

# KNIGHTS FERRY, Stanislaus County, CALIFORNIA

By

Gary B. Speck

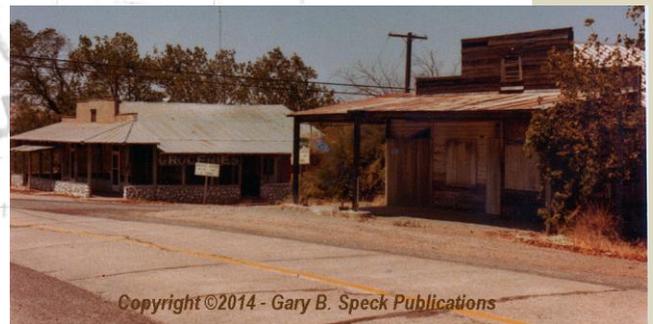
**JUST NINE DAYS** after James Marshall discovered a pea-sized gold nugget in the tailrace of a sawmill he was building for Johann Augustus Sutter in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, and well before that world-changing find was made public, the Mexican-American War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. California and much of the present southwest officially came under American control. Congress then went to work to decide the future of all this new land they now had jurisdiction over.

While debates raged as to whether these future territories and possibly states would be slave or free, the whole debate took on an urgent tone when word of the gold discovery hit the main population centers of the United States. "Gold in California!" lit the fire of excitement to where few cared what California's official status was or would be. No one cared if it was unorganized territory, or a state, "OUR" gold had to be safeguarded. To do so, Congress worked with amazing speed (for them) and on September 9, 1850, California became the 31<sup>st</sup> state.

Along with the miners flocking into this unknown land were the entrepreneurs and others seeking to capitalize on the wealth suddenly flowing from the ground. One of the thousands of bright-eyed dreamers was William Knight, a man with a strong sense of adventure. He had actually come to the

future California a half decade before the gold rush got started, thus giving him a leg up on most of the new arrivals. He originally settled along the Sacramento River north of Sutter's Fort around 1843, establishing a ferry crossing on the west side of that major watercourse.

In 1849, he relocated to a spot along the north side of the Stanislaus River, southeast of Sacramento, where the road between Stockton and Sonora crossed that temperamental Western Sierra river. He and a partner named James Vantine then established a ferry crossing, hotel and general store. Their ferry was built from an old whaling boat and was dragged across the river by a heavy cable. The location of Knight's Ferry was a good one, netting the owners up to \$500 a day in receipts. While river-crossers waited for the ferry, a cluster of businesses grew up on the west side of the crossing. Here travelers could seek their rest, swill liquid refreshment or find a meal.



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Knight became the first interment in the Knights Ferry Cemetery when he was murdered on November 9, 1849. Vantine continued the enterprise, bringing in new partners - John C. and Lewis Dent, brothers of Julia Boggs Dent, who had just married a young 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, 1843 West Point graduate named Ulysses Simpson Grant. In 1852, 1853 and 1854, Grant and his wife visited her brothers in Knights Ferry, giving the little town a minor claim to fame.



Dent House - HABS photo 1930s

Vantine and the Dent brothers replaced the whaleboat with a larger ferry and also built a restaurant and boarding house. They decreased the ferry toll to stimulate more business, laid out a formal town and directing its growth. Somewhere around this time, Vantine disappears from the historical record.

About this same time David Locke arrived in Knights Ferry. He wanted to build a sawmill on the north bank of the river just upstream from the town. The Dents funded his operation and in June of 1854 the sawmill was operational. A few months later, in October, the Stanislaus Flour Mill had been added to the complex. A wooden diversion dam was built to funnel water to the mills and a large brick



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warehouse was built adjacent to and just above the mill.

As the gold rush began winding down in late 1856, the road still drew travelers and commerce, but not to the extent it did during the main years of the rush. David Locke bought out the Dents, scrapped the ferry and built a bridge. It opened in early 1857, stimulated the local economy as there were no more waits for the ferry. By 1859, Knights Ferry consisted of: two attorneys, a band, a blacksmith, bookstore, boot and shoe store, clothing store, express office, furniture store, four general stores, three hotels, IOOF Lodge (est 1870), Masonic Lodge (#112), a saddle shop, saloon, school, tin shop and others.

In September 1859, W. J. Collier began publication of the first newspaper in Stanislaus County, the weekly *Knights Ferry Bee*, but it shut down 14 months later. Knights Ferry putted along until January 1862, when warm rains melted the heavy mountain snowpack in the mountains to the east. Unprecedented flooding occurred throughout the state, especially along the Western Sierra rivers that fed into the Central Valley. Knights Ferry lost numerous buildings, including Locke's Mill complex. However as the warehouse was just a little higher, it was spared destruction. The Knights Ferry Bridge held firm with water reaching the bottom of the span. Upstream, another bridge broke loose and washed down, crashing into the Knights Ferry Bridge. The scattering pieces of both disappeared into the raging torrent and ended up way downstream with remnants of other flotsam.

No sooner had the rampaging rivers turned the San Joaquin Valley flatlands into an inland sea, than rebuilding began. At Knights Ferry, the mill was rebuilt of pink and brown Ione Sandstone, granite and river cobbles by an English stonemason named Thomas Vinson. The stone was quarried from the local hills, as well as granite and river cobbles. Vinson also built a stone dam

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upstream to divert water into the wheels that powered the five sets of four foot diameter millstones imported from Belgium by new mill owner David Tulloch. David Locke replaced the original bridge with a 379' long covered toll bridge. Still standing, this is the longest covered bridge remaining west of the Mississippi River. Most sources credit the length at 330', but according to the 2011 Historic American Engineering Record drawing, it is 378' 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " long.

The town of Knights Ferry also suffered damage, but didn't die. However, just a few months later, in September 1862, an election was held to determine the fate of the Stanislaus County seat in nearby LaGrange. By a vote of 422 to 383, the seat of county government was shifted from LaGrange to Knights Ferry, an honor it held for nine years, until being outvoted 893 to 340 to the upstart railroad town of Modesto in September 1871.

David Locke operated the bridge until 1868, when he sold it to Thomas Edwards. Edwards continued to operate it until 1885, when the county took over, turning it into a fee-free crossing.

A decade later, electricity was becoming more utilized, and in July 1895, the Stanislaus Milling and Power Company incorporated, installing a 600 KW electrical generating plant on the west side of the Tulloch Mill. David's son, Charles now owned the complex and in 1899 he finally shut down the flour mill, selling the machinery to a mill in Oakdale. Water was diverted from the river into a pipe that fed an overhead penstock powering the generator. The generated electricity flowed as far as the City of Modesto. In 1902, Tulloch built the eight foot high, 300 foot long mortared rock Tulloch Dam some six miles upriver to increase the water supply, which in turn increased electrical generation capability.

Time passed and competition from larger purveyors of electricity took their toll. The town of Knights Ferry faded and in 1909 Tulloch sold out.

The bridge remained open, still operated by the county as a free bridge.

Today's Knights Ferry is a tiny, historical mapdot that is immensely popular for river rafters, who utilize the large parking area between the town and the restored bridge as a river access point. Just to the east (upstream) of town the 150 year old bridge still stands firm, restored and now closed to all motor vehicle traffic. The quiet streets of town reek of history. Some of the highlights include: the oldest continuously operating general store in the state (since 1852), the wood-frame Dent house (built in 1851), the stone Abraham Schell house (1856), the clapboard Masonic Hall (1870), the restored (1998) wooden 1871 firehouse, wooden IOOF Hall, the 1860s-vintage Miller's Saloon and the Knight's Ferry Community Church (formerly the Methodist-Episcopal Church). The latter is a relative newcomer having been constructed in 1890, as a replacement for an 1860 structure.

Just east of the town is the big draw - the bridge, mill office and mill ruins.

At the time of our visit in June 2012, the parking lot bustled with river-rafting groups and was nearly full. My hopes for a peaceful visit on this quiet, warm, first Sunday morning in summer visit were nearly dashed, but as we walked to the mill ruin, I saw that all the vehicles belonged to rafters, and we had the ruins and bridge nearly to ourselves.

The conjoined, roofless ruins of the old mill/power-generating station and warehouse hunched over the calm, quiet Stanislaus River, like a long forgotten medieval fortress or castle towering above its moat. Just to the northeast of the warehouse ruin across the street, the restored mill office stood guard over the ruins. Just below, and humping over the lazy Stanislaus River, was the covered bridge. Sitting high on its rock abutments and lording over the ruins, this

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nearly forgotten relic of California History is one of only a few covered bridges remaining in the Golden State. It has been restored and is well worth a visit.

The roofless, rock mill and warehouse ruins have been stabilized, but because they are pretty much open to the public, they have been slightly vandalized. Wandering about, it is easy to imagine what this important spot looked like while it was in operation. Knights Ferry is a wonderful, forgotten ghost, AND a worthy destination for all seekers of Ghost Town USA!

This was our **Ghost Town of the Month** for November 2014

## LOCATION:

SITE NAME	ELEV.	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	TOWNSHIP/RANGE
Covered Bridge		37.8196919 37° 49' 11" N	-120.6638238 120° 39' 50" W	SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 28, T1S, R12E, MDM (Mount Diablo Meridian & Base Line)
Knights Ferry (town)	213'	37.8196499 37° 49' 11" N	-120.6721494 120° 40' 20" W	E-Ctr Sec 29, T1S, R12E, MDM
Knights Landing (Yolo Co.)	36'	38.8018459 38° 48' 07" N	-121.7180192 121° 43' 05" W	Sec 14, T11N, R2E, MDM
Mill / Warehouse Building		37.8200818 37° 49' 12" N	-120.6649203 120° 39' 54" W	SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 28, T1S, R12E, MDM
Miller's House		37.8204632 37° 49' 14" N	-120.6644804 120° 39' 52" W	SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec 28, T1S, R12E, MDM

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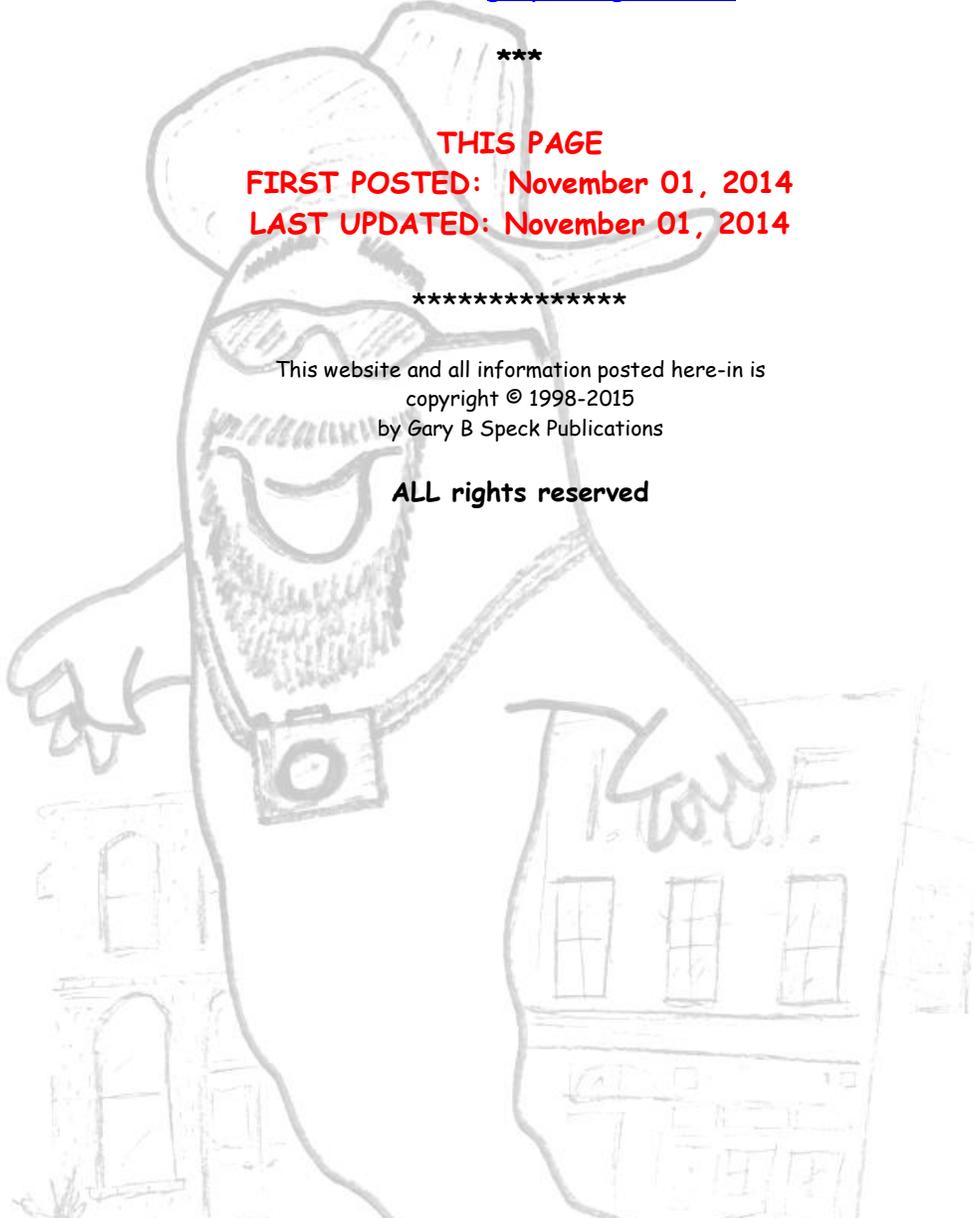
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