

COLFAX COBBLESTONES

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Correcting legends and folklore about how the railroad rounding Cape Horn was constructed and how Colfax got its name

By Dirk Gifford

In February 2018, Roger Staab was asked to prepare position papers for the Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) about the following two topics that have well-known stories which are incorrect and are not supported by primary historical sources.

1. Chinese laborers for the Central Pacific Railroad working at Cape Horn, California, did not hang over cliffs supported by ropes, bosun's chairs, or hand-woven wicker baskets.
2. Illinoistown was not spontaneously renamed by its residents to "Colfax" in response to a visit by former U. S. Speaker of the House (later Vice President) Schuyler Colfax in 1865.

Primary sources include first-hand accounts written by eyewitnesses, such as letters, diaries, some newspaper articles, and some reports that were written at the time of the event. Photos taken at the time of events, and some other images are also considered to be primary sources. Historical artifacts,

such as objects made by people, may also be primary sources.

The exact origins of these stories are unknown, but the history of their embellishment into folklore and legends is traceable.

Roger presented his research as position papers to the CAHS board in April 2018. The board unanimously agreed to accept and adopt the position papers that Roger wrote. These papers now serve as guides for volunteers at the Colfax Area Heritage Museum to use in answering questions about these topics and are available to visitors who express interest in the local history.

Roger Staab is a member of the Colfax Area Historical Society and the Placer Sierra Railroad Heritage Society. He is the author, with Arthur Sommers, of *Railroads of Placer County* (Images of Rail).

This issue of *Colfax Cobblestones* includes the text of both of Roger Staab's position papers.

Chinese laborers did not use bosun's chairs and wicker baskets at Cape Horn

Roger Staab wrote the following to the CAHS board about his position paper on the work of the Chinese railroad laborers:

It includes a brief look at facts that are supported by primary research, along with the expansion of the stories over time in published literature. I believe this paper provides a factually correct view of the Cape Horn story, while leaving open the slim possibility

that additional primary information could be discovered at a future date that might alter the CAHS position.

The position paper also acknowledges the tremendous fact-based contribution by Chinese workers to railroad construction without the need for embellished "stories" about their accomplishments.

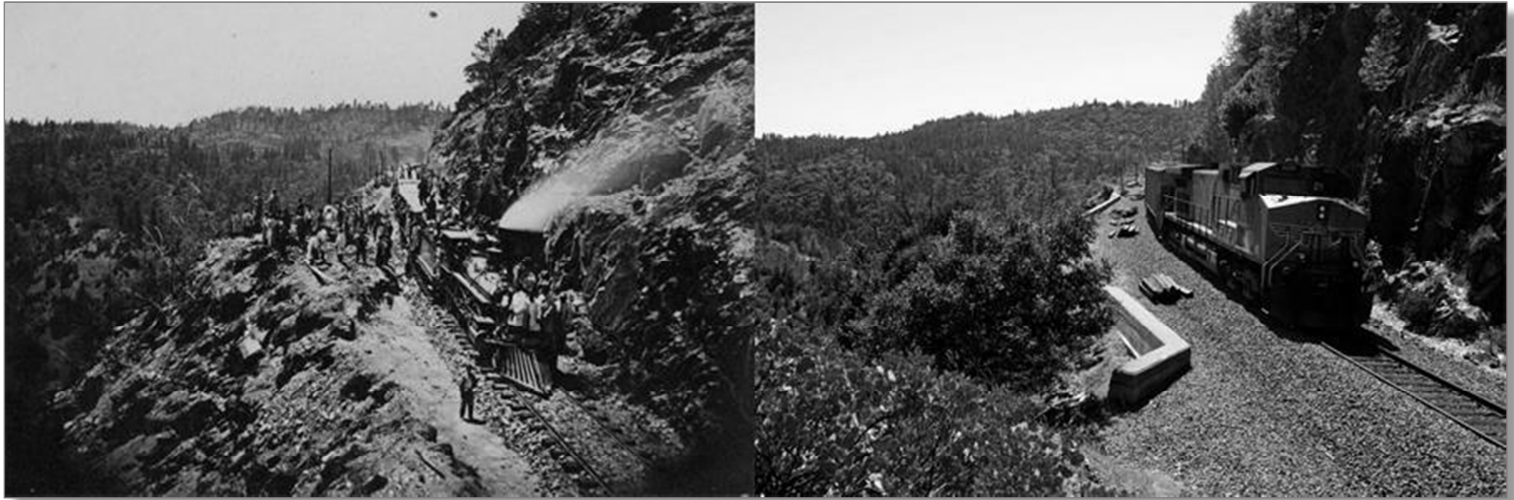
CAHS position paper about Chinese laborers at Cape Horn

By Roger Staab

Much has been written and speculated on the construction methods used in carving the railroad bed at Cape Horn east of Colfax. The stories and legends have Chinese workers suspended by ropes, seated on rope-supported “bosun’s chairs”, or hanging in mid-air in hand-woven baskets as they chipped away at the rocky hillside.

[Cape Horn], will involve much heavy work, though the material encountered is not of a very formidable character, being a soft friable slate, which yields readily to the pick or bar.”

With the roadbed construction at Cape Horn nearly complete, the Chief Engineer’s Report dated November 1865, notes, “The work at Cape Horn has proved less difficult and expensive than was first



“Cape Horn, which overlooked the Canyon of the American River and where the railroad was blasted out of the side of the mountain by Chinese workers, was one of the great engineering feats of the Central Pacific Railroad. It was often the site of tourist visits such as the one pictured above and was one of the most famous views in nineteenth-century California. . . .

“Today, Cape Horn is noticeably bereft of tourists. The modern bed had been considerably widened and buttressed to accommodate today’s trains. Comparing the modern railroad cars with those of the nineteenth century gives a sense of their difference in size and weight. Now, largely freight trains travel the Cape Horn tracks. Workers have fortified the cliff side of the tracks with a concrete retaining wall.” From “Excursion Train, Cape Horn,” Stanford University, “Railroaded,” <http://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/railroaded/gallery/railroad-repeats-alfred-hart-collection/57-excursion-train-cape-horn>.

In recent years numerous articles have been published questioning the stories or in some cases debunking those stories as myths. A careful review of those articles and further review of primary sources does indeed appear to disprove any truth behind the legends. Primary sources can be first-hand accounts from someone who was there, or documents, letters, etc., written or published at the time of the event and not colored by the intervening years.

The Chief Engineer’s Report submitted to the Central Pacific Railroad’s Board of Directors in November 1864 noted that the work at Cape Horn was likely not going to be as formidable as first thought. “The construction of the Road around this point

anticipated. The line was thrown into the hill sufficiently to form the road-bed in solid cutting, with the exception of two points, where ... heavy retaining walls have been built and the road made as secure as if upon the solid ledge.”

There was no mention in either of these reports of the need for ropes, bosun’s chairs, or workers in baskets hanging in mid-air. However, the Chief Engineer did laud the work ethic of the Chinese workers involved in the construction. In his 1865 report, he noted that the hiring of Chinese workers “has proved eminently successful. They are faithful and industrious, and under proper supervision, soon become skillful in the performance of their duties.”

Commenting on the heavy work at Long Ravine and beyond, The Chief Engineer stated, “The rapid accomplishment of this heavy work can only be obtained through the medium of that class of labor heretofore alluded to.” He added, “Judging from what has been accomplished during the past season, I confidently predict that within the year 1866 your trains will run to the summit of the Sierras....”

The construction of the railroad was big news in 1865. Newspaper reports from that time noted the progress of the construction and the “swarms” of Chinese workers on the construction sites, but made no mention of ropes, bosun’s chairs or hanging baskets. Likewise, no reports have been found documenting loss of life during the initial construction at Cape Horn, either by Chinese workers or others.

So where did the stories come from? The first reports of use of ropes at Cape Horn appeared in some of the early tourist guides, which were compiled and published to make the trip more interesting to early travelers on the new transcontinental railroad. *The Great Transcontinental Railroad Guide*, published by Crofutt and Eaton in 1870, a year after the new railroad was completed and five years after Cape Horn construction, included among its flowery wording this note about Cape Horn: “When the road-bed was constructed around this point, the men who broke the first standing ground were held by ropes until firm foot-holds could be excavated in the rocky sides of the precipitous bluffs.”

The mention of only ropes in these early promotional documents effectively disproves the use of bosun’s chairs or hanging baskets at Cape Horn.

The first known mention of bosun’s chairs to support the workers at Cape Horn appeared in the May 1927 edition of the *Southern Pacific Bulletin*, in an article written by SP’s public relations department. “It was at Cape Horn that workers were lowered over the cliff in ‘bosun’s chairs’ and did the preliminary cutting, suspended 2500 feet above the American River.”

The first known publication to reference wicker baskets was the 1962 book, *A Work of Giants*, by Wesley Griswold. The book stated: “Here Strobridge had to lower Chinese from the top of the cliff in wicker baskets to chip out holes for the initial charges of powder.”

In summary, the Legend of Cape Horn started with references in early tourist guides about construction workers supported by ropes. The legend was expanded in later publications to include the use of bosun’s chairs and, eventually, hanging baskets.

The construction methods at Cape Horn have been studied extensively and documented by numerous well-credentialed historians researching all primary sources at their disposal. Their findings have failed to lend credence to the stories of Chinese workers using ropes, bosun’s chairs or hanging baskets at Cape Horn. Unless information to the contrary is found in similar primary sources such as documents or letters written at or near the time of construction, or photos (not sketches) of the actual construction activity at Cape Horn, the Colfax Area Historical Society must conclude that the initial construction of the railroad roadbed at Cape Horn was completed by conventional construction techniques. There were no ropes, nor bosun’s chairs, nor hanging baskets, nor known loss of life by the Chinese crews who worked on the Cape Horn slopes. However, CAHS does recognize that the construction was significantly augmented and accelerated by the industrious work ethic of the Chinese workers, and we salute their contributions toward carving the roadbed at Cape Horn that is still in use today.

CAHS further acknowledges that the plaque that was placed by the Society at the Cape Horn overlook on Highway 174 is not correct in stating that bosun’s chairs were used by the Chinese workers in the construction of the railroad at Cape Horn.

To learn more

Editor’s note: The history of building the railroad at Cape Horn was the subject of the CAHS’s quarterly meeting in May 2018. In his presentation that evening, historian and engineer Jack E. Duncan explained how the construction was done and how tracks were added, moved, and reinforced as rail traffic increased and engine weight increased from 70 tons to 250.

Duncan is the author of the book *A Study of Cape Horn Construction on the Central Pacific Railroad 1865-1866* (2005). An 11-page summary of the book can be downloaded as a PDF file from a discussion page on the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) Photographic History Museum’s web site, at

<http://discussion.cpr.org/2005/10/new-book-study-of-cape-horn.html>. The web page also includes information about ordering the book and contacting the author.

The CPRR Photographic History Museum (<http://cpr.org/Museum/index.html>) contains “thousands of digitally restored period stereoviews and photographs, engravings, illustrations, maps, original photographs, ephemera, exhibits, and annotated complete transcriptions of primary source materials such as period and modern articles, first person accounts, and a wide selection of CPRR,

UPRR, and government documents, reports, and railroad related federal and state statutes” (<http://cpr.org/about.html>).

The CPRR site also includes an online copy of a 12,000-word illustrated book by Edson T. Strobridge that traces the history and development of the stories about Chinese laborers working from wicker baskets hung over the cliffs. See “The Central Pacific Railroad and the Legend of Cape Horn 1865-1866,” by Edson T. Strobridge, 2001 (http://cpr.org/Museum/Cape_Horn.html).

Illinoistown’s residents did not rename their town as “Colfax”

In his cover letter for his position paper about the naming of Colfax, California, Roger Staab wrote the following:

The plaque below his statue is not blatantly incorrect, but as worded it implies that the tracks were completed to the new town at the time of Schuyler’s visit, which is not true.

I’ll leave it up to the wisdom of the CAHS board of directors to determine if the plaque should be changed, but I believe it is essential to inform all CAHS volunteers and the visiting public of the supportable facts regarding how and when the town got its name, as outlined in the attached position paper.

CAHS position paper about the naming of the town of Colfax

By Roger Staab

One would think that the naming of a town would be straightforward, both in how and when it was done, and by whom. However, the naming of Colfax, California, is surrounded by conflicting reports, myths and rumors. Everyone does seem to agree that the town was named for Schuyler Colfax, then Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, who visited the area in 1865.

Research in primary sources establishes the following:

- n Schuyler Colfax passed through Illinoistown on July 11 and 12, 1865, before the railroad had reached the area. There is no evidence that he gave a speech at Illinoistown on either of those days.
- n The first known mention of the town name Colfax was in the July 19th *Sacramento Union*.
- n Illinoistown continued to exist as a separate town for several years a couple of miles from the new town.

Schuyler Colfax traveled to the west coast in the summer of 1865. He was an advocate for a trans-continental railroad, an idea also supported by his boss, President Abraham Lincoln before Lincoln’s untimely death. Colfax had to travel much of the last portion of the route West by horse-drawn stage-coach, arriving in San Francisco on July 4, 1865.

Articles in the July 11-14, 1865 issues of the *Sacramento Union* and the *Grass Valley Union* establish that Schuyler Colfax and his party traveled by train on July 11 to the end of the tracks, which at that time was at Clipper Gap. They then traveled by horseback to Illinoistown and transferred there to horse-drawn stage for the trip to Donner Lake.

On the way they made a brief stop in Dutch Flat where Colfax gave a “short and interesting speech” before resuming the journey to Donner Lake.

On July 12, the party returned to Illinoistown where they were met by Mr. Delano, a schoolmate of Schuyler’s, who escorted the party to Grass Valley and Nevada [City]. There was no mention in the newspaper articles of any speeches made in Illinoistown on either the trip to Donner Lake or during the

return trip, nor was there any mention of the town name of Colfax.

Statements that Schuyler Colfax's great oratory and personal charm made him so popular with the citizens that they named the new settlement after him, or as reported in another reference—citizens tore down the signs that said Illinoistown and put up new signs saying Colfax—are simply not supported by what is known.

No documented evidence has been found that Schuyler Colfax made a speech while traveling through Illinoistown on July 11 or July 12. The *Sacramento Union* reported on July 19, a week after Schuyler's visit, that the Pacific Railroad Company had purchased land adjoining Illinoistown and began laying out lots for a new town. The article included a recommendation to the railroad company that the new town should be named "Colfax" in honor of the Speaker. The July 24th *Sacramento Union* included an advertisement for the sale of lots in the new town of Colfax. Illinoistown continued to exist as a separate community a couple of miles away after Colfax was established.

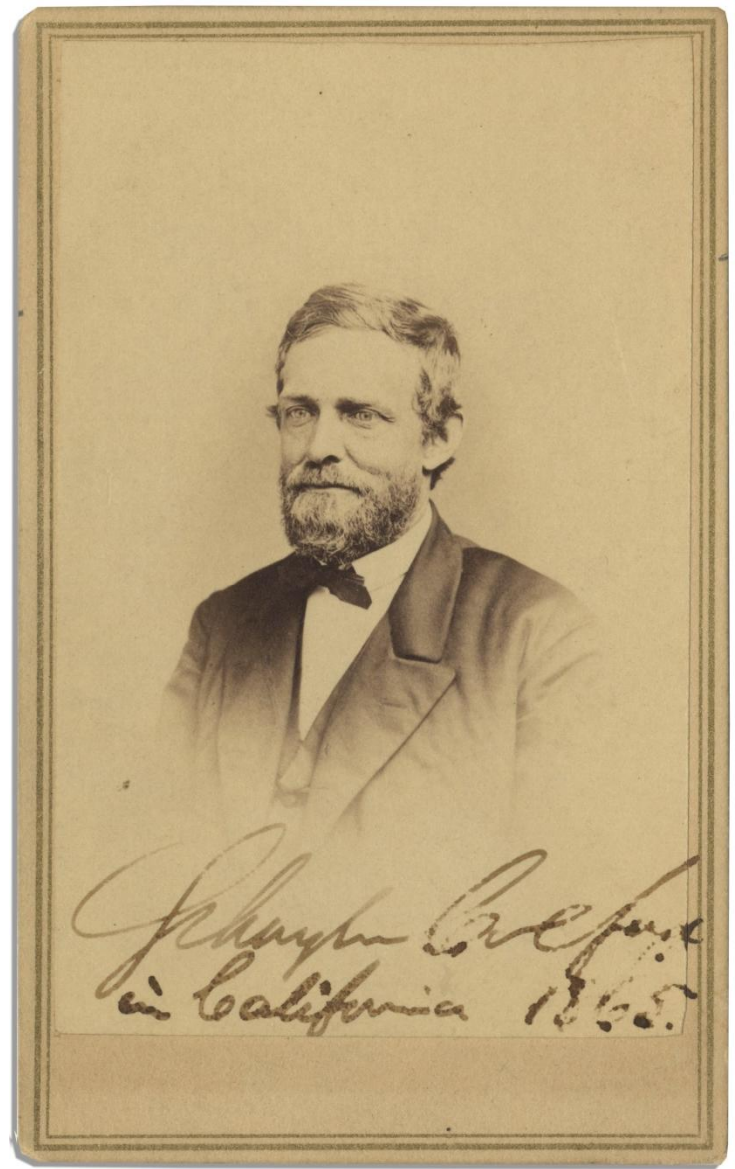
Primary source research rules out the naming of the town by enthusiastic citizens during Schuyler's visit on July 11 and July 12. It is very likely that Central Pacific officials, perhaps CPRR President Leland Stanford, named the town Colfax in honor of the Speaker to encourage continued federal support for the completion of the transcontinental railroad.

Docents and Volunteers Needed at the Museum and Chamber of Commerce

Are you interested in volunteering one day a week in either the Colfax Area Heritage Museum or the Chamber of Commerce? Docents at the Museum answer local history questions and greet visitors and travelers. If interested, please call the museum at (530) 346-8599 or visit the museum and talk to the docents or Museum Director.

The Chamber of Commerce also needs volunteers to answer questions about the Colfax Area and businesses, provide information about train and bus schedules, and help passengers enjoy their stop in Colfax. Drop in for more information about volunteering.

The Museum and the Chamber of Commerce are both located in the Colfax Passenger Depot, 99 Railroad St., Colfax, California. Their hours are 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Saturday.



A *carte de visite*, signed by Schuyler Colfax in California, in 1865. The *carte de visite* was an albumen photograph mounted on a 2½ by 4 inch paper card. The format of these inexpensive photo cards was an international standard, which facilitated collecting, storing, and trading them.

They were popular from 1859-1870, when they were replaced by a larger-format card, called a cabinet card, which measured 4½ by 6½ inches. The larger cabinet cards remained popular until Kodak introduced low-cost home photography in the early 20th century.

***Colfax Cobblestones* is published quarterly by the Colfax Area Historical Society. A subscription is part of your membership. Membership information is on page 7.**

September 22, 2018, Meeting and Program

Our guest speaker will be Alyssa Scott, a PhD student and Graduate Student Instructor at UC Berkeley who has been using the CAHS Archives for research about the tuberculosis clinics and treatments in the Colfax and Weimar areas.

Saturday, Sept. 22, 2018, 7 p.m.

Colfax Passenger Depot
99 Railroad Street, Colfax

In her LinkedIn profile, Scott has written about herself:

I am a PhD student in Anthropological Archaeology at UC Berkeley, and I specialize in nineteenth century California Historical Archaeology. I also work part-time at the California State Archaeological Research and Collections Facility.

I completed an MA in Historical Archaeology at the University of York, and throughout my studies I have worked on archaeological field projects in the US, the UK, and Peru.

I have a strong commitment to sharing history and archaeology, demonstrated by my extensive volunteer work at three different museums. I have experience working with artifact collections through my MA and BA theses, my volunteer work at the York Archaeological Trust Finds Department storeroom, and the Center for Sacramento history.

My research interests include the archaeology of health and disease, community-based archaeology, tuberculosis sanatoriums, institutions, the archaeology of childhood, and deliberately concealed assemblages.

Other interests include public archaeology, the archaeology of death and bereavement, and memory.

Scott has also transcribed some of the taped oral interviews that are in the CAHS Archives, as she has reviewed them for information she can use.

There is no charge. This meeting is open to all CAHS members and to the public. Visitors and guests are welcome. Refreshments will be provided. Bring a friend!

The Current CAHS Officers

President: Jay MacIntyre

Vice President: Swend Miller

Treasurer: Barbara Kelly

Recording Secretary: Joann Geist

Membership Chair: Chris Miller

Corresponding Secretary: Lynda Couchman

Archives Director: Swend Miller

Museum Director: Rachel Christian

Member-At-Large: Bonnie Wilson

Member-At-Large: Walt Wilson

Member-At-Large: Gayle McClain

Cobblestones Editors: Dirk Gifford, Mel Couchman

Webmaster: Dirk Gifford

Museum and Archives

The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Area Heritage Museum (CAHM) preserve the local history of Colfax, California, the surrounding area, and the railroads, by collecting stories, photographs, and artifacts about the people and buildings in this part of the Sierra foothills.

The CAHS and CAHM have an Archives Room that is currently open to the public by appointment. The Archives Room is being redesigned to better accommodate research and access to the collections. The following are some of the items in the collections located in the Museum and the Archives.

- n **Physical items**, such as Chinese ceramics and baskets, period clothing from 1800 to 1940, and WWII memorabilia: uniforms, helmet, shells, and an album with pictures of Camp Placer
- n **Historical books and other literature**, cemetery records from 1851 to 1984, and back copies of the *Colfax Record* newspaper
- n **Maps and pictures** from 1870–1999 of the Colfax area and of many of the railroads
- n **The Grace Hubley Jones Photographic Collection:** 10,000 glass plate negatives from the early 1900's

To schedule an appointment or find out when the Archives Room is open, please call the Colfax Area Heritage Museum before your visit, at (530) 346-8599.

Local Businesses and Organizations That Support CAHS

The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Area Heritage Museum (CAHM) appreciate the support and services that local businesses provide.

The following local businesses and organizations are members of the CAHS, and we appreciate their support. We invite you to support them and other local organizations and businesses.

The Museum and the Colfax Area Chamber of Commerce are both located in the Colfax Passenger Depot, located in the former Colfax Amtrak passenger depot at 99 Railroad St., Colfax, CA. CAHS works with the Chamber of Commerce to promote interest and support in the Colfax area. The Chamber of Commerce has been serving Colfax, Dutch Flat, Alta, and Gold run since 1951.

American Legion Colfax Post 192 P.O. Box 311 Colfax, CA 95713	Colfax Dental Center 120 Whitcomb Avenue Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6244	Colfax Garden Club P.O. Box 1801 Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6215
Grace Hubley Foundation 24820 Ben Taylor Colfax, CA 95713 www.gracehubleyfoundation.org	Kurtis H. Fox, M.D., Inc. 101 Grass Valley St. Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2281	Sierra Business Services 520 South Auburn St, # D Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2455 barbkelly@foothill.net
Sierra Vista Community Center 55 School Street Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-8726 svcc@colfaxnet.org	Teri Andrews-Murch, Realtor Lyon Real Estate 1900 Grass Valley Hwy, Auburn CA (530) 798-0215 www.FoothillsHotProperties.com	VFW Ladies Auxiliary Post 2003 P.O. Box 1213 Colfax, CA 95713 President: (530) 636-4242

Join the Colfax Area Historical Society

We invite you to join the CAHS and support the work of the Society. You will receive the *Colfax Cobblestones* four times a year by mail. Each issue includes articles and photos about local history. Memberships are for one year, from July–June. **Memberships begin on July 1.**

To join the Colfax Area Historical Society, fill out this form and mail it with a check to: **CAHS, PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.**

Your subscription will begin with the next quarterly issue.

Name _____

Address _____

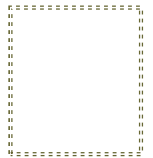
Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

- ☐ **\$20 Individual membership** (one person)
- ☐ **\$25 Family membership** (including children)
- ☐ **\$35 Business or Non-Profit Organization** (includes an ad in each issue of *Colfax Cobblestones*)



“WEIMAR JOINT SANATORIUM—This well-staffed, 550-bed tubercular sanatorium, located on Highway 40 near Auburn, accommodates cases in all stages for stages for 15 Northern California counties.” This undated photo and caption were printed on a postcard published for W. C. Spangler News Agency, Sacramento, California.



The Colfax Area Historical Society

PO Box 185

Colfax CA 95713

Phone: (530) 346-8599

Email: museum.colfax@gmail.com

USPS mail: Mail for both the Colfax Area Heritage Museum and the Colfax Area Historical Society is received at PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.

Museum location: The Colfax Area Heritage Museum is physically located at 99 Railroad St, Colfax CA 95713