Illinoistown's residents did not rename their town as "Colfax"

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Summary: Illinoistown, California, 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. After Colfax was established in 1865, Illinoistown continued to exist as a separate community a couple of miles away from Colfax.

Colfax was a new town created near Illinoistown

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:

- 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.

- The first known mention of the town name Colfax was in the July 19, 1865, *Sacramento Union*.

- 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 transcontinental 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 stagecoach, 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.

Why this position paper was written

This paper was researched and written by Roger Staab at the request of the Colfax Area Historical Society board, in order to clarify how the town of Colfax was named and to identify and confirm the details using primary sources.