Norristown: A Prehistory of the Sac State Campus

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A Gold Rush community called Norristown once briefly grew on the site of the Sacramento State University campus. This town's short history – and the way in which it was apparently wiped off the map – is a mixture of the Western and mystery genres. As the United States wrestles with a wave of disinformation surrounding the 2020 election, we must seriously consider whether and how difficult or unpleasant events are enshrined as history. The forgetting of Norristown shows that entire communities can be simply removed from our local history. The Gold Rush thus provides an unfortunately timely warning of the extent to which falsehood and forgetfulness can replace truth and memory in our collective understanding of history.

The forgotten truth is that – at least for a few years between 1850 and 1853 – settlers on the site now occupied by Sacramento State built a town at the site of a major village of the Nisenan people. Norristown was an alternative to the swampy bottomlands and corrupt land schemes of Sacramento City – a speculative land enterprise that ultimately became the nucleus of modern Sacramento. The people of Norristown ultimately failed in their attempt to settle here. But it is our failure to remember their efforts that reveals the extent to which a revisionist approach has obscured a painful chapter of California's history.

Traces of Norristown appear in primary sources dating back to 1850, in newspapers, maps and aerial imagery from the early 20th Century. And most remarkably, legal descriptions and official public surveys confirm the precise boundaries of Norristown. This assortment of evidence indicates some degree of permanence that is not adequately explained by the dominant historic narrative of Sacramento's early development, which mostly ignores events east of the central Sacramento City grid. Furthermore, there is a curious pattern to the disappearance of towns surrounding Sacramento City, as well as the roadways that connected those towns to each other and to the Gold Country.

Sacramento City was highly unstable. It was plagued by repeated flooding as well as a land ownership conflict that exploded into violence in 1850, when an uprising known as the "Squatters' Riot" resulted in the deaths of eight people including the sheriff and assessor; the mayor was severely wounded and left town, never to return. This conflict occurred as a speculative real estate bubble was collapsing in the wake of prominent banker Barton Lee's bankruptcy.[1] Sacramento City was thus poorly sited for ongoing human habitation and plagued by conflict, and its success seems to have required the removal of its closest competition. The disappearance of Norristown (along with several other nearby towns) was apparently obscured by selective removal of primary sources from public collections.

Fortunately, increased digitization has now enabled rapid searches of historic newspapers, whose incomplete collections still illuminate the skullduggery of Sacramento City – described below. Although the analysis presented here raises more questions than it answers, this introductory research unearths a forgotten storyline and reveals the role of extralegal groups including the Committees of Vigilance. This paper lays the groundwork for further research that is needed to better understand the ramifications of Sacramento's early land struggles.

Part I: A Prehistoric Settlement

The relationship between Norristown and Sacramento has simply not been a subject of serious research.[2] The only known treatment in the academic literature came in 1946, when Norristown received a brief mention in Allen L. Chickering's "Samuel Norris: Litigious Pioneer," published in the *California State Historical Society Quarterly*. Chickering notes that

[1] Mark Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 146-7.

[2] Database and catalog searches using the keyword "Norristown" almost always lead to the city in Pennsylvania. Combining that keyword with "Sacramento" yields results in which the two place names are very loosely connected: For example, 16 of the 20 most relevant articles identified by JSTOR are from an address list regularly published in the journal *Family Advocate.* Two others are addresses listed in the *National Tax Journal.*

Norris laid out a town, and that a newspaper reported "regular" steamboat service. He leaves it at that.[3] More recently, *A History of the Lower American River* (1977, revised 1991) made passing reference to Norristown in the context of flooding. Founder Samuel Norris was said to have seen opportunity in Sacramento City's flood troubles, but his namesake town was dismissed as "a paper city only."[4] Both works miss Norristown's importance as a challenge to Sacramento City.

The most significant examination of Norristown occurred in 1967, when Walter Frame wrote a *Golden Notes* pamphlet for the Sacramento County Historical Society. "Fires, Floods and Hoboken" was focused on another town that briefly flowered three years after Norristown's founding, seemingly at a slightly different location. Frame includes numerous mentions of Norristown, as well as observations about the area in which both towns were situated. This is the most serious attempt to reconstruct early settlement in the CSUS campus area, and it is valuable despite some inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Frame's analysis will be discussed further below.

Despite the lack of scholarly research, the story of Norristown is important for what it shows about early Sacramento's development. This settlement left behind numerous faint or indirect historic traces, mostly located in primary sources including maps and newspapers. These sources suggest a degree of general turmoil that could explain the disappearance of Norristown – both as a physical place and as a subject of historic inquiry.

Catching a Ghost

The best records of Norristown are cartographic – it has occasionally been caught lurking on the edges of Sacramento maps. In 1913, Norristown appeared on the *Map of Sacramento City*,

[3] Allen L. Chickering, "Samuel Norris: Litigious Pioneer," *California Historical Society Quarterly 25, no. 3. (September 1946):* 223.

[4] William Dillinger, ed., *A History of the Lower American River* (Sacramento: The American River Natural History Association, 1991), 85.

published by Phinney, Cate & Marshall.[5] This is a detailed and precise map, with an index of streets and subdivisions as well as a grid to help locate the features listed. At first glance, this map is everything one expects from modern cartography, intended for use as a reference to the city as it existed at the time of publication. But looking more closely, we can discern a number of reminders of a Sacramento that *could have been* tucked behind the then-extant city.

Figure 1: *Map of Sacramento City* by Phinney, Cate & Marshall

Places that had long since vanished appear as dotted lines depicting streets and even parcel boundaries that did not survive to 1913. Upstream, on the map's eastern edge, lies Norristown. The other cartographic ghosts, including Sutterville and early settlements at crossings of the American River, jostle for position with an expanding city. They are easy to miss. But Norristown stands out on open land east of the railroad tracks, split into two riverside tracts totaling nearly 300 acres – almost half a square mile. Its northern quarter is shown as belonging to Henry S. Moddison; this land now comprises the southern portion of the River Park neighborhood. But the bulk of Norristown is identified as property of W. W. White and George Terry. Most of this land later became a public university.

Phinney, Cate & Marshall clearly and precisely identify the boundaries of Norristown, which clash with neighboring features. The "N.W. Corner of Norristown" juts awkwardly into the Wright Tract, at a location near the intersection of 54th and F Streets. The "S.W. Cor. of Norristown" intrudes on the properties of East Sacramento's old Italian farm district near Folsom Boulevard. Norristown's southern and northern boundaries both cross the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railway, which appears to have been carved out of the town's easternmost blocks.

Of course, lines on a map do not always indicate real features on the ground. It may be that Phinney, Cate & Marshall showed a failed paper town for unclear reasons. However, their

[5] Phinney, Cate & Marshall, *Map of Sacramento City* (1913).

depiction and other evidence of Norristown raise significant and uncomfortable questions about the history of the Sacramento State campus: If there was a town here, what happened to it? And are we studying history on stolen land? In response, we must look both backward and forward from 1913. We must catch the ghost whose image lurks on the edge of this intriguing map.

Looking backward, two kinds of historic evidence support the existence of Norristown as a legitimate attempt at settlement: First, newspapers of the mid-19th Century contain numerous mentions of the place, including the early stages of community-building in 1850. None of these mentions raise doubts about the underlying title – a common theme of real estate news in those days.[6] Second, Norristown appears explicitly on at least one map created a decade after its founding, indicating years of stable boundaries.

Looking forward from 1913, three kinds of modern evidence indicate that Norristown was real and significant: First, official records of the Sacramento County Assessor confirm Norristown's precise boundaries. Second, aerial photos from the early 20th Century clearly show the edges of Norristown, including a road that once ran along a line within sight of the modern university's history department offices. Finally, contemporary parcel boundaries support the existence of a large property identical to that depicted by Phinney, Cate & Marshall.

The Beginnings of Norristown

The first known mention of Norristown in California newspapers was an advertisement in the *Placer Times* – then Sacramento City's only paper, published weekly during March of 1850. The notice boasted of a "splendid town site…much higher than the late flood which inundated Sacramento City." Readers were reminded that the road to the mining district passed through

[6] *The California Digital Newspaper Collection* provides a searchable database of the most comprehensive collection of California newspapers. Although some additional specimens are available elsewhere, the CDNC is used in this paper as an indicator of availability, aggregated from public collections such as the California State Library.

Norristown, while river access was available "the greater portion of the year." Sacramento City land merchant and speculator Henry Schoolcraft had a map available for inspection by interested parties.[7] But was Norristown a "paper town" thrown up on speculation, with no expectation that it would survive longer than needed to turn a profit in the crazed Gold Rush real estate market? That may be. Newspapers of the day were full of glowing descriptions of dismal bottomlands for sale. One couldn't throw a stone without having it land on "splendid" property.

Yet there is ample evidence that Norristown was an actual town, starting with movement of people. By late April, the steamboat *Etna* was reportedly making regular forays up the American River, which would have been navigable during the winter and spring snowmelt.[8] This route might not have been a viable year-round enterprise, but it does appear that visitors were regularly coming and going by water. Norristown also seems to have been viewed as a budding civic center. It served as one of eight precincts for the first county election in April of 1850.[9] And when six county districts were established, the fourth was described as "Embracing Norristown and the settlements adjacent thereto."[10] This all suggests that Norristown was the anchor of a secondary population center, several miles east of the primary center in Sacramento City.

Continued settlement is suggested by the location of the "Five Mile Station" Pony Express stop, marked by California Registered Historical Landmark No. 697. This monument stands at the western end of the Guy West Bridge – where the Coloma Road (segments of which survive as nearby J Street, and, miles to the east, in Rancho Cordova) once met the river. Although Pony Express stations were typically spaced at 15-mile intervals, the monument notes

[7] "Norristown," *Placer Times, March 2, 1850.*
[8] "First Steamer on the American River, *Placer Times,* April 22, 1850.
[9] "County Election," *Placer Times,* March 16, 1850.
[10] "Election Notice," *Placer Times,* May 9, 1850.

that this unusual station was located only five miles from Sacramento City. Not only that, the monument text records that, "quickly changing ponies, (the rider) sped on to the next stop at Fifteen Mile Station."[11] The 1860 establishment of an irregular stop in the middle of a standard Pony Express leg indicates that there was a reason to stop here – an eastbound pony would not yet be tired after a few miles of easy terrain, so why change mounts? The most likely explanation is that this was a population center at which mail was gathered and added to the carrier's bag. This suggests a durable population center lasting a decade after the founding of Norristown.

Norristown was also important in the first regional display of holiday patriotism. On the Fourth of July, 1850, "Captain Samuel Norris" fired the cannon at Norristown, joining Sacramento City, the Town of Sutter, Sutter's Fort and another disappeared eastern neighbor called Brighton in an explosive morning observance.[12] Anglo settlers in a wild land still awaiting statehood must have felt some comfort in hearing the coordinated blasts booming out over the swamplands, tying together far-flung settlements into a single celebration.

Then there was silence.

Norristown vanishes from the surviving collection of newspapers, disappearing without any mention of trouble. There are no surviving articles describing title disputes, business failures, or boats running aground as the river dried up in summer. Norristown simply ceases to be a topic of printed conversation. The only exception comes in the fall of 1853, when one section of a planned levee contract is described as "the line from Sixth and H streets to Norristown."[13]

However, in subsequent years, Norristown appears in numerous real estate notices, indicating that it *was* a significant landmark from which other property boundaries were derived.

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[11] California Historical Landmarks, "CHL No. 697 Pony Express Five Mile House - Sacramento," *California Historical Landmarks.*

[12] "Orders No 2," *Sacramento Transcript,* July 4, 1850.

[13] "The Levee," *Sacramento Daily Union,* September 28, 1853.

The first such notice, apparently the most substantial, was a sheriff's sale notice in November of 1855. The southeast corner of Norristown was the easternmost reference point of a vast tract that stretched to the Sacramento River near Freeport. This mammoth spread encompassed nearly 30 square miles that had just been ruled the property of Nicholas Larco, despite being north of the line claimed by Johann Sutter as the southern edge of his purported Mexican grant.[14]

Schoolcraft's original sales map of Norristown is apparently lost, but the town did not entirely escape the cartographic record after its demise. It appears on a ragged specimen held by the California State Library, titled *Map of the Partition Between Sanders & Muldrow, in October 1858 and May 1860*. This strange map clearly shows Norristown in the same location indicated by Phinney, Cate & Marshall a half-century later.[15] Even today, several extensive property lines converge at the old southern edge of the Norristown waterfront, now the site of Alumni Grove. These apparently include a remnant of the so-called "Larco Line" depicted by Sanders and Muldrow – now the site of Hornet Crossing, one of the few access points to the CSUS campus.[16]

Figure 2: *Map of the Partition Between Sanders & Muldrow in October 1858 and May 1860,* by Lewis Sanders Jr. and William Muldrow

These major property lines converging at Norristown's southeastern point – some of which are still visible in today's official maps – confirm that Norristown was a property of greater age than surrounding properties. Norristown was the durable landmark from which other properties were identified. But strangely, Norristown managed to remain isolated and mostly intact as the land around it was subdivided. This suggests a suppression of the normal impulse to sell and subdivide valuable land, which is an anomaly worth exploring.

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[14] "Sheriff's Sale," *Sacramento Daily Union,* October 29, 1855.

[15] Lewis Sanders Jr. and William Muldrow, *Map of the Partition Between Sanders & Muldrow, in October 1858 and May 1860* (1860).

[16] The Sacramento County Assessor's Parcel Viewer website shows two intact property lines approaching from the south and southeast. These follow Norristown's southern boundary and another approach that connects the spot to the road now known as 65th Street, to the southwest. Online at http://assessorparcelviewer.saccounty.net.

The Sacramento County Assessor's annual map books provide a detailed look at how land changed hands from year to year, allowing us to understand how property holdings evolved. This collection should provide a detailed account of subdivision and sales within the Norristown tract. Unfortunately, no volumes from the first 20 years of the county's history are available in the collection that was recently digitized by the Center for Sacramento History.[17]

So much for the past. How did Norristown hold up after 1913?

Modern County Records

In 1933, F.J. Klaus conducted a survey for the Sacramento County Recorder. Klaus produced a detailed map showing a portion of the northern boundary of Norristown as well as its northwestern corner, which he pinpointed at 88.07 feet northeast of the midline of 54th Street, where it intersects with the southern edge of F Street. Numerous precise measurements showed Norristown's relationship to the Wright Tract, which would later be subdivided into several blocks of East Sacramento suburbia. Although the northwest corner was obliterated by subsequent property sales, much of the northern boundary (extending toward the river) survives as Messina Way in River Park. The reason for Klaus' detailed survey is unknown, but presumably there was *some* reason for devoting resources to precisely locate this obscure spot.

Norristown's southern boundary has been largely erased by the development of the Sacramento State campus. But before it was destroyed, the old boundary road, which is visible in aerial imagery from as recently as 1937, passed between Tahoe Hall (home to the History Department) and Amador Hall (formerly home to the Geography Department).[18] The southwestern corner, on the other hand, is still partially intact. A triangular parcel at 63rd Street

[17] The Center for Sacramento History's collection of digitized volumes is available at https://archive.org. This collection is still being digitized but the Center's staff has confirmed that no additional volumes were transferred from the County.

[18] Laval Company, *47-69* [airphoto] (1937).

and Elvas Avenue includes a remnant of the southern boundary. The line's identity is confirmed by information currently available on the County Assessor's website, where two nearby parcels are described in relation to a point "N 50 deg 43' E 276.50 ft from SW cor Norristown."[19]

Norristown's demise was therefore not due to title issues. Modern legal descriptions pinpoint, within inches, the location of its original boundaries. This reveals the exact location of a durable tract of land, first described in 1850, whose boundaries are partially preserved up to the present day. The title underlying Norristown managed to survive decades of turmoil in the region, and remains a legal feature 170 years after its creation. Norristown was therefore a coherent and specific property, which remained mostly intact for a century. This brings us to the question of what happened on that property: Why, 100 years after its founding, did a forgotten community that might have been a twin city for Sacramento, instead become farmland donated for a college campus?

Part II: Traces of Lost Communities

To evaluate the viability of Norristown, we should examine the known history of settlement at the site, which is documented both before and after the brief period it was called Norristown. Some traces survive of an earlier community called Yalesumne, as well as a later community called Hoboken. But information is scarce, so additional insight may be gleaned from an analysis of the topography, which reveals a superb location for settlement; Norristown had direct access to a major river and related natural resources, but also relatively low flood risk. Even when the river was not flooding people would have been drawn to this site. It is no surprise that at least three serious settlement attempts took place, but it is quite surprising that such attempts stopped after a few years, even as the area's population continued to grow.

[19] Sacramento County Assessor, *Parcel Viewer.* APN 008-0020-017 and 008-0020-015. Online at http://assessorparcelviewer.saccounty.net.

A Popular Place

Before this choice location was Norristown, it was the approximate location of a major village of the Nisenan people. They called it Yalesumne. An 1846 survey commissioned by Johann Augustus Sutter indicated 485 people living here – the largest population described in the large region between the Feather and Mokelumne Rivers.[20] Indeed, before the Gold Rush Yalesumne was larger than Yerba Buena, which would later become San Francisco.

After Norristown came Hoboken. In 1853, flooding once again devastated Sacramento City. And once again, people flocked to the high ground east of town. Although the location of Hoboken is murkier than that of Norristown, it seems most likely that Hoboken arose just upstream from its predecessor community. Hoboken lasted only until the waters subsided, but its demise seems more connected to political issues than hydrological ones.

Several early maps show a converging network of roads between the Sacramento River and the gold fields, which met at this high ground during the 1850s. One road was a straight shot from the embarcadero, now known as J Street. The other two follow the topography, skirting the north and south sides of the flood basin in which Sacramento City was situated. These bypasses, which will be described below, survive only as fragments. The disappearance of these roads suggests a pattern of removal connected to the removal of Sacramento City's rival towns.

The most obvious disappearance was the beginning of the famous Coloma Road. This was the road along which news of the gold strike traveled to Sutter's Fort, and along which the first waves of argonauts rushed toward riches. This road met the American River at Norristown before continuing upstream along the south bank to William Liedesdorff's Rancho del Rio

[20] Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 66.

Americano. There, it branched out to provide access to a variety of mining sites. The west end of the Coloma Road was severed by construction of the Southern Pacific Railway spur in 1869.

Another thoroughfare, called the Sutterville-Brighton Road, served as a bypass to the lowlands surrounding Sacramento City, approaching the Norristown area from the southwest. It appears on a variety of maps, and is most clearly depicted in Theodore Judah's 1855 map illustrating his plan for the Sacramento Valley Railroad.[21] The Sutterville-Brighton Road exists today only as a short stretch of Sutterville Road south of downtown.

Figure 3: Theodore Judah, *Map of the Sacramento Valley Railroad*

A third route approached Norristown from the northwest, following a terrace flanking wetlands on the American River's southern bank and providing connection to Sutter's Landing and several river crossings. This route followed the natural levee of the river, which was built up higher than the surrounding countryside as part of an alluvial fan of sediments washed down from the Sierra Nevada. Evidence for this road is less conclusive than the other two, but a portion of the route appears on a lavishly detailed depiction of the land and water – the 1857 map of the terrain now occupied by northern East Sacramento and western River Park, drawn by G. H. Goddard.[22] Norristown lies outside the map's extent, but a route is shown roughly following modern Elvas Avenue. It continues off the map's southeastern corner. Although not labeled, this is where a road to Norristown would have been located.

Figure 4: *Map of Rutte, Muldrow & Smith's Gardens by* G. H. Goddard

Death by Railroad

The greatest change to the Norristown vicinity came in 1869, when a storage spur was built as part of the Transcontinental Railroad's western terminus. This spur was located on a high

[21] Theodore Judah, *Map of the Sacramento Valley Railroad* (1855).
[22] G. H. Goddard, *Map of Rutte, Muldrow & Smith's Garden* (1857).

levee that doubled as a flood control structure protecting Sacramento. The California State Railroad Museum was not able to produce any detailed records of Norristown land acquisitions for this spur. However, Wendell Huffman of the Nevada State Railroad Museum believes that "construction of the 'east levee' became its principal justification."[23] The path of floodwaters would now change dramatically. Instead of following their ancient overflow courses down sloughs into the flood basin in which Sacramento City lay, the floodwaters would be blocked. They would pool up along the levee, then flow along a relatively narrow course following the main channel, right through Norristown. The river's banks, which were previously the highest and safest land around, were now threatened by even moderate flooding.

Crucially, the railroad levee also blocked the Coloma Road near its entry into Norristown, blocking off the original route from Sacramento City to the gold fields. The spot at which this artery was severed is captured by a woodcut in the illustrated 1880 history by Thompson and West. This image shows the former Coloma Road making a sharp turn just before the railroad tracks, with its former path directly obstructed by a multi-story building at trackside.[24] It looks like someone wanted to make sure the route didn't reopen.

Title issues are often seen as the reason for a Gold Rush town's failure, and this was a particularly widespread problem around Sacramento. As Mark Eifler explores in *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento*, doubts about Johann Augustus Sutter's 1842 grant from Mexico were at the root of serious and widespread conflict. Those who purchased land based on titles traced back to Sutter's grant were locked in a prolonged general dispute with those who believed the land to be government property for the use of whomever settled on it

[23] Wendell Huffman, email message to author, March 16, 2020.

[24] Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West. *History of Sacramento County California,* (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 137.

first. This dispute escalated into the bloody 1850 "Squatters' Riot" featuring gun battles in Sacramento City on August 14 and Brighton (just upstream from Norristown) on August 15.

The durable boundaries discussed above strongly suggest that Norristown – unlike Sacramento City – was built upon a valid claim. Norristown was both closer to the gold and less prone to flooding than Sacramento City. Given the extreme value of Norristown land, as well as the evidence of at least two major settlement attempts, we should expect some evidence of economic development here. At the very least, the Norristown waterfront should feature the remains of some kind of riparian industry.

It is simply weird that there are no pilings, no foundations. There is no sign that anyone made a sustained attempt to develop this choice location. Although a shallow river channel downstream would have blocked water access in the summer and fall, the Norristown waterfront featured high banks along a stretch that resembles a narrow lake more than a river – deep even in the summer and with a relatively gentle current during the floods that repeatedly devastated its downstream neighbors. It would have been a superb site for a sawmill, processing logs floated downstream from the mountains. The lack of any historic infrastructure demands an explanation.

Lost Sacramentos

The notion of entire towns wiped off the map in peacetime seems outlandish, but vanished communities litter the landscape under modern Sacramento. Lingering traces of Sutterville, Boston, Brighton and Hoboken confirm that multiple towns near Sacramento were lost to history. Our modern historic understanding of Gold Rush real estate would be enriched by acknowledgement that competitors had to be removed from the field of play. A quick overview of other forgotten neighbors helps to provide context for Norristown's failure to develop.

Eifler provides a detailed account of Sutterville's demise. At the time of Sacramento City's founding, the town of Sutter (originally Sutterville) lay several miles downstream on some of the Sacramento Valley's highest riverside land. This was the preferred city site of its namesake and founder, who viewed it as being distant enough to avoid crowding his operation at the fort – located in what became far eastern Sacramento City. Eifler outlines the ruthless tactics of Sam Brannan and others to crush this rival: After destroying the wares of a merchant who left Sacramento City, Brannan's cabal pressed the Sutter town land agent Lansford Hastings to give them 80 free lots. They used this prime property only to manipulate Johann Sutter, Jr. and leverage further free land in Sacramento City.[25] Sutterville couldn't compete.

Sutterville survives as a place name without a place. Almost nothing remains of its street grid, which grew to the hundreds of blocks shown on the 1913 map by Phinney, Cate & Marshall. Nor is there a trace of the town's physical presence, which Barber and Baker depict in an 1855 lithograph as having at least four large buildings – one with three stories. This image also shows a wooden causeway connecting the town's high ground to the river, bridging the slough that drained the flood basin in which Sacramento City was located.[26]

Sutterville's disappearance is all the more surprising when we consider that it had a half-decade head start over Sacramento City, as well as the blessing of the man whose purported Mexican grant was the basis for the titles in the Sacramento area. Eifler asks "Why create a new town in a poor location, when one already existed in a superior location?"[27] The answer to this rhetorical question is, of course, that the proprietors of Sacramento City were not in a position to profit as handsomely from the continued growth of existing land enterprises.

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[25]Mark Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 52-3.

[26] E.L. Barber and G.H. Baker, *Sacramento Illustrated* (Sacramento: Barber and Baker, 1855), 9.

[27] Mark Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 13.

In *Mining California: an Ecological History,* Andrew Isenberg describes Sacramento City as a type of municipality quite different than those found today. Modern cities might be corrupt but are nonetheless dedicated, at least in part, to provision of services to their citizenry. Isenberg writes that Gold Rush cities "were rather more like joint-stock companies than organisms…municipal governments, made up largely of the most prominent land speculators and merchants, acted as boards of directors."[28] Removal of competing enterprises like Sutterville would thus be simply part of the board's fiduciary responsibility – especially when governing an enterprise as precarious and risky as Sacramento City.

Other towns have also disappeared. For example, a city called Boston was located just north of the original confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers. Although short-lived, it was reportedly a significant settlement that had already been forgotten a generation later. In 1886, the *Sacramento Daily Union* reprinted a Gold Rush description of the place, concluding that it "reads almost like a fiction to many, but its truthfulness is vouched for by pioneers, who remember the long rows of white tents in the 'Western Hub' in 1849-50."[29]

Brighton is of particular interest. This town was located upstream from Norristown, and gained notoriety as the location where Sheriff McKinney was shot and killed during the Squatters' Riot. McKinney was leading a posse in pursuit of members of the Sacramento Settlers' Association, and Brighton seems to have been a "squatter" stronghold. Brighton and its racetrack appear on Judah's map, as well as a map published in Barber and Bakers' 1855 history. But the name is now attached, ironically, to a rail junction a mile from its original site. The original Brighton is long gone.

Figure 5: "Map of Sacramento and Vicinity" by Barber and Baker

[28] Andrew Isenberg, *Mining California: An Ecological History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 56.
[29] "The City of Boston," *Sacramento Daily Union,* June 18, 1886.

Hoboken's disappearance is even stranger than that of Norristown, and provides important insights into the relationship between the towns. Hoboken's story also provides an essential clue about the opposition faced by settlements surrounding Sacramento City. In *Fire, Floods & Hoboken,* Walter Frame claims that, "Norristown failed to prosper, and prior to 1852 the only building on the property was a wayside inn known as the Four Mile House, located near the junction of J Street and the Norris Ferry Road." Frame locates this junction just outside of Norristown.[30]

However, Frame's assessment is undermined by his inclusion of a woodcut depicting Hoboken during its brief heyday. "View of Hoboken, on the American River" seems to show a broad, triangular plaza. Several converging property lines come together at the site of Alumni Grove, so this space could be the gap between two rectangular street grids, laid out at different angles along the river's curve, with Norristown downstream and Hoboken upstream. A subtle detail seems to confirm Hoboken's spatial relationship to Norristown, and to contradict Frame's assertion that the only surviving building was just outside Norristown limits: Hoboken is understood to have lasted only for weeks, and indeed most of the structures shown are the tents thrown up to quickly relocate operations from flood-stricken Sacramento City. However, smoke is clearly rising from the chimneys of a pair of two-story wood frame buildings.[31] These seem unlikely to have been constructed in such a short time.

Figure 6: "View of Hoboken"

These buildings, assuming they existed, were most likely remnants of Norristown. This would locate Hoboken just upstream of Norristown. More importantly, it suggests continuity between Norristown and Hoboken, indicating several years of at least modest economic activity.

[30] Walter C. Frame, "Fire, Floods & Hoboken," *Golden Notes 13, no. 3* (April 1967), 3.
[31] Ibid. 12.

This evidence undercuts the idea that these were ephemeral towns, and reframes Hoboken's demise as the end of a settlement that had existed for years rather than weeks.

The disappearance of Hoboken features more than a hint of menace. Frame attributes Hoboken's demise to flood damage at Lisle's Bridge downstream – the county board of supervisors ordered the drawbridge nailed shut, effectively ending commercial river traffic on February 1, 1853. This would have been a severe blow to any town, and Frame muses about whether it was a "deliberate act of urbicide" that the county government blocked river access.[32]

That would be bad enough, but Frame missed a key part of the story. Although Lisle's Bridge may well have been damaged, American River towns faced a more serious trouble, which had been brewing for weeks. On January 5, notes from the supervisors' meeting reported that a delegate had made an alarming discovery: "The bridge was guarded by an armed force, who refused to raise the draw, or allow me to raise it; consequently it is at present a great obstruction to business."[33] The supervisors promptly passed a resolution for the sheriff to deliver to the bridge's proprietors, demanding that it be opened again. And that was apparently the end of that.

Part III: Sacramento's Reign of Terror

The *Union* did not report the results of the sheriff's visit to Lisle's Bridge, if it ever happened. Whatever bridge damage may have occurred, the supervisors' apparent abandonment of the matter suggests that the county government was unable to muster significant force to regain control of a primary artery controlled by some mysterious militia. So who was that armed force? The group's identity remains unknown, but motives may be surmised from its choice of actions. The force seems to have sought to halt water traffic on the American River, at a time when Sacramento City was emerging from yet another damaging flood. They were not reported

[32] Ibid. 10.
[33] "Board of Supervisors," *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 8, 1853.

to be impeding anyone from crossing over the bridge; land traffic appears not to have concerned them. This armed force was there to block river traffic to the Norristown and Hoboken area, and there was apparently nothing the county government could do about it.

By itself, this is an interesting historic episode that might be considered part of general lawlessness in the "Wild West." However, the period during which Norristown disappeared was a time of great turbulence in Sacramento, partly obscured by gaps in a key primary source: Hundreds of issues of several newspapers are missing from all known collections including the California Digital Newspaper Collection (CDNC). During the months of particular unrest that plagued the area in 1851, at least one journalist was brutally assaulted and threatened with death over something he printed in these missing editions. Around the same time, a group called the Committee of Vigilance arose in Sacramento. It is deeply unfortunate that we have lost key primary resources describing this difficult and complicated episode in Sacramento's story.

Adding to the intrigue, two of the earliest histories of Sacramento, published in 1853 and 1855, strongly suggest a reluctance to talk about what had happened in 1851. As a result of their silence and distortions, subsequent histories have been built upon a flawed foundation. A complete examination is well beyond the scope of this paper, but a detour to San Francisco will provide useful perspective on the turbulence that contributed to the forgetting of Norristown.

To understand the dynamics of the Sacramento area during the early 1850s, it is essential to recognize the presence of the Committees of Vigilance, which conducted extralegal executions in 1851 and 1856. Lynchings in the Gold Rush are generally viewed as spontaneous uprisings, part of the "Wild West" in which social order was sometimes weak or absent and communities were sometimes outraged to the point they took matters into their own hands. The Vigilance Committees were something else entirely: led by elites for investment purposes.

The San Francisco Committees of Vigilance are a reasonably well-researched topic, even if most Californians are unfamiliar with their reign of terror. In *Dirty Deeds: Land, Violence and the 1856 San Francisco Vigilance Committee,* Nancy Taniguchi uses long-hidden Committee minutes to illustrate that this latter group was driven by a desire for control of land. The land of San Francisco was tremendously valuable but plagued by serious title issues – similar to the issues facing land around Sacramento City.

Although Taniguchi does not explore the connection, the rise of San Francisco's Committees was closely linked to Sacramento. Indeed, the first lynching of 1851 occurred in Sacramento City. A gambler named Frederick Roe killed a bystander who intervened as Roe was engaged in assault. He was hanged by a huge mob at the Horse Market, in what must have been an event deserving extensive commentary. Yet Eifler notes a conspicuous absence of discussion:

> The silence of that night remained nearly unbroken. Although *Sacramento Transcript* editor F. C. Ewer reported the lynching in painstaking detail, his account is nearly the only evidence remaining of what happened that day and night. Though Sacramento residents wrote of the Squatters' Riot in letters, journals, pamphlets, and memoirs, they remained silent on their thoughts or feelings about the death of Frederick Roe.[34]

Eifler does not pursue the reasons behind this noteworthy silence, and reduces the lynching to a "symbolic" event establishing a "boundary between the admirable confusion of gold rush opportunity and the immoral anarchy of gold rush irresponsibility."[35] Nor does Eifler appear to take into account the views of the *Daliy Index,* another paper that was publishing in 1851 but apparently still missing at the time of his writing. The *Index* provides a clear indication that this was a political lynching. Dissent was discouraged as mob rule was established:

> Already have men ventured to declare that law is non-existent, and that the people are to govern themselves hereafter, by the dictation of the mass, while others have not scrupled

[34] Mark Eifler, *Gold Rush Capitalists: Greed and Growth in Sacramento* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 188.

[35] Ibid, 212.

> to threaten the denouncers of yesterday's proceedings, with a like visitation of the vengeance of the public will.[36]

The *Index* was almost lost to history, but specimens from its brief run in early 1851 have recently resurfaced. These issues are held by the New York Historical Society, and preserve fragments of a dissenting voice that was almost successfully silenced.

The Missing Issues

Eifler also fails to enquire why the historic record did not include the editorial perspective of the *Transcript's* better-known rival, the *Placer Times.* Here, a comparison of journalistic gaps with major news events illustrates a pattern of newspapers disappearing at inopportune times. Characteristics of the gaps in the CDNC holdings suggest that newspapers were removed to influence collective memory, not missing due to accidental destruction through fire or flood.

Disaster is the easiest explanation for these missing newspapers, especially in a flammable and flood-prone settlement like Sacramento City. But in a scenario of accidental destruction, all publication dates prior to the disaster would probably have been lost (unless the paper had off-site storage of older back issues). One might also expect that the gaps would begin concurrently with known disasters, and that the first issues surviving after the gaps would be filled with accounts of the city rebuilding. The publisher would have presumably announced that they were back in operation, with description of the damages to their office and press. Futhermore, all or most of the city's papers would have probably exhibited similar gaps.

No such fingerprints of disaster appear in the CDNC's missing issues. Indeed, examining the gaps in the Sacramento City newspapers of 1850-51 suggests intentional removal. The CDNC holds all copies from the founding of the *Placer Times* on April 28, 1849, until June 7, 1850 – about two months before the Squatters' Riot and a full year before it was merged with the

[36] "The Long Agony," *Daily Index*, February 26, 1851.

Transcript. Surviving issues of the *Transcript* – which became the only surviving collection after the disappearance of the *Times* – run from its first issue on April 1, 1850 until June 5, 1851. The *Transcript* and *Times* were combined shortly thereafter, on June 15.[37]

June of 1851 was an important month in California vigilantism, so having only a single local point of view is deeply unfortunate. Indeed, the news from San Francisco suggests that something was seriously amiss in California. Three days after the *Transcript's* disappearance on June 8th, the *Alta California* published the call for a "war of extermination" against Australians – they were the scapegoats of the day, often depicted as "incendiaries" and criminals, bent on burning cities and looting.[38] On the 9th, the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance was organized in a warehouse belonging to Sam Brannan. On the 10th, five days after the *Transcript* went silent, an Australian was hanged by a huge mob in San Francisco's first successful lynching.[39]

At this point, the reader may be wondering what was happening closer to Norristown. Unfortunately, there is not much to report. By the end of June, the *Alta* printed a revealing and ominous brief: "A Vigilance Committee of 213 signers has been found in Sacramento…The Sacramento papers contain very litte (sic) news."[40] Indeed, the merger and later departure of the *Times Transcript* left the *Daily Union* as the only Sacramento City paper with a surviving collection. And as will be shown below, the *Daily Union* publisher John Morse is not a trustworthy reporter with regards to the dark days of 1851.

Even so, the lack of news from Sacramento could have an innocent explanation: Did the *Times* and the *Transcript* simply have gaps in publication? There is no evidence that this happened in either case. In fact, the newspapers were frequently mentioned by rivals during these

[37] *Newspaper Holdings of the California State Library,* by Marianne Leach (1986)
[38] "City Intelligence," *Daily Alta California,* June 8, 1851.
[39] "The Execution of Jenkins," *Daily Alta California,* June 12, 1851.
[40] "Sacramento," *Daily Alta California,* June 28, 1851.

gaps, confirming ongoing publication. The most relevant such mention occurred in the April 14 edition of the *Transcript*, which reported that *Times* editor James E. Lawrence was severely beaten due to something he had recently written about violence in a saloon called "The Branch." Lawrence was reportedly threatened with death if he did not immediately leave town.[41]

This attack on journalism has been mostly ignored by historians. A rare exception is the 1880 account by Albert Thompson and Thomas West in *History of Sacramento County California.* They note, "threats were openly made by the rough element that they would treat the next editor that ventured to intervene with them, in a worse manner." Thompson and West also report that this assault on the press prompted an "address" that was signed by over 1,000 people. This statement condemned a more generalized threat to reporting, as Lawrence's assailants "design an attack on the various editors of this city, and in their own language, to 'make a clean sweep of them.'" The end result of this alarming episode is unclear, although the authors report "no more editors being maltreated" and indicate that the "*rough* element" would themselves fall prey to Sacramento's second lynching in August.[42]

Although alarming, none of this proves that the demise of Norristown and other communities was directly related to turmoil in Sacramento City. The connection between the Committees of Vigilance and these journalistic gaps remains murky. However, it is clear that the period during which Norristown disappeared is marred by significant holes in the journalistic record, and a generally poor understanding of the conflicts that plagued the area. That an armed force blocking legitimate government activity is one of the last known events in the Norristown area suggests that the missing newspapers of 1850-51 hold significant additional clues.

Historic Silences

[41] "A Dastardly Attack," *Transcript,* April 14, 1850.

[42] Thomas H. Thompson and Albert Augustus West. *History of Sacramento County California,* (1880. Reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1960), 125-6.

To make matters worse, early histories of Sacramento apparently exhibit a taboo about discussing some of the more difficult issues the community had faced. Both Morse's 1853 history and Baker and Barber's 1855 history contain strange and conspicuous gaps in their treatment of 1851. Morse, who was the founding editor of the *Daily Union,* also produced what is regarded as Sacramento's first history. In it, he gives a highly detailed account of the land controversies that plagued Sacramento through the end of 1850, including the Squatters' Riot. His account is fairly even-handed up to this point, and includes excerpts from numerous primary sources.

But when faced with the most traumatic period of the city's short life, Morse provides an absurdly inaccurate summary of 1851: "The winter passed away almost unnoticed, save by its genial influences, and never were realized more delightful comminglings of business and pleasure." Then, in a bizarre shift of style, events of that spring are summarized by a disjointed list of notes from his newspaper's files. The month of April, which featured developments that must have been of extreme interest to a local newspaper publisher, included only three such records. The day after the assault on Morse's colleague, which prompted widespread community outrage and organizing, he recalls only one thing: "City divided into Wards."[43]

Morse continues in this style through most of the remainder of his account, failing to mention the lynchings or any other strife. He never mentions Norristown. On the other hand, he does report that in January of 1853, "many mercantile houses established branches of their business at Hoboken. Trade entirely cut off from the City on account of the high water and impassable conditions of the road." Unsurprisingly, Morse makes no mention of the armed force

[43] John F. Morse, "History of Sacramento," in *1853-54 Sacramento Directory,* ed. Mead Kibbey (Sacramento: California State Library Foundation, 1997), 69-70.

blocking river access. He concludes with a description of improvements including planking of the Coloma Road, which passed through Hoboken at that time.[44]

Following Morse's omissions, an avoidance of conflict seems to have settled over early Sacramento historians. This avoidance appears again in the 1855 account by Barber and Baker, who plagiarize Morse: "The winter passed away almost unnoticed under the genial influences of business and pleasure." They do briefly describe the lynchings, but not before reminding the reader that these unpleasant episodes are barely worth mentioning, as 1851 "was marked by no very great or interesting event."[45]

Conclusion: Excavating Norristown

As a result of apparent suppression of the community's memory of the difficulties of 1851, a key part of Sacramento's early history has been forgotten; this was a time when multiple towns were quite literally wiped off the map. The apparent removal of newspapers and county assessor record books helped obscure the story for nearly 170 years, and still impedes a full accounting. But when one starts looking seriously at all the gaps in Sacramento's history, it becomes clear that something is dramatically wrong with how we recall the city's origins.

The story of Norristown is difficult to square with known local history, but evidence lies everywhere we look: A superb settlement site was depopulated and then remained utterly undeveloped for a century, until it was donated to the state for a university campus and converted to postwar suburban housing. This was simply an excellent place for a city, and it was indeed one of the first places that people tried to build a city. But after all this time, Norristown – previously Yalesumne, the region's largest population center during the mid-1840s – was abandoned despite its natural advantages and great attraction to many flood-weary people.

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[44] Ibid, 71.
[45] E.L. Barber and G.H. Baker, *Sacramento Illustrated* (Sacramento: Barber and Baker, 1855), 19-20.

Someone seems to have taken control of Norristown, and prevented its natural development as a community. The question of who killed Norristown – and how they did it – is a matter for further research. But the preponderance of circumstantial evidence indicates that there is a major gap in the history of the land on which CSUS sits. Norristown's disappearance provides a stark lesson in how pliable history really is, and calls out for correction. As we struggle with a modern outbreak of misinformation, we should unearth the lessons of Norristown to improve our understanding of how collective memory is obscured and false history is enshrined.

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