

# COLFAX COBBLESTONES

October 2019

Issue 31.3

[museum.colfax@gmail.com](mailto:museum.colfax@gmail.com)

[www.colfaxhistory.org](http://www.colfaxhistory.org)

[www.facebook.com/colfaxmuseum](http://www.facebook.com/colfaxmuseum)

(530) 346-8599

## Colfax's Much-Traveled Freight Depot

By Roger Staab



Central Pacific passenger depot and long freight shed parallel to Main St. businesses, circa 1866.

This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1869 completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad. Colfax has played a major role in the

construction and operation of the railroad since the town was established in 1865. This article is about the much-traveled Colfax Freight Depot,

currently located on North Main Street across from downtown businesses.

Did you know this is the third location for this building?

Our story starts in September 1865, when Central Pacific (CP) tracks reached Colfax on their way to meeting Union Pacific (UP) tracks at Promontory Summit in Utah Territory. Colfax quickly became a major freight distribution point for surrounding mining camps and for railroad construction over Donner Summit. To accommodate the freight deliveries and construction supplies, Central Pacific built a 700-foot-long freight shed parallel to

Main Street, extending from Depot Street past Grass Valley Street. The original passenger depot was located across the tracks from the freight shed at Depot Street.

The Nevada County Narrow Gauge (NCNG) railroad opened for business between Colfax and Grass Valley/Nevada City in 1876.

In 1881 Central Pacific replaced a portion of the freight shed with a new freight depot, the same building that exists in Colfax today, but when built it was located parallel to Main Street where the caboose and U.S. Bank are today and still blocking Grass Valley Street.



The 1881 CP Freight Depot replaced a portion of the old freight shed at Main and Grass Valley Streets.

In 1882 a long transfer shed was added at the eastbound end of the freight depot to transfer

cargo from standard gauge cars to NCNG cars. The layout worked well for several years, but there was



a problem. The NCNG tracks came into town on the far side of the CP tracks and passenger depot. In order to reach the freight depot and transfer shed,

NCNG freight cars had to cross the CP mainline tracks. As rail traffic increased, this cross-traffic became a bottleneck.



NCNG freight cars can be seen (center) on the Main Street side of the narrow transfer shed at the near end of the freight depot, circa 1904.

By around 1900 the railroad was operating under the Southern Pacific (SP) name. In May 1905, the original passenger depot was destroyed by fire. SP already had plans for a new Colfax passenger depot and hastened its construction.

The SP passenger depot opened in November 1905 in its present location on Railroad Avenue. To eliminate the bottleneck mentioned above, SP moved the freight depot and transfer shed to the far side of the tracks, northeast of Grass Valley Street.

Join us on October 20 for a special program in the City Council Chambers with Robert S. Wells, author of a book about the 1874 shipwreck of Chinese emigrants. See page 7 for complete details.

Now NCNG cars did not have to cross the SP mainline tracks to transfer cargo, and Grass Valley Street became a railroad crossing.



The freight depot and new passenger depot were on the far side of SP tracks in this 1907 view, and Grass Valley Street crossed the tracks.

This arrangement worked well until SP decided to add a second track to and through Colfax. A larger railyard was also to be built, requiring longer straight sections of track.

Hillsides were removed at South Main Street and across the tracks from North Main Street, creating long straight tracks and sidings through town. Under the new alignment, the tracks no longer paralleled Main Street as they passed through town.

But this created a new problem – our freight depot was in the path of the new tracks and had to be moved once again. The resulting track alignment is what can be seen in Colfax today.

#### **Volunteering at the Museum or Chamber of Commerce**

The Colfax Heritage Museum and the Colfax Area Chamber of Commerce share the Colfax Passenger Depot at 99 Railroad St., Colfax, California.

- If interested in **volunteering at the museum**, call the museum at **(530) 346-8599**, send email to [museum.colfax@gmail.com](mailto:museum.colfax@gmail.com), or visit the museum and talk to the docents or Museum Director. More information about the museum is available online at [colfaxhistory.org](http://colfaxhistory.org).

- If interested in **volunteering at the Chamber**, call the Chamber at **(530) 346-8888**, send email to [colfaxareachamber@gmail.com](mailto:colfaxareachamber@gmail.com) or visit the Chamber and talk to the volunteers and Chamber of Commerce officers. More information about the Chamber is available online at [www.colfaxchamber.com](http://www.colfaxchamber.com).





The freight depot was in the path of the 1915 track realignment and had to be moved again.

In May 1915 the freight depot was moved to its present and third location for this durable and well-traveled building. The NCNG transfer shed was separated from the freight depot and relocated to the yard area beyond today's fruit sheds, where it continued to serve the NCNG until the line was dismantled in 1942.

The next time you look at the freight depot in its present location beside Main Street, give it a salute for enduring two major moves in its many years of service to Colfax and the transcontinental railroad.

**Note:** This article was previously published in the City of Colfax's monthly newsletter Colfax Connections, in July 2019.

***Roger Staab** is a well-known railroad historian and author. As a charter member and the historian of the Placer-Sierra Railroad Heritage Society (PSRHS), Roger has been collecting railroad images for 19 years.*

*Roger also serves on the Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) board as a member-at-large, and he is a volunteer at the CAHS Archives.*

*He is the author of a book about the Towle Brothers' logging, railroad, and family businesses, and he is the co-author, with Arthur Sommers, of the Arcadia book Railroads of Placer County.*



# An Opportunity to Be Part of Iowa Hill History

The Iowa Hill Community Cemetery, Inc., has an opening for the position of treasurer



The Iowa Hill Community Cemetery, Iowa Hill, California

By Robin Yonash

Would you like to make a big impact with a minimal time investment? Then the six other members of the Iowa Hill Community Cemetery Board of Directors invite you to join them as the Treasurer. This position requires only about five (5) hours a year and filling it will make an immense difference to the operation of the Cemetery.

Duties include attending two Board meetings a year (transportation from Colfax to Iowa Hill is available if needed) and presenting a Treasurer's Report, plus filing simple reports annually with four Government

entities. (Our taxes can be done with just two electronic postcards!) These activities occur between May and October.

Computer literacy, including basic Excel skills, and Internet access are essential. Residency in Iowa Hill is not necessary, although a connection to the community is of interest.

If you want to explore this opportunity, please contact our President, Tom McClure, at **916-616-9649** or email him at **iowahillcc@gmail.com**.

The Iowa Hill Community Cemetery is a 501(c)(13) charitable corporation. For more information on the historic Iowa Hill Community Cemetery, visit

our web site at [ihcemetery.weebly.com](http://ihcemetery.weebly.com).

*Robin Yonash, Secretary to the Board of the Iowa Hill Community Cemetery, is the author of three books on the history of Iowa Hill: Schools of the Iowa Hill Divide, Towns and People of the Iowa Hill Divide, and Gold and Fire: A History of the Iowa Hill Divide.*

*Signed copies of her books are available for purchase at the Colfax Heritage Museum (proceeds benefit the Colfax Area Historical Society); unsigned copies can be purchased on Amazon.*

## The tragic 1874 shipwreck of Chinese emigrants

# Join us on October 20 for a special speaker and book talk

Join us and other members of the community to hear the story of the tragic 1874 shipwreck of Chinese emigrants returning home to China after working in the United States as laborers on the railroads, in mines, and in agriculture.

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**Sunday, October 20, 2019, 2 p.m.**

Colfax City Hall  
City Council Chambers  
33 South Main Street  
Colfax, CA 95713

There is no cost to attend

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Author Robert S. Wells will share the story about some of the Chinese emigrants who crossed the Pacific Ocean from 1867-1875 arriving in San Francisco and Colfax, California, to work as laborers.

The return of one group to Hong Kong by ship in 1874 ended tragically in a midnight fire and shipwreck in the South China Sea, just hours before the Chinese emigrants were to arrive in China to rejoin their families after years away.

Their ship, the SS Japan, was the world's largest wooden passenger vessel. Some of the passengers could not reach the lifeboats because of the fire. Almost 400 of the Chinese passengers perished. Some of

them drowned when they jumped into the sea, dragged down by the weight of their money belts, which contained the gold they had earned in the United States.

The speaker, Robert S. Wells, is the author of *Voices from the Bottom of the South China Sea: The Untold Story of America's Largest Chinese Emigrant Disaster*. He wrote this book using recently-discovered records of the event. Mr. Wells also describes this story as being about "the beginnings of the modern U.S. and China relationship."

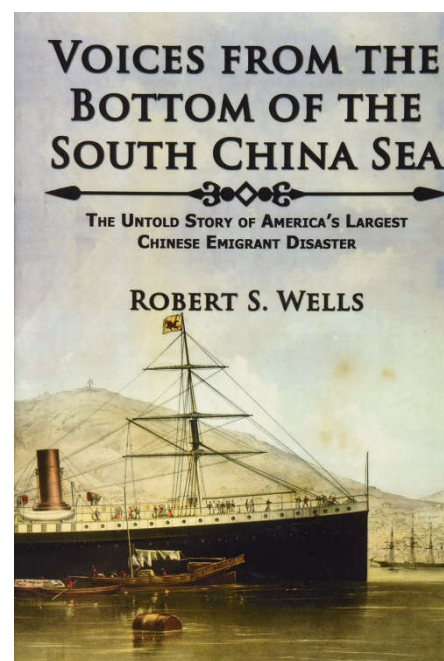
Mr. Wells is a retired U.S. Navy Captain with a distinguished 30-year naval service career. He served in the Clinton and Bush (43) Administrations. His most recent White House experience included three years on Vice President Dick Cheney's National Security Affairs staff as Special Advisor.

Mr. Wells has written and spoken frequently about national security and foreign policy issues in national and local media.

More information about the author and his book is on his web site, [southchinavoices.com](http://southchinavoices.com), and on his Facebook page, [facebook.com/southchinavoices](https://facebook.com/southchinavoices)



Robert S. Wells, author of *Voices from the Bottom of the South China Sea*



*This special event was organized by Marnie Mendoza, Colfax Mayor Pro Tem.*



## How to Contact Us

There are four ways to contact the Colfax Area Historical Society and the Colfax Heritage Museum.

- Call us: **(530) 346-8599**
- Send us an email: **[museum.colfax@gmail.com](mailto:museum.colfax@gmail.com)**
- Send us USPS mail: Mail for both the Colfax Heritage Museum and the Colfax Area Historical Society is received at PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.
- Drop in at the museum: The Colfax Heritage Museum is physically located at 99 Railroad St, Colfax CA 95713. It is open Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

## Web Site and Facebook Page

Our web site is at **[colfaxhistory.org](http://colfaxhistory.org)**. It has information about the Historical Society and the Museum, including resources for historical and genealogical research.

We have updated the web site to make it easier to read on phones and tablets.

Our Facebook page focuses on news and events about the Historical Society and the Museum. It is at **[facebook.com/colfaxmuseum](https://facebook.com/colfaxmuseum)**

*Colfax Cobbles* is published quarterly by the Colfax Area Historical Society.

**A subscription is part of your membership.**  
Membership information is on page 9.

**If your membership has expired**, this will be the last issue of *Colfax Cobbles* that you receive. To renew your membership, fill out and return the form on page 9 with your check.

## Museum and Archives

The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Heritage Museum (CHM) 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 CHM have an Archives Room that is currently open to the public by appointment.

The Museum and the Archives collections include:

- Physical items, such as Chinese ceramics and baskets
- Period clothing from 1800 to 1940
- Local WWII memorabilia
- Historical books and other literature
- Maps and pictures of the Colfax area and of many of the railroads
- The Grace Hubley Jones Photographic Collection

To schedule an appointment please call the Colfax Heritage Museum at **(530) 346-8599**.

## CAHS Officers

**President:** Jay MacIntyre

**Vice President:** Dirk Gifford

**Treasurer:** Barbara Kelly

**Recording Secretary:** Joann Geist

**Membership Chair:** Chris Miller

**Corresponding Secretary:** *Not currently filled*

**Archives Director:** Swend Miller

**Museum Director:** Chris Miller

**Member-At-Large:** Roger Staab

***Colfax Cobbles* Editor:** Dirk Gifford

**Webmaster:** Dirk Gifford



# Local Businesses and Organizations That Support CAHS

The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Heritage Museum (CHM) 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.

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

## Join the Colfax Area Historical Society

Join the CAHS and support the work of the Society and the Colfax Heritage Museum. You will receive the *Colfax Cobblestones* newsletter four times a year

by mail. Memberships are for one year, from July–June. **Memberships begin on July 1 and end on June 30 of the following year.**

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 \_\_\_\_\_

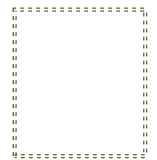
Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

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



Irene Allen (left, behind the counter) and Rick Hatala (in a bowler hat, behind the counter) were two of the many volunteers who worked in the Colfax Heritage Museum September 28-29, during Colfax's 2019 Railroad Days.



**The Colfax Area Historical Society**  
PO Box 185  
Colfax CA 95713

**Phone:** (530) 346-8599

**Email:** [museum.colfax@gmail.com](mailto: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 Heritage Museum is physically located at 99 Railroad St, Colfax CA 95713