

NINETEENTH-CENTURY STONEWORK IN CALIFORNIA'S NAPA VALLEY

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California's Napa Valley probably features more functional stone construction, in greater variety, than any comparable area in the western United States. The tradition of fine stone masonry goes deep, with the peak of building activity occurring in the late 19th century. Unique factors uniting harmoniously both natural landscape and pioneer settlement have produced structures of native stone for a variety of uses, but with remarkable consistency of heritage and design.

Stone has been used extensively for private dwellings, public and commercial buildings, wine cellars and distilleries, bridges, fences and resorts. Stone has been gathered up loose from fields and stream beds, as well as quarried from rich layers of volcanic rock and sandstone in the surrounding hills. And stone structures have thus become a part of the tradition and heritage of the area.

THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE

The Napa Valley is a long, narrow slightly crescent-shaped lowland about 35 miles in length, extending in a general north-west to south-east direction (see Figure 1). The foot of the valley broadens into the lowlands of San Pablo Bay at the south, while Mount St. Helena, 4343' high, blocks the north-west head. On both sides of the valley, and restricting it to an average width of one to three miles, extend the peaks of a section of California's Coast Ranges. On the west, the southerly heights reach 2375' while on the east more massive mountains attain elevations in excess of 2600'.

The elevation of the valley floor ranges from just 18' at Napa in the south to 419' north of Calistoga at the north-west. The floor of the valley is quite flat, the surface broken only by an occasional isolated hill.

The surrounding mountains are volcanic in origin, and generally date from the Sonoma volcanics of the early Pleistocene period.

"An accumulation of flows, agglomerates, tuff and tuffaceous land-laid sediments, later folded and faulted. Well exposed in hills on both sides of the Napa Valley¹."

The presence of easily available natural building stone is noteworthy.

The valley is well-drained by the Napa River, which wends its way through the lowlands from its headwaters on the slopes of Mount St. Helena. Numerous small tributaries originating in the mountains on either side,

¹ Taliaferro, N. L. *Geology of the San Francisco Bay Counties*. California Division of Mines, Geologic Guidebook of the San Francisco Bay Counties. San Francisco: State of Calif., 1951

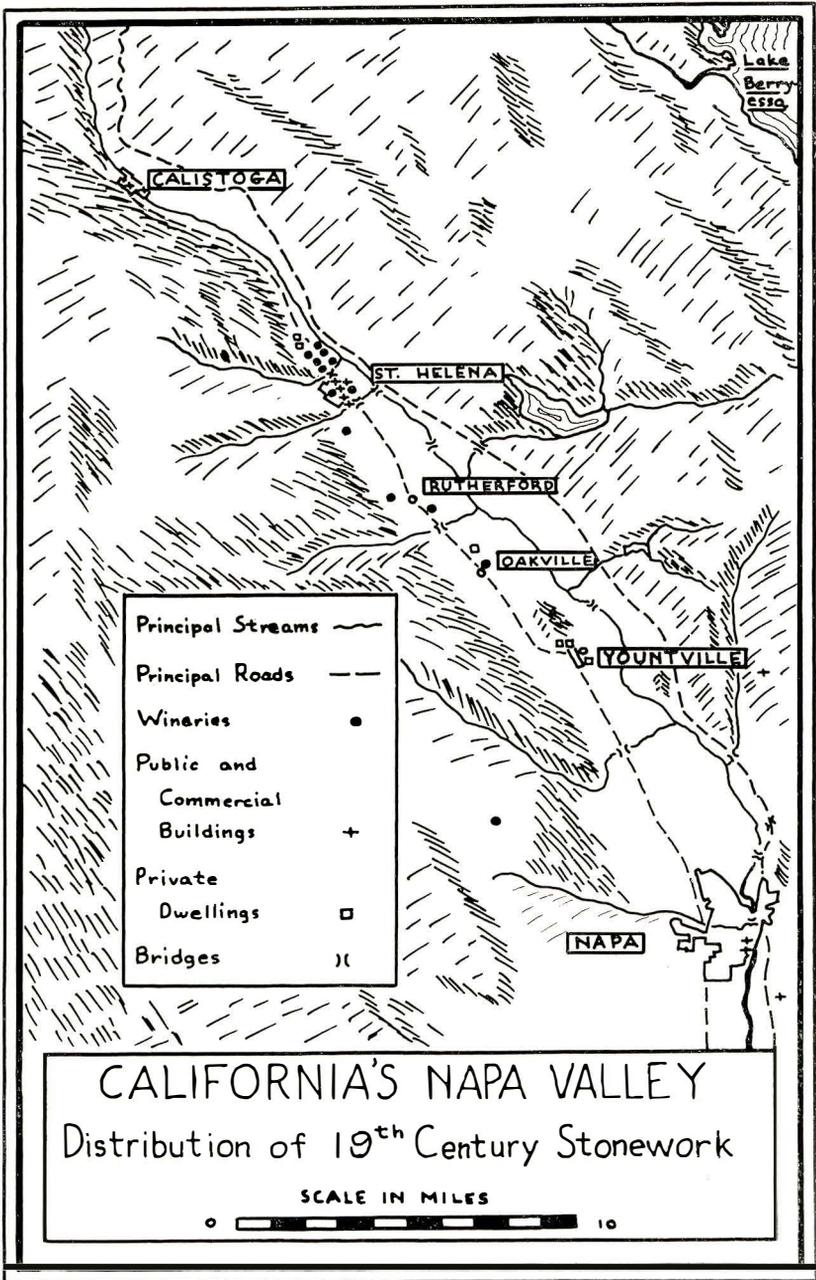


Figure 1

some of which are all-season, spring-fed streams, flow into the river. Others are active only during periods of rainfall runoff. The stream pattern is generally angular.

Natural vegetation on the valley floor, as well as on the lower slopes of the mountains on either side, is a typical California open pattern of live oaks and seasonal grasses. The natural oaks and grasses give way to coniferous forest of fir and pine at the higher elevations on the east and west, and particularly in the north. The streams and river contribute to occasionally thick brush along their banks.

EARLY HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LAND GRANTS

When the first Caucasian explorer, Padre Jose Altimira, arrived in the Napa Valley in 1823, he was primarily searching for a suitable site for a mission for the Roman Catholic Church. Because of the somewhat isolated character of the area he decided to recommend the nearby Sonoma valley region, and it was there that the building of the northernmost mission was begun the same year.

Altimira discovered some three to six thousand Indians of the Wappo tribe living in the valley and the surrounding area at this time. The Wappos were typical primitive Indians of early California, but they did employ an extremely rudimentary agriculture in the lowlands areas. Smallpox and other diseases had virtually eliminated the entire Indian population by 1870.

The first permanent settler was George C. Yount, who obtained a grant of nearly 12,000 acres in the fertile central portion of the valley from the Mexican authorities in 1837. His "Rancho Caymus" became the site for Sebastopol (later renamed Yountville), the first lasting settlement in the Napa Valley.

The same year, Nicholas Higuerra was granted two parcels by the government — "Rancho Entre Napa," which is the site of the present city of the same name, and "El Rincon de los Carneros," located to the south.

Dr. Edward Turner Bale, who married the niece of the Mexican administration governor, General Vallejo, received his interestingly named "Rancho Carne Humana" in 1843. Here, in 1846, he built the first structure in the Napa Valley to employ quarried stone: the millstones used in his early grist mill. Three miles to the south, the town of St. Helena was founded in 1853.

Several other land grants were extended to the early settlers by the Mexican government in the years between 1843 and 1850, when California was removed from the Mexican administration. While the entire Napa Valley was thus claimed prior to statehood, much of the original early ownership was later disputed under United States authority, and many of the first settlers lost holdings in court litigation.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Napa Valley was recognized by most of the earliest pioneers as agricultural land of great promise. Dr. Bale had grown wheat and erected his famous grist mill shortly after his first coming to the region. George Yount supervised extensive cultivation at his "Rancho Caymus." The rich soil and warm climate seemed conducive to the growing of virtually any crop.

But when Colonel Agoston Haraszthy, a Hungarian nobleman, imported 100,000 cuttings of choice European vines for his vineyards near neighboring Sonoma in 1862 and sold his proven stock to Napa Valley farmers and ranchers the following year, the true foundation for much of the valley's agricultural richness was laid. The entire area soon proved ideal for the cultivation of grape vines, and before long extensive vineyards were planted in the valley and on the surrounding foothills.

Many new settlers soon arrived from the great vineyard areas of Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy, bringing with them the skills and traditions of their homelands. These pioneers in Napa Valley viticulture realized the need for cool cellars and distilleries. Today, the Napa Valley is one of the richest vineyard areas in the United States.

The northernmost portion of the Napa Valley is one of the most active areas of hot springs and geysers in California.

Sam Brannan, an early California pioneer of many facets, immediately recognized the scenic and commercial value of such an asset. In 1860 he bought the land from an earlier settler, named the locale of greatest hot spring activity "Calistoga" (from "California's Saratoga"), and opened his "Calistoga Hot Springs." The vacation spot soon proved popular with the residents of San Francisco and surrounding cities. The popularity of the area was one factor leading to the building of a railroad traversing the valley from Vallejo north to Calistoga.

The resort at one time featured a bath house and headquarters, built partly of stone, surrounded by small guest cottages. Robert Louis Stevenson, who honeymooned at an abandoned quicksilver mine on Mount St. Helena in 1880, describes the area vividly in his "Silverado Squatters."

Napa Soda Springs, another famous resort, was built on a mountain slope near the eastern side of the valley in 1856, and rebuilt in 1900 following a fire. The hotel rotunda was a massive structure of stone, and masonry was employed to a considerable extent in other portions of the structure. This property has long been deserted, but the ruins of the hotel still remain.

Extensive deposits of cinnabar ore for the production of quicksilver were discovered in northern Napa County, and in southern Lake County, as early as 1860. Great quantities of the mineral were mined and taken back to the San Francisco area by way of the famous Silverado Trail which skirts the eastern side of the valley. By 1875, the peak of mining activity had passed, and the mines have been operated on a commercial basis rarely since the turn of the century.

NAPA VALLEY STONEMASONRY

Several key reasons present themselves to explain the prevalence of stone construction in the Napa Valley.

First, the traditions of the settlers. Immigrants tend to bring with them the familiar building methods and architectural styles with which they are familiar. Most of the early settlers of the Napa Valley were from the rural provinces of Europe. They knew the techniques of stone masonry, and their farms and vineyards called for the building of fences, bridges, distilleries and cellars. Many experienced stonemasons were among those in the early stream of immigrants.

Second, the availability of appropriate natural resources. The fact that both sides of the Napa Valley are amply blessed with easily reached, abundantly available volcanic rock and sandstone is a key factor. In addition, a great deal of suitable building stone was available in the fields and stream beds.

Third, the availability of abundant and inexpensive manual labor. Many Chinese were indentured to work in the valley vineyards, and many others to work in the quicksilver mines. Since the mines ceased effective production within a very few years, and since extensive labor supplies were required in the vineyards only on a seasonal basis, ample manpower was usually present for the building of stone projects.

In sum, the Europeans supplied the knowledge and tradition, the "Celestials" furnished the manual labor, and the bountiful hills ringing the valley supplied the appropriate raw materials.

The locations of the various remaining 19th Century stone structures are shown by general types on Figure 1.

WINERIES

Among the most prominent and numerous stone buildings are the wineries of the Valley. They are nicely described by Anne Roller Issler in the following terms:

"Architecturally, the old stone wineries are the most interesting feature of the county. Built of 'memorial stone' in the first years between 1865 and 1885 (the first few earlier) . . . Covered with ivy, they are scattered throughout the valley; sometimes in the towns, sometimes in the vineyards. Several are very large. The Greystone Winery is said to be the largest in the world. But most of them are smaller structures that might be mistaken for old mills minus their mill wheels."

"The earliest wineries here were built of stone blocks quarried out of nearby hills, many borrowing in architecture from German schloss and French chateau, familiar to the pioneers from Germany, France and Switzerland."²

One of the best examples is the Christian Brothers Greystone Winery at St. Helena, shown in Figure 2. This attractive structure, complete with

² Issler, Anne Roller. *Stevenson at Silverado*. Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1939

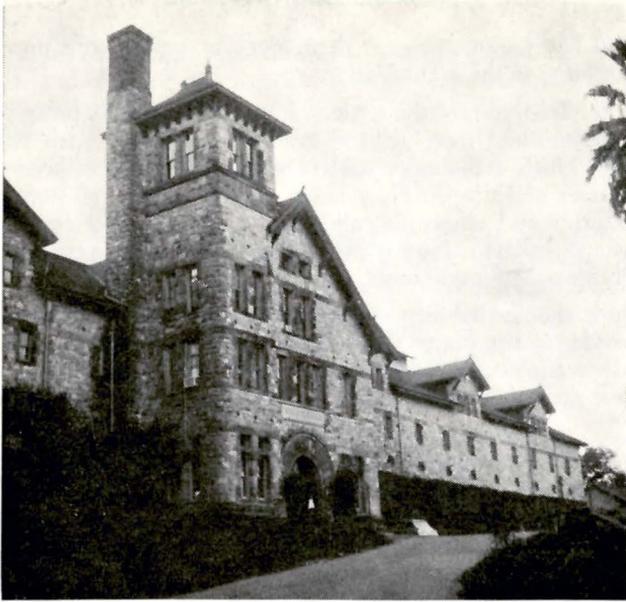


Figure 2
Christian Brothers Greystone Winery

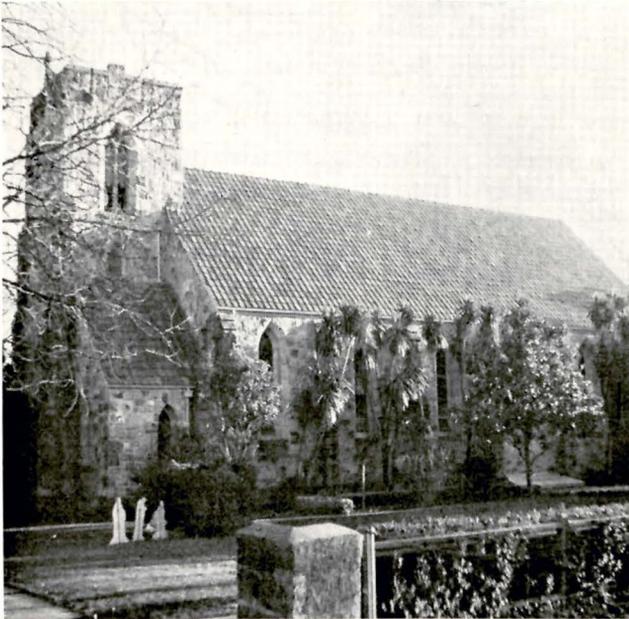


Figure 3
Roman Catholic Church, St. Helena

extensive wings, numerous gables, and a central tower, was built in 1889 and is reputedly the world's largest individual winery. It is built of light grey quarried volcanic stone.

PUBLIC AND COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

Stone construction is used in many early Napa Valley buildings designed for commercial or public use, ranging from a tiny jail-like structure in St. Helena to the imposing County Court House in Napa. Most are carefully built of volcanic rock and sandstone, sometimes of varying color tones for decorative effect.

Commercial and public buildings of stone are largely concentrated in downtown St. Helena, although some exist in the older part of Napa. The traditional architecture of many of these structures has not been preserved, and they display false fronts of brick or stucco . . . their true heritage revealed only by the unaltered sides and backs of the structures.

A very fine example of this type is the Roman Catholic Church at St. Helena, shown in Figure 3. This church, of color-blended volcanic stone and sandstone, was built in 1879. It shows excellent workmanship and is very well preserved.

PRIVATE RESIDENCES

Impressive examples of Napa Valley masonry are not confined to large public and commercial buildings or to wineries. Many private homes, ranging in size from modest homes to substantial mansions, were built during the latter part of the 19th century. An imposing example of volcanic stone, built in 1880, is shown in Figure 4.

Still other stone buildings have changed in function. Small wine cellars and distilleries, store buildings, and even a rock wall have been converted into private residences.

WALLS AND FENCES

The abundance of natural fieldstone and inexpensive labor combined to produce many miles of stone walls and fences in 19th-century Napa County. Most are of loosely piled rock, although some are more carefully mortared and fitted. A few, such as the remarkable wall surrounding "Grandview" in St. Helena, are very ornate.

Many of the walls and fences have been embellished, either concurrently or at a later date, with columns or other forms of entrance ways. Some pillars and arches are quite elaborate.

Most of the stone fences and walls are in current use, although many are in a distinct state of disrepair.

Natural fieldstone is also found in extensive use for retaining walls and terracing, particularly along the eastern edge of the valley.

NAPA VALLEY STONE BRIDGES

By the turn of the century, Napa County was known as the "County of the Stone Bridges." Between sixty and seventy public stone bridges were



Figure 4

Stone Residence, St. Helena

constructed, including some of the largest in the western United States. Some of these bridges have since been replaced by more modern structures of steel and reinforced concrete, but many are still in use and are performing their function admirably. Nearly all are built of quarried volcanic rock or in combination with sandstone, and most show evidence of highly competent workmanship and considerable engineering skill.

The first stone bridge to be built in the area spanning the Napa River was located in the town of Napa in 1860. For at least 50 years stone continued to be the prime building material for bridge construction in the valley. One of the best preserved and most graceful of the structures of the period is the Pope Street Bridge in St. Helena, shown in Figure 5. This attractive bridge was built in 1894 and is in active use today.

THE END OF THE STONE ERA

For nearly seventy years, from the 1846 quarrying of stone to grind wheat in the Bale Mill until the advent of the First World War, Napa Valley stone masonry continued to distinguish most of the wineries and bridges, together with many private residences and commercial buildings. But eventually the use of newer, cheaper, labor-saving methods of building such structures became inevitable. Several related factors may be adduced to account for the demise of the stonework era in the valley.

First, the nature of the population settled in the Napa Valley changed. The original Europeans were gradually replaced both by their Americanized heirs and by newcomers to the area. Such people, without the Old World heritage and traditions of the earlier pioneers, were more interested in newer, faster, less expensive methods of accomplishing the building that needed to be done.

Second, the mass supply of inexpensive labor diminished. The "Chinese", now second-generation Chinese-Americans, left the rigors of their lot in the Napa Valley to move to the cities, or sometimes to return to their homeland.

And third, the very temper of the times changed. After the War, the traditional, time-honored materials and methods of workmanship no longer seemed very important. America — even the pastoral America of the Napa Valley — craved the new, the different, the fashionable.

Recent indications in the Napa Valley offer some slight hope that the heritage of the era of building in stone is not to be totally lost. The Bale Mill of 1846 is now partly restored. Some of the abandoned stone wineries have been returned to a useful existence as private homes, art galleries, or gift shops. And, of course, many other wineries, public buildings, stores, and bridges continue to function actively in their planned use.

Such structures certainly deserve preservation. Stonework in the Napa Valley represents a unique period of California history and architecture and is a fascinating example of the influence of geographical, economic, and social factors upon one aspect of the cultural landscape.

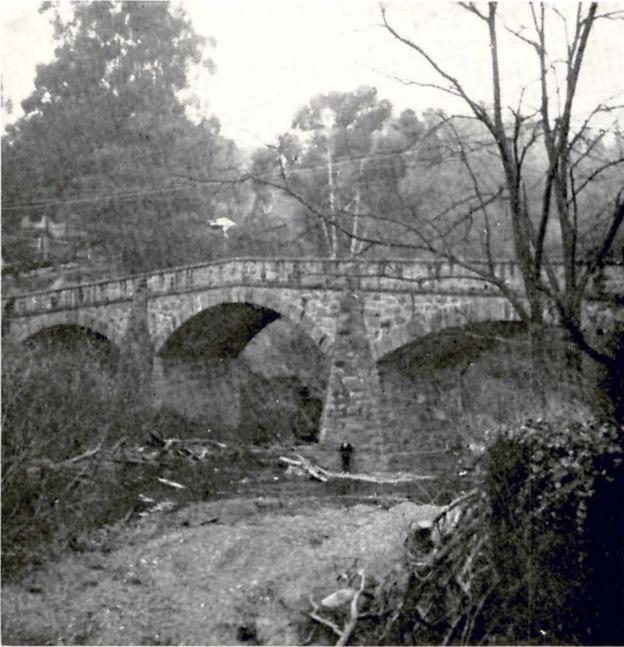


Figure 5

Pope Street Bridge, St. Helena