



## A Brief History of Freestone

### Western Sonoma County Hamlet is Site of New JPV Winery & Vineyards

By Kathie Fowler

#### THEN . . .

The year is 1835. By 1849 the siren call of “Go West, young man” will bring tens of thousands into the Bay Area and Northern California foothills searching for gold. But up in western Sonoma County along the California coastline the Russians have already established an outpost (today known as Fort Ross), and General Vallejo has been dispatched by the governor of Mexico to extend Mexico’s frontier settlement in Sonoma County northward toward the Russians.

Vallejo invites three men – James McIntosh, James Dawson and James Black – to settle on the land known as *Cañada de Jonive* at the town of Freestone. Except for the Russians, these three men are the first recorded settlers in the area.<sup>1</sup> (Native American tribes, particularly the Southern Miwok, were known to inhabit western Sonoma County, yet there is little record of their presence in the 1800’s.<sup>2</sup>)

\* \* \*

Freestone was named in 1853 for a nearby public quarry of easily-extracted sandstone and, like many frontier communities, was founded by smart, tough, determined, often eccentric characters. It is the latter trait that most often appears in the history books, and two anecdotes in particular crop up in Freestone’s history. One is the reaction of James Dawson to James McIntosh’s returning from Monterey with a grant deed for land that did not include Dawson’s name. Furious, “he

gave his partner a thrashing and with a cross-cut saw sawed the house in which they had been living in half. Later, he moved his half of the house to the site where it still stands today.”<sup>3</sup>

The second involves one Mr. Hind, proprietor of the local hotel. Freestone was the terminus for the narrow-gauge North Pacific Railroad, and when the roadbed was laid down in Freestone in 1872-73, Mr. Hind decided to extend his booming hotel business by going out each night and burning down the railroad bridges that had been erected during the day. According to Fred Cook’s *Historic Legends of Sonoma County*, “Mr. Hind’s money-making scheme sent him to San Quentin.”

After the railroad was finished Freestone became a trade center for the surrounding areas, and a number of picturesque buildings were erected, many of which still stand today. Mr. Hind’s hotel, a fine example of Greek Revival architecture, is almost 150 years old. In 1875, what began as the local grocery store evolved into a post office which, after being closed in the 1950’s and ‘60s, was reopened in 1970 and established as a rural postal substation of Sebastopol. Today it still operates in what was the original general store.<sup>4</sup>

The 1887 schoolhouse, still intact, takes pride of place perched on a knoll overlooking the beautiful little valley, and many charming homes from the period are also still in evidence.

What sets Freestone apart from similar frontier communities is that as the

lumber industry dwindled and the railroad was abandoned, residents worked to protect the character of the town and prevent it from falling into disuse and neglect.

In 1974, the Sonoma Co. Planning Dept. issued an extensive report recommending that Freestone be declared an “Historic District,” and stating:

*“Freestone, 20 minutes from Santa Rosa on Bodega Highway, remains a 19th century community nestled in the rolling wooded hills of western Sonoma County. Its residents, valuing this quality, are systematically restoring its homes and commercial buildings . . . [in order to preserve] a living example of an unspoiled 19th century rural community.”<sup>5</sup>*

Indeed, according to *Historic Legends of Sonoma County* (undated, but probably published in the 1950’s), Freestone was considered “one of only four towns in the state left virtually untouched by ‘progress’.”

#### . . . AND NOW

It is the year 2000. In the April-June issue of *Global Vintage Quarterly* a headline reads:

**“Land Rush on the Sonoma Coast: Winemakers are Searching for Land Where Pinot Noir Grows Best.”**

The article is by Jeff Cox who reports, “Very, very few places in the world have the sort of climate found in the [Sonoma Coast] region – a climate that

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An 1893 photo of the North Pacific Coast Railroad in Freestone. I.T. Ward's General Merchandise Store (background) was built around 1872. Previous owners of the building included a Mr. Hind, whose nightly forays outside of town to burn down the newly constructed railroad bridges earned him a stay in San Quentin. Today, painted a cheerful yellow, the building serves as the general store and local post office.

seems perfectly suited to producing Pinot Noirs that challenge the supremacy of Burgundy itself.”

In a newsletter published in the spring of 1999, Paul Hobbs, a Sonoma Coast grape grower, writes,

*“There aren't many places in the entire world that can grow great Pinot Noir – the most ornery and temperamental grape in existence. There's Burgundy, of course, and in California parts of Carneros, the Russian River area . . . and some areas further along the coast . . . that's about it. Not only does the thin skin of Pinot Noir shrivel in the sun and rot in the rain, seams of different soils can result in one row developing flat and vapid fruit while the next produces all the bright flavors it's capable of.”*

According to Hobbs, “The rare potential of this land is that the right soil and a balanced climate come together.”

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In early 1999 the Phelps family and management team purchased 55 acres near Freestone, in an

area of rolling hills surrounded by stands of redwood. Neighboring the property is O'Farrell Hill, where Jasper O'Farrell, state senator in 1849 and chief surveyor of San Francisco, made his home. (Subsequent uses for the Phelps property included logging, dairy farming and, in the 1930's and '40's, the operation of a rest home.)

In September of 2000, additional land was purchased known locally as Quail Hill Ranch (but since renamed Quarter Moon Vineyard). Bill Phelps describes the parcel as “facing south at an elevation of 500 feet, only eight miles from the ocean, with panoramic views of rolling hills, redwood forests and the Pacific. Quarter Moon Vineyard is one of the greatest vine-

yard sites I've ever seen.”

Today, 82 acres are planted to Pinot Noir and 18 acres to Chardonnay on these two parcels, and a state-of-the-art winery is scheduled for completion by the harvest of 2007.

Because the winery itself will be a private facility, a small building in Freestone is being renovated to host visitors and showcase the wines. The visitors' center is scheduled to open in the fall of 2006.

Questions on the project can be directed to Bill Phelps or Damian Parker at 707-963-2745.

*Kathie Fowler is Director of Communications at Joseph Phelps Vineyards.*

1. *Historic Legends of Sonoma County*, pps. 47-48; edited by Fred S. Cook, Volcano, CA; undated.
2. “Dirt Roads and Dusty Trails, a Bicentennial History of Bloomfield, Sonoma County, CA,” pg. 8; Hannah M. Clayborn; Cleone Publ. Co., Santa Rosa, CA 1976. (1993 Ed.)
3. *Historic Legends of Sonoma County*
4. *Bear Flag Country*, pg. 63; Richard Paul Papp; Analecta Publishing, Forestville, CA 1996.
5. “Staff Report: Freestone,” Sonoma County Planning Commission; November 21, 1974; File #7287.