan Smith that is unknown. Most of her history in Placer County is tied to George Stephens who built the American Hotel.

Smith was born in Virginia and was seventeen years older than Stephens, nevertheless: they were partners to some degree for several years.

Much of the early information about Smith and Stephens comes from court testimony. Stephens testified that he had come to California with Susan from Louisiana in October 1849. They had a coffee house in Sacramento and then for a short time ran the National House also in Sacramento.

By 1852, they were both in Auburn running a public house. Susan had a liquor license, and then she bought the Union Restaurant from William Corbusier for \$2,200. The Union was on the site of the current day Auburn Ale House (American Hotel). Even though the deeds were in Susan's name in the court documents, others testified that Susan was working for George.



By 1854, she and likely George were running the Diana Bowling Saloon on the same property. After the big fire of 1855 that destroyed most of Old Town, Susan sold the old Diana lot to George Stevens for \$1.00.

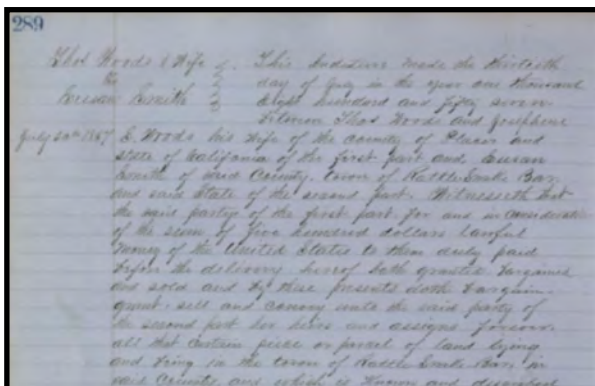
George would begin construction of the American Hotel on that lot.

In the court case that Susan filed against George in 1856, one year after he completed the American Hotel, she stated that she had worked for George since November 1849 continually (except for a two month period) until the lawsuit was filed.

Susan was suing George for back wages dating to 1849. When George testified, he acknowledged that Susan had worked for him since 1849 in San Francisco, Sacramento and Auburn, but that he provided her room and board and clothing and that Susan actually owed him money. He stated that he "never regarded her as a partner."

Stephens sold the American Hotel shortly after Susan and several others filed lawsuits for unpaid wages and unpaid bills. Stephens would later regain possession of the Hotel. It is unclear whether Susan and the others ever got their money from Stephens.

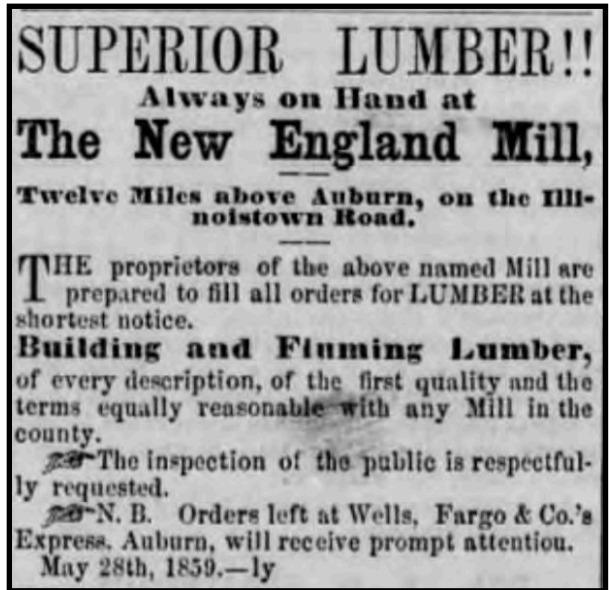
The last official record found for Susan Smith is a deed from 1857 for her purchase of two small houses in the mining camp of Rattlesnake Bar.



Captain John Boardman Starbuck

1821 - 1898

Capt. Starbuck was a 28 year old sailor from Nantucket, Massachusetts when he decided to try his luck in California. He left Baltimore in February on the small schooner *Ferdinand* and arrived in San Francisco in September 1849. He mined near Auburn for a few years before going to New England Mills in 1854. New England Mills is located in the modern day Weimar/ Applegate area. In 1861, Starbuck bought the mill from John Q. Jackson (the Auburn Wells Fargo agent) for \$2,000.



Capt. Starbuck was also involved in the People's Saw Mill with William E. Miller. The two mills were only two miles apart and for a time ran simultaneously.

Sometime between 1870 and 1873, Starbuck married Lena Schwartz. They had three children.

Starbuck also held several pieces of property in Auburn. He died in 1898, and Lena died in 1917 in Sacramento.

George Henry Stephens
abt. 1820 - 1882

George Stephens was born in Connecticut about 1820. He arrived in San Francisco in 1849 with Susan Smith, whose story is told above.

Stephens must have been quite a character. He was known to be smooth salesman, a genial host, and energetic entrepreneur.

He and Susan ran several businesses together and when the fire of 1855 swept the town, George took advantage of a newly vacant lot to erect a fine hotel, the American Hotel.

The American Hotel was a splendid place boasting gilt mirrors, damask curtains and marble topped tables. There were thirty rooms all furnished with spring mattresses, feather pillows and wash stands with bowls and pitchers.

In spite of being a popular stopping point from the date it opened, George had invested so much in the construction that he couldn't pay his workmen. In 1856, several people, including Susan Smith, filed lawsuits against him. His property was attached by the court including a ranch he owned, the Salt Spring Ranch on Antelope Ravine near present day Rocklin, the Empire Livery Stable, the Milk Ranch about 1 1/2 miles above Auburn on the Auburn Ravine, and the Hotel and all its furnishings. There were over thirty lawsuits filed against Stephens and over twenty mechanic liens filed by contractors.

*The town bus in
front of the
American Hotel*



Somehow, George managed to borrow and mortgage his way back into ownership of the hotel. He would lose it three times in public auctions to pay his debts over the years.

George owned the hotel in 1859 when another fire swept town. George stayed on the roof “during the whole time the flames were beating upon the walls.” Due to his and several others’ efforts, the hotel was saved though it was severely damaged.

George stayed at the hotel sometimes as full owner, sometimes as part owner and sometimes with no ownership at all. Stephens was always popular with the townsfolk and managed to keep his reputation despite his money problems. It seems he was always able to talk someone into lending him money.

Another fire swept town in 1863. This time the brick walls of the American Hotel stopped the progression of the fire. The same thing happened in the fire of 1864, the brick walls of the American stopped the movement of the fire.

George suffered losses with each fire. But he was always able to keep the hotel well furnished and open. During the 1860s and 1870s, George invested in mining claims and property about town.

In 1872, George married Jane E. Bayley from Pilot Hill. Very little is known about their marriage. There was not a big write up in the local paper even though they were both prominent figures in the area.

George was still in financial difficulty and somehow involved his aunt in his attempt to save himself from his creditors. It seems that while George had the hotel in his aunt’s name, the Mitchell brothers were running it. George and Jane lived in Lotus and in Pilot Hill for a short time.

In 1875, George lost the hotel for the last time. He also lost other properties in town and the spring on Brewery Lane. About 1878 George finally left Auburn. By 1880 he was in Pima County, Arizona keeping a meat market. Jane was long gone ,and by 1880 she had remarried. It is unclear when they divorced.

In 1882, George Stephens, once a proud hotel keeper, admired by his friends and customers, returned to Auburn. He was despondent and went on “several prolonged sprees and had to be taken in charge by the Sheriff.”

George had a room at his beloved American Hotel. He was found there on the morning of July 1, 1882 dead from an overdose of morphine.

The American Hotel - 1890 Sanborn Map

