

Two Courthouses of Alvarado

Historical research and analysis into two different photographs of
the Alameda County Courthouse building in Alvarado.

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Introduction

In his history book of Union City, Dr. Robert Fisher has two photographs of the first County Courthouse of Alameda County. The two photographs look to show different buildings for the Courthouse and different buildings next to the Courthouse. Dr. Fisher lists a number of reasons to explain the differences between the two photographs. I have reviewed them and I can't say for sure that they are the same buildings and have a few questions. It is my contention that they are not the same building.

Dr. Robert Fisher was the founder of Mission Peak Heritage Guild and prior to that, a member of the Washington Township Historical Society. Dr. Fisher was a long time doctor in Fremont and an amateur historian of Washington Township. Dr. Fisher tirelessly collected old photographs, family papers, and other information about the history of Washington Township.

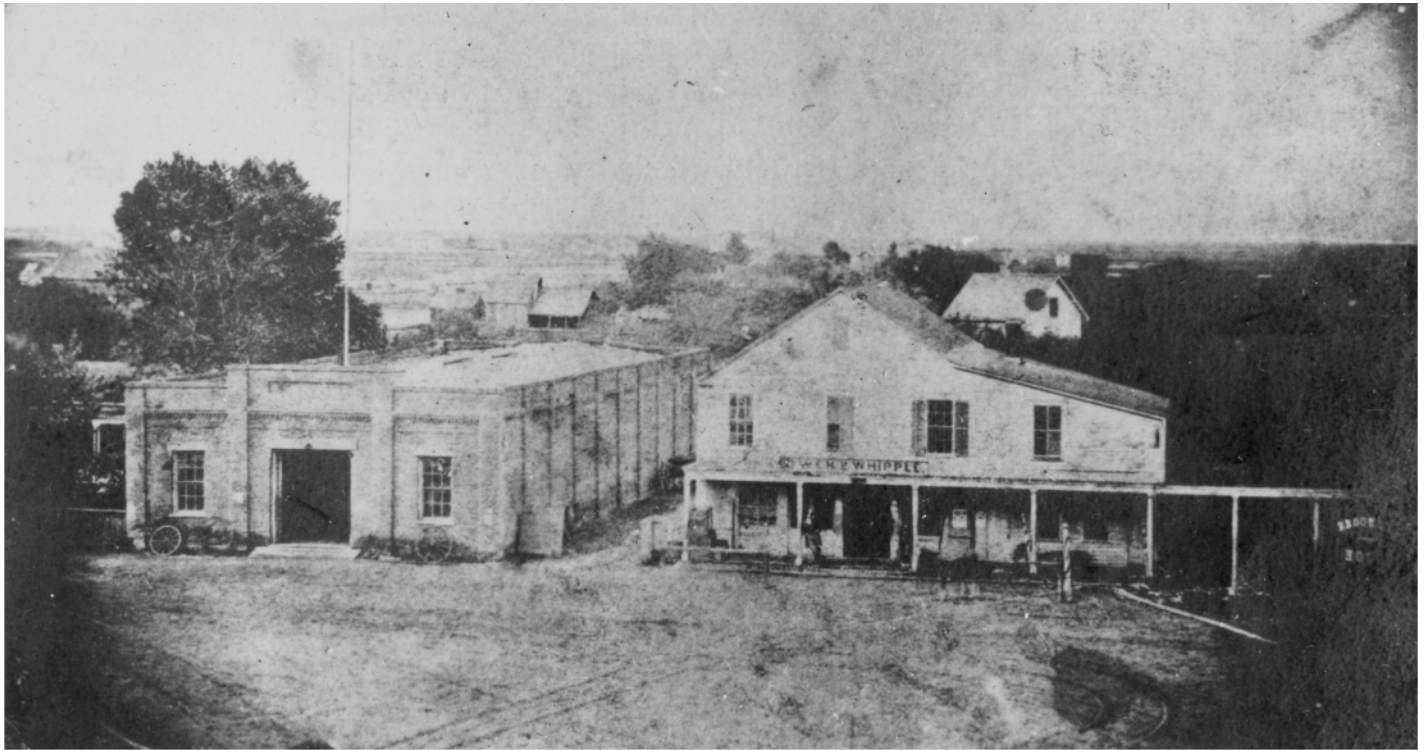
The Two Photographs

Photograph #1 shows the courthouse and a brick building to the left. The photograph was taken from upper floor of a building that is supposed to be Brooklyn Hotel (or Brooklyn House) because the sign is visible in the upper left corner of the photograph. The sign on the Courthouse looks to say "W E P N Whipple". The brick building has a number of wagon wheels out front and a rather large and tall doorway.

Photograph #2 shows the courthouse taken from ground level, with a different building to the left of the Courthouse. A little bit of the building on the left (SE side of the corner) is viewable. A building on the right (NE side of the corner) is also viewable, with another building viewable behind it.

To explain the differences between the two photographs, Dr. Fisher says "The old Smith-Church store has been modified and the adjacent brick warehouse destroyed by the 1868 earthquake. Proprietor Liston's Brooklyn Hotel sign just visible behind the corner store by the pole."

So, from the above we know that photograph #1 was supposed to have been taken before 1868. If the Brooklyn Hotel was at the NE corner of Smith and Levee Streets, then the Alvarado Hotel must have replaced it, because it now stands at the same spot. In the "Primary Historic Resources - Union City" written by Dr. Fisher and published by the Mission Peak Heritage Foundation, the location of the Brooklyn Hotel is placed at the NE corner of Smith Street and Union City Blvd, the same place the Alvarado Hotel building now resides.



Photograph #1



Photograph #2

The Facts:

County Courthouse

The Courthouse was built about 1852. Most sources say that the building was built by August M. Church and that it was later purchased by Henry C. Smith. One source alludes that the men were in business together when it was built. In 1853, the upstairs of the building became the first Courthouse for Alameda County. In 1857, the Courthouse and County seat was moved to San Leandro. In 1859, Charlotte Cornell wrote in her autobiography that her and her husband, Chauncy Cornell, moved from Mission San Jose to Alvarado, purchased the courthouse building, and "fitted it up for a store and dwelling." The 1860 Census lists Cornell as a Merchant. The 1870 Census does not list any Cornell family, so they had moved by 1870. In 1883, Woods says that the store was now the establishment of M. J. Peach. In 1890, the Courthouse lost in a fire.

Brooklyn Hotel

The Brooklyn Hotel (or House) was built before 1855 "at Union City". An advertisement from 1857 listed the hotel as having eighteen rooms. The advertisement listed the hotel for rent (meaning a new hotel keeper). In an 1867 Alvarado business directory O. P. Fuller was listed as the manager of the hotel. A business directory in 1876 listed William Liston the proprietor. The biography of William Liston (Woods, 1883) said that in 1861 he "opened the Brooklyn House on the ground where he is now located". Since we know that the hotel existed at least as early as 1855, maybe the biography meant that he took over the hotel at that time. An article in the Oakland Tribune from May 20, 1876, said that William Liston has sold the Brooklyn Hotel. The last mention of the Brooklyn Hotel in newspapers was also in 1876.

Earthquake of 1868

The earthquake of 1868 was the last large earthquake on the Hayward Fault. Damage in Alvarado from the earthquake was described in the "History of Washington Township" as "knocking down the large brick building and all of the chimneys, wrecking Stokes' store and crushing the bridge together so that it was impassable." The Centennial Yearbook of Alameda County had this to say, "In Alvarado the brick shop of A. J. Lattin was entirely destroyed. The store of J. J. Stokes was damaged, with great loss of goods."

Alvarado Hotel

The Alvarado Hotel is first mentioned in newspaper reports in 1891, when it was sold to new owners. The 1883 Sanborn map shows the Alvarado hotel.

The Analysis:

Courthouse

Photograph #1 clearly shows the name "Whipple" on the front of the building. It is unclear what the other letters mean. If the photograph was taken before 1868, this would mean that Whipple would have to be associated with the building before 1868. A book of Alameda County biographies, written in 1883, says that Henry Smith moved to Nevada in 1861. The question is, did Cornell buy the courthouse directly from Henry Smith. This looks to be likely. If Whipple did own the courthouse, it could have been before 1868, since it is unclear when, before 1870, the Cornell's sold the business.

The Brooklyn Hotel

All descriptions of the Brooklyn Hotel say that it was built in Union City. I interpret this as meaning that it was built on the land originally purchased by John Horner. The courthouse was built in New Haven, on land that was originally purchased by Henry Smith. The Horner land was all to the west of the Smith land. For the Brooklyn Hotel to be to the east of the courthouse, it would have to be built on land originally owned by Henry Smith, making it New Haven and not Union City.

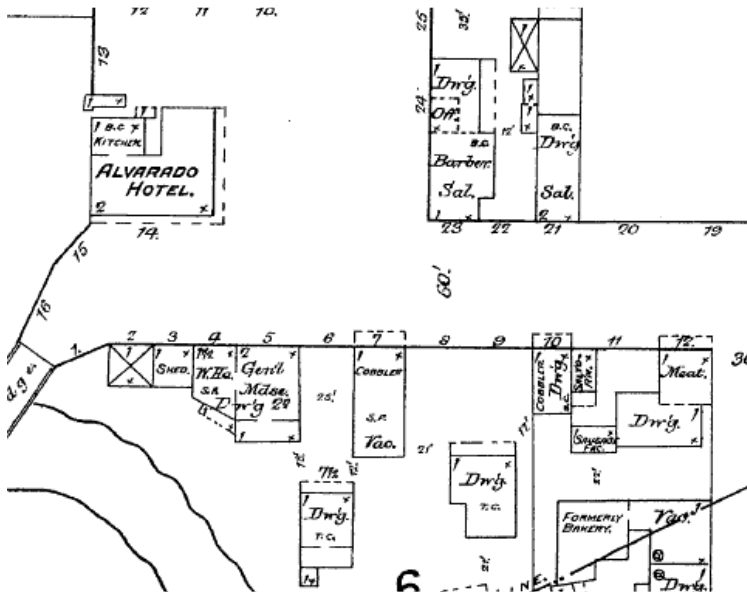
The Brick Building

The 1870 Atlas lists Ambrose Lattin as a Carriage maker. The shop in photograph #1 looks to be a carriage shop by the large size of the door and the carriage wheels outside the building. It is possible that the brick shop in photograph #1 was the one that was demolished in the 1868 earthquake.

The Answer

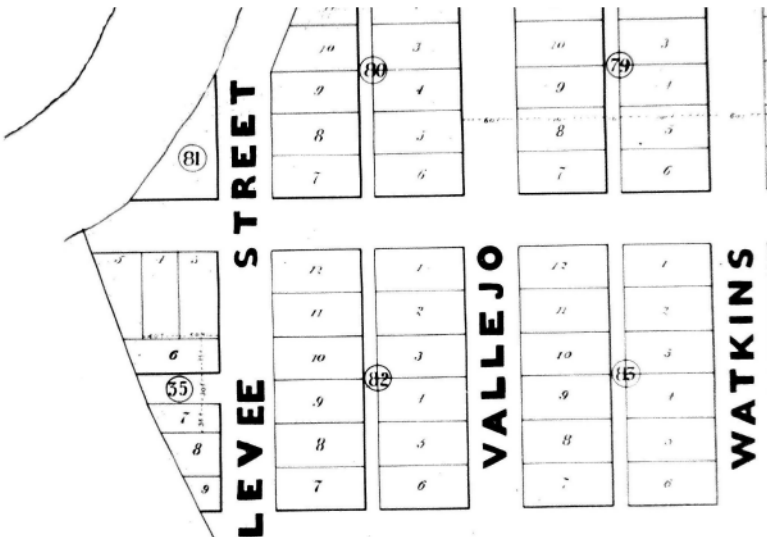
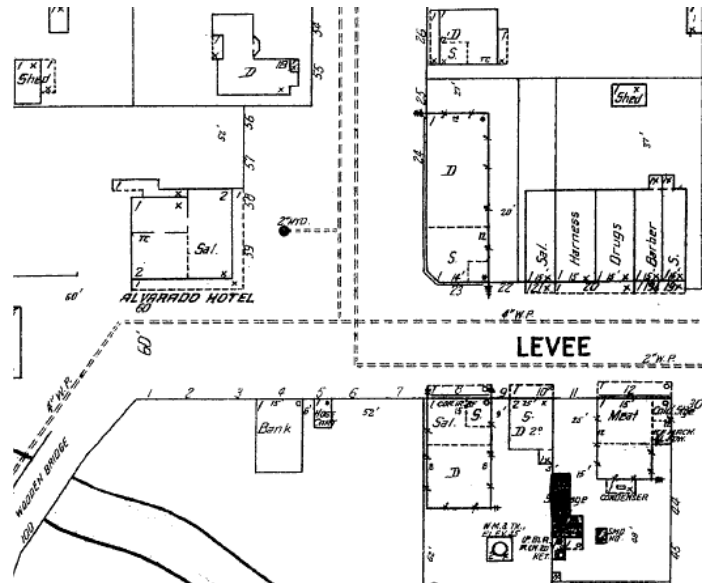
Looking through newspaper reports, there is this entry from the San Francisco Call, on January 27, 1897; "Ambrose J. Lattin to I.V. Ralph, a lot on Block 81, Levee Street in Alvarado." Looking at Bowman, he mentions that the Courthouse "building was on Block 81". A footnote from his article points to a survey by George Black, dated November 8, 1853, but not recorded until 1860. Another article in the San Francisco Call from March 20, 1896, mentions another real estate transaction using Blocks and refers to "Black's survey of the town of Alvarado" as the source of the block numbers.

The Museum of Local History has a survey map with a pencil date of March 10, 1860. The survey does not mention who the surveyor is, but it does have each town block numbered. The map looks to be proposed for Alvarado, as it lists a number of streets that were never built, and a planned Canal that never went beyond the idea stage. On the map, Block 81 is the block that the Courthouse was built.



Sanborn map from 1887. Courthouse building is just below the Alvarado Hotel.

Sanborn map from 1908. The Bank of Alvarado is now located just below the Alvarado Hotel.



1860 Survey map showing block numbers.

So far we have A. J. Lattin owning land on the same block as the Courthouse. I. V. Ralph formed the Bank of Alvarado in 1902 and the bank building was located just to the south of where the courthouse was located. The Sanborn map of 1887 shows the location of the Courthouse building in relation to the Alvarado Hotel. The 1908 Sanborn map shows the location of the Bank of Alvarado and, based on the location of the Alvarado Hotel, the bank sits either just to the south of the Courthouse property or just on it. There is no building shown that replaced the Courthouse. The land the Ralph purchased from Lattin looks to be the same land that the Bank sits on and was probably the location of his Carriage shop.

This means that the building in the first photograph is very likely to be the building owned by A. J. Lattin that was demolished in 1868. Therefore, it is likely that Dr. Fisher was correct and both photographs show the Courthouse.

Additional Conclusions

If the courthouse is shown in both photographs, this does point to the fact that the Brooklyn Hotel was located on the same location as the Alvarado Hotel. So far there no evidence to disprove this. The Brooklyn Hotel and the Alvarado Hotel are not mentioned to exist at the same time. The last mention of the Brooklyn Hotel is the 1883 biography of William Liston published by Woods. The first mention of the Alvarado Hotel is the 1887 Sanborn map (the first Sanborn map for Alvarado).

This also means that the term Union City did not specifically mean the land that was owned by John Horner. It is possible that later, after the 1850's, the terms Union City and New Haven might have gotten a little muddled and slightly confused.

Questions that Remain

What relationship did the Whipple family have with the Courthouse building such that their name is on the building?

What did the Brooklyn Hotel change to the Alvarado Hotel? Was it the same building, or was the Brooklyn Hotel torn down and the Alvarado Hotel replaced it?

References

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