

## Pioneer Henry Thomas Holmes

The Gold Rush period in Auburn was an exciting and turbulent time. Men flooded into the area following the tales of gold to be found lying about by the side of a trail or in a streambed, ready to be just plucked from the earth. But they soon faced a harsh reality.

There had been some "easy pickings" but as more and more miners came there was less and less easy gold to be found. The winter of 1849-1850 was particularly rainy and cold. Many miners who arrived with little in the way of supplies or cash to buy them found themselves facing terrible conditions. They were literally stranded on remote sand bars with no shelter or food. Many made their way into the fledgling town of Auburn and scabbled to make it through the winter.

One young miner by the name of Henry Thomas Holmes proved quite the exception. He had left New York in January 1849 on the sailing ship, the Tahmaroo. After an arduous six-month journey via Cape Horn he and his companions arrived in San Francisco on July first.

He and Hiram Hawkins and several others immediately paid \$16 for passage on a schooner to Sacramento. From there they hired oxen and a wagon and headed for the North Fork of the American River. They spent just a few months mining. Whether they found a substantial amount of gold or whether they just came with more money than most, when the harsh winter set in, Holmes and Hawkins made their way back to San Francisco and caught a schooner to the Sandwich Islands (now called the Hawaiian Islands) and spent the winter in the balmy sunshine.

They returned as soon as the winter was over and forsaking the mining trade opened a store near Missouri Bar. A few months later they opened the Long Valley House (now the Shirland tract area). When Auburn became the County Seat in 1851, Holmes was elected deputy sheriff. He served for a short while before traveling back to New York only to return again in 1852.

When he came back he became partners with John R. Gwynn at Auburn's first post office. It proved to be quite lucrative and Holmes invested in land and city lots in town. While at the post office, Holmes and Gwynn and Gwynn's son William became associated with I. E. Strong a telegraph operator and builder. Strong had tried to interest investors in San Francisco and Sacramento to back his plan for a telegraph line. Finding no backers he ended up in Auburn and his idea sparked the interest of Holmes and the Gwynns.

They formed an association called the Alta California Telegraph Company and collected subscriptions from local businessmen and miners. They successfully built the first

telegraph line in California. It ran from Auburn to Grass Valley and Nevada City. They later expended the line to Sacramento. Eventually their line and other independents merged into the Western Union Telegraph Company.

Holmes soon took over the general store that Gwynns had started and then married J. R. Gwynn's daughter Laura Virginia. Before 1855 he opened a brickyard between Auburn and Millertown (now the Edgewood area). His timing was fortuitous as almost the entire town of Auburn burned to the ground in 1855. Holmes and his brickyard did very well in rebuilding the town after the fire.

We know that the building at 301 Commercial Street was built from bricks from his brickyard. Becoming involved in the building business led Holmes and the Gwynns into the lime business. They formed the Auburn Lime Kiln Company. William Gwynn had discovered a lime quarry right outside Auburn. They expanded their business with quarries at Clipper Gap, Applegate and eventually Sacramento. Lime from their quarries are estimated to have supplied seven-eighths of all the lime used in buildings in all of northern California during the early years of statehood.

Holmes and Laura moved to Sacramento where he was influential on the Board of Levee Commissioners that initiated the building of the great levee in Sacramento and raised the street level in the downtown area. Holmes was also an early stockholder in the Central Pacific Railroad. His lime business expanded into Santa Cruz and Eldorado County.

Holmes and Laura traveled to Europe in 1877 and spent several years making a "Grand Tour." After their return they settled in San Francisco and Holmes expanded his lime business into Kern County.

Henry Holmes died in San Francisco in 1902 and Laura died there in 1912. Both are buried in the Sacramento City Cemetery.

--**April McDonald**, Auburn City Historian

**Sources:**

History of Placer County – Lardner & Brock

Find-a-grave.com

San Francisco Daily Journal – July 1889

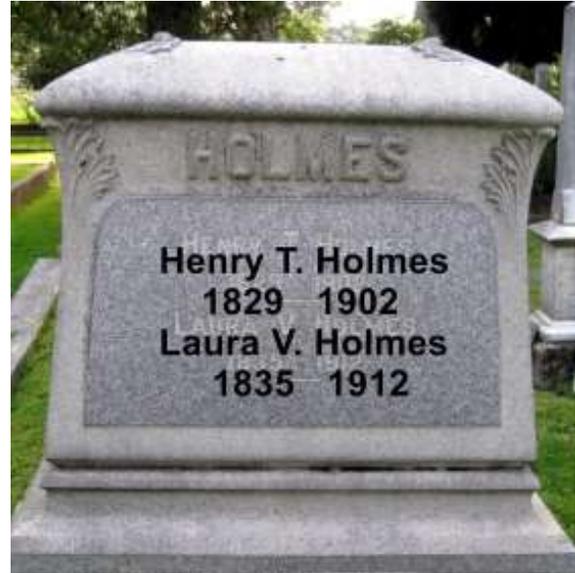
The Commercial Record – February 1890

Placer County Leader – May 1902

Placer Herald – May 1895



**Holmes gravestone,  
Sacramento City Cemetery**



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