

**NOTABLE PEOPLE OF MILPITAS & WARM SPRINGS**

**Henry Curtner: Rags to Riches, A Hoosier Comes West in 1852**



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#### WHO IS HE?

Henry Curtner had a significant role in Milpitas, Warm Springs (Fremont) and San Jose history. Honoring him in Milpitas is the Curtner Elementary School (seventh of our lower-grade schools after the closure of the 1916 Milpitas Grammar School in 1956). Also, two streets are named for him: Curtner Drive in the Sunnyhills neighborhood and Curtner Avenue in San Jose on which the Oak Hills Memorial Cemetery is located, where many Santa Clara County pioneers are buried, including Curtner with his three wives. Where did Henry come from and what did he do here that makes him notable?



#### HIS ROOTS

Henry Curtner was born on January 17, 1830 in Fountain County in western Indiana. His father was Jacob Curtner, and Henry was the fifth and last child of Nancy Heaton, Jacob's first wife who passed away in 1843.

Henry was barely a teenager when he became an orphan (likely at the time of his mother's death). His older sisters and brothers had started a life of their own by then. His life abruptly changed at an early age.

Henry's education ended prematurely, which in any case would have been very poor in the early American frontier. School books were rare and most other supplies often inadequate. He started work felling trees for a farmer for a very small wage, the promise of a new suit and three months of education (cash was hard to get in those days, so pay often came in other forms). From that agreement he was only paid a pittance of money, offer of a second-hand suit and no schooling at all. Henry left for another job with another farmer doing the same wielding of an axe. For frontier farmers, lumber was a critical commodity to build their homes barns, and fences, so this type of work was plentiful, but it provided little income, especially for an exploitable youth.

He eventually became a towboy and boat driver on the Wabash and Erie Canal, which connected Lake Erie to the Ohio River via the Wabash River. The Wabash forms the western boundary of Fountain County in west-central Indiana where Henry Curtner was born, and the river continues south separating Illinois from Indiana, ending at the Ohio River and Kentucky.

Even with the seemingly better job as a towboy, Henry's pay primarily was food and lodging. Life in the 1800s generally was a hardship that motivated people to make radical choices.



*A canal boat being towed by horses controlled by a "towboy." Canals were an important innovation in the movement of freight and passengers. Canal boats could transport more weight and people than wagons, and roads were unusable during periods of the heavy rain or snow. They functioned like scows on shallow creeks in the West.*



In 1852, Henry spent what savings he had accumulated to buy boat passage from New York to San Francisco via Panama. Like many others, he had heard the alluring siren call of California's gold. But then again, maybe not.

### **CURTNER ARRIVES IN CALIFORNIA**

Research has revealed that there are conflicting stories about Henry Curtner's arrival in California with only \$20 in his pocket. One is that he immediately struck out for the gold fields, which fits the popular narrative of the incoming horde of people seeking quick riches. In this case, that popular version is probably not accurate.

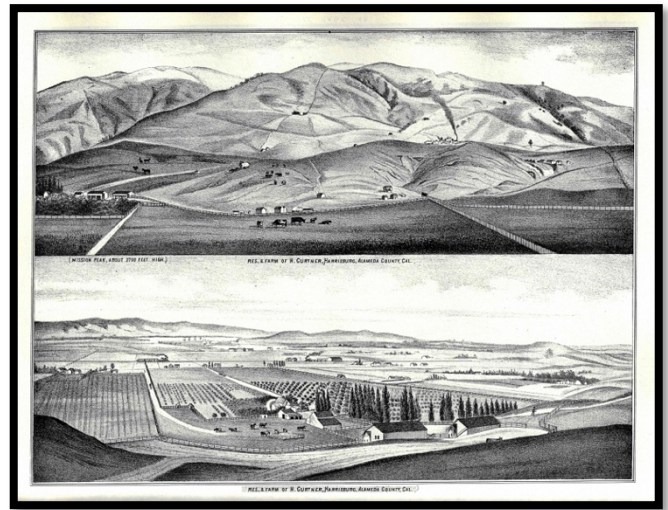
The more believable story is that Henry arrived shoeless and shabbily dressed, and with that \$20 he bought a pair of blankets and a stagecoach ticket to Mission San José, from which he was taken to work in Alvarado on a potato ranch co-owned by Elias Lyman Beard and a partner. The job had been pre-arranged with a contract before Henry left Indiana. He managed to get to New York by his own means and the ship passage from there to California most likely was prepaid.

Curtner worked hard to earn enough money to buy out his contract early, and by 1854 he was renting land from Beard to farm for himself. In 1857 he returned to Indiana, but not to stay; he married Lydia Ann Kendall, after which they returned to California to start a new life.

### **ESTABLISHING A FOOTHOLD**

In Fall of 1857, the newlyweds arrived in Alameda County and Henry purchased his first foothold of fifty acres of farmland between Alvarado and Centerville (before they formed the northern portion of today's Fremont). His industriousness was forged in his early Indiana years and he was determined to be successful in this new effort. For ten and a half years, Henry and Lydia lived, worked, and had their first five children there (William Morrison Curtner was one of them).

In the Spring of 1868, now more prosperous after a decade of hard work, the Curtners relocated south to Harrisburg in Warm Springs where they would live for the remainder of their lives. Lydia would have three more children before her early death in December of 1877.



*The Curtner Ranches as they appeared in 1878 with Mission Peak in the background. (Source: The Historical Atlas Map of Alameda County, published by Thompson & West, 1878)*



*In 1879 Henry Curtner built this Italianate mansion with seventeen rooms that still stands today on Wabana Common near Gable Drive in southern Fremont. The victim of development, it is completely encircled with homes built in more recent years. (Photograph by Joseph Ehardt, December 2022)*

## EXPANSION INTO A VAST EMPIRE

In his move to Warm Springs, Curtner bought almost 2,000 acres that were originally part of the 4,400-acre 1821 Rancho Los Tularcitos land grant of José Loreto Higuera. It was Valentin Higuera, second son of José, who sold 295 acres of his inheritance of the Rancho to Clemente Columbet in 1859. This section of land included the Higuera Adobe that Columbet purchased to create a hotel and gambling casino complex, but the venture failed. All of this would later become Curtner's property.

As a major landowner, Curtner would need to employ many workers. Mindful of his own difficult start in life, he would go down to the docks when ships arrived and ask passengers if anyone needed a job. He would offer them a fair wage, and if they were good workers and later wanted to start out on their own, as Beard did with him, he would offer them a piece from his major land holdings to start their own farm. He helped others succeed as well. He paid it forward.



In 1870, Henry Curtner bought into an ongoing 1866 business (William Fresh Downing and a Mr. Alexander were partners) that purchased cattle in Utah and drove them to markets in Nevada and California. In 1868 this operation morphed into a stock-raising ranch in Elko, Nevada. and Curtner bought out Alexander's share giving birth to the Downing and Curtner Company. It was Downing who managed operations of the ranch until 1881, after which

Downing and Curtner dissolved their partnership.



*"Cattle Drive," a painting by Joe Ferrara (1932-2004). The high-desert counties in Nevada such as Elko were ideal for stock raising. The best use of land was to grow crops in fertile Santa Clara County and use Nevada for open-range grazing of herds.*

Curtner was president of yet another partnership with another Milpitan, George Abel, which was known as the Milpitas Land and Live Stock Company. It owned 8,000 head of cattle, 800 horses, and 7,000 sheep on a 32,000-acre tract of land in Humboldt County, Nevada.

During his lifetime Curtner would buy about 8,000 acres of land in Alameda and Santa Clara Counties.

## THE LEGACY OF HENRY CURTNER

Although he never sought elective office, he was a public citizen who established the Irvington Seminary and supported schools and poor widows. He bequested \$30,000 to home benevolences, \$30,000 to the Pratt Home, \$20,000 to San Anselmo Orphanage, \$6,000 to Oakland Orphanage (to make it debt free), and \$5,000 to the California Pioneers of Santa Clara County for a building (to name only some of Curtner's charitable deeds).

During his life of 87 years, Henry Curtner would marry three wives (Lydia Ann Kendall, Mary A. Myers, and Lucy M. Latham) and have eleven children. He would die on November 1, 1917 in Warm Springs and be buried in Oak Hill Memorial Cemetery together with his wives and his twin sons, Howard ( 1859-1861) and Samuel (1859-1905).

*Written by Joseph Ehardt, Milpitas Historical Society,  
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### **Our Society's Contact Information**

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