

A tale of two junctions: the birthing of Niles, 4 June 1869 to 28 April 1870

by Victor K. Wong, <vkw@umich.edu>, December 2020



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for the preservation of the history of Fremont, Newark, and Union City
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A tale of two junctions: the birthing of Niles, 4 June 1869 to 28 April 1870

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Junction in the canyon

Fresh from the golden spike ceremony at Promontory Summit, where he cheered and toasted the Chinese railroad foreman and workers for their monumental contributions to the construction of Central Pacific's portion of the first transcontinental railroad, James Harvey Strobridge boarded the steamer *Yosemite* at Sacramento on 4 June 1869 with some men, horses, grading and camp tools. They were headed to San Francisco to construct a new railroad in Alameda County, from a point in the canyon one mile east of Vallejo's Mills to the designated western terminus at Oakland.

At the request of Samuel S. Montague, Chief Engineer of the Central Pacific, Alfred A. Cohen obtained a one-year lease of Vallejo's Mill and consent from Mill's owner, José de Jesús Vallejo, to shut down the Mill and tear out its flume, which carried water from Alameda Creek to power the Mill, in order to construct the new railroad. The new rail line, starting at a yet-to-be-built junction in the canyon on the old Western Pacific line about a mile upstream from Vallejo's Mill, generally followed the line of the old flume. Upon arrival, Strobridge and his Chinese work gang, which swelled to 500 strong, began to grade the new line, and the flume was rebuilt on the lower side of and about parallel with the new railroad line.

This first junction, started in June 1869, was in the canyon, about 100 yards above the eastern end of the first bridge over Alameda Creek, on the old Western Pacific line completed in October 1866, which led south to San José. Consequently the junction was known as the "San José junction", and the stop there was called Vallejo's Mills after the closest landmark, the Mills, even though it was about a mile away in the valley. From the junction in the canyon, the new rail line ran westward along the Creek's north side, hugging the hillsides, with a gentle sweep above the Mills into the valley, then northwesterly to Alameda/Oakland.

Three months later, the San José junction became operational with much ado, when the historic first through train from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay stopped there on **6 September 1869**. The *Daily Alta California* described the train as consisting of "*three locomotives and twelve first-class cars. One train switched off at Vallejo's Mills, and went on to San José and Gilroy...*". According to Robert Ford (*Red trains in the East Bay*, 1977), Gov. Leland Stanford and Alfred A. Cohen were on the main train that continued on to Alameda wharf (and via ferry to San Francisco) -- thus inaugurating the first transcontinental railroad to the Pacific coast.²

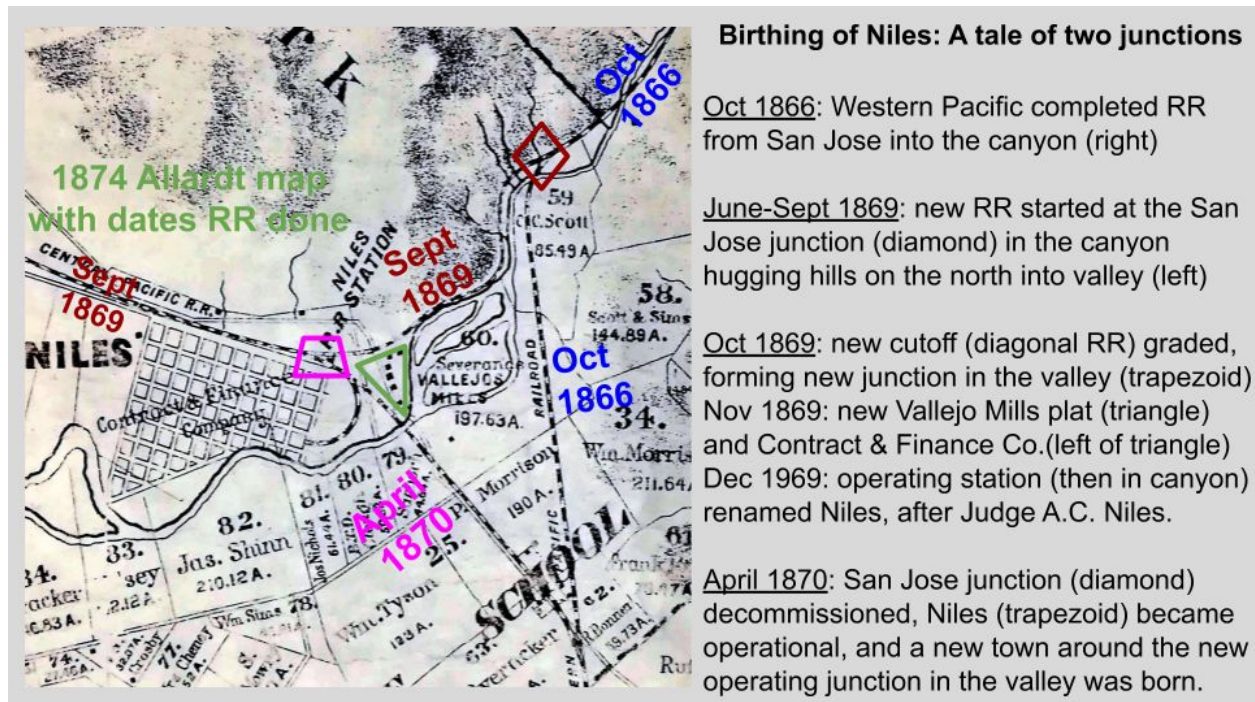
¹This story of the beginnings of Niles emerged after months of searching and re-searching during the pandemic.

²For further details, see "*A brief tale of three Chinese gangs (1865-1869)*", Victor K. Wong, December 2020, which is available on the website of the Washington Township Museum of Local History.

Junction in the valley

Because the San José Junction was in the canyon, the confinement made some operations impossible, like turning a locomotive around. The railroad solved this problem by building a second junction in the valley a mile away. While the San José junction had a memorable beginning, the second junction elicited hardly a mention. (We don't know yet who the contractor was nor how large the Chinese work gang was.)

But it was heralded in the 25 July 1869 *Daily Alta California*, revealing a junction in the valley west of the Mills: "Vallejo's Mills stand in a Y [lying on its left side] formed by the branch running to San Jose and that towards Oakland and San Francisco. This Y will be converted to a triangle by the construction, at an early day, of a short track from one road to the other, westward of the mills." (See map.)



1874 Allardt Map, courtesy of Washington Township Museum of Local History, with dates railroads were completed. Timeline on the right summarizes the events leading up to the beginnings of Niles.

With the immense interest garnered by the first transcontinental train to the Pacific coast in September 1869, it wasn't until October 14th that some words came out in the *Alameda Gazette* about the short track from one road to the other: "The grading of the road between the two tracks at Vallejo's Mills is finished. The bridge across the [Alameda] creek is being constructed... Two express trains will run daily each way, from San Jose and Oakland." By then it became apparent to some that the long-term potential of a new junction in Alameda valley could be immense.

On 3 November 1869, Plutarco Vallejo -- a mining engineer, graduate of Santa Clara College, and son of J.J. Vallejo -- recorded the Vallejo Mills subdivision as the plat of 23 lots laid out by surveyor Luis Castro on a small triangular piece of land that included the Mills, adjacent to and east of the new junction. That same month, Contract & Finance Company, a Central Pacific subsidiary, purchased a quarter section of land, to be platted later, adjacent to and west of the same junction. (See map above)

Meanwhile,³ Central Pacific renamed the Vallejo Mills station at the San José junction in the canyon as "Niles", after Nevada County judge and Central Pacific supporter, Addison C. Niles. This new name appeared in the 3 December 1869 *Daily Alta California*.

On 6 January 1870, the Sacramento *Daily Union* reported that the second junction, adjacent to Vallejo's Mills, was nearly completed. But several months had to pass before Central Pacific was ready to make the switchover. In contrast to the San José junction which became operational with the celebrated inauguration of the first Pacific railroad, the *Daily Alta California* published only a brief notice on **28 April 1870**:⁴

"The station known heretofore as "San José Junction," will no longer be a stopping place for the trains either way. Passengers for San José will change cars at Niles."

Quietly without fanfare, the second junction "Niles" became operational, the San José junction in the canyon was decommissioned, and most importantly a new town adjacent to the newly operating junction in Alameda valley was born.

³ Probably between the opening date of the Western Pacific Railroad from Sacramento to Oakland, 8 November 1869, and 3 December 1869, the earliest use of the name "Niles Junction" found in *Daily Alta California*.

⁴A similarly brief notice of the switchover appeared in the San José *Mercury News* on the day after.