

## HONORABLE GURDEN BACKUS III

Gurden Backus was born on November 6, 1820 in Burlington, Vermont, the son of Gurdon and Lucy Nichols Backus. His father was a contractor and ship builder, and he built the flag ship Saratoga at Vergennes, Vermont, which whipped the English at the battle of Plattsburg. He died when Mr. Backus was but eight years old. He was a first class chip builder and mechanic, traveling all over the continent in the course of his business.

Backus had six children, two boys and four girls. The youngest son, brother of Gurdon, left his home for the battle-fields of Mexico, where he fell in battle. Commodore McDonough boarded with his grandmother at Vergennes, Vermont, during the building of the fleet in 1814. The maternal grandfather, Colonel Nichols, was a pensioner of the Revolutionary war.

### **He was in the clothing business until he came to California**

The subject of this sketch was brought up on a farm until fourteen years of age, and was then engaged in the clothing business in Poughkeepsie, New York, and Burlington, Vermont, and next in New York City. He entered business for himself at the age of nineteen years, and was in the clothing trade until he came to California. He was married at age 21 to Julia Woolsey in 1841, with whom he had four children.

### **A 49er searching for gold**

Mr. Backus was among the first to set out from his Eastern home for the El Dorado, leaving Burlington, Vermont, January 13, 1849 for the long trip across the continent from the city of St. Louis. The Golden State was reached on August 29, 1849. After a few days in Sacramento, Mr. Backus went up to Redding's Diggings in the northern end of the Sacramento Valley, but did not remain long. He took a position in the Empire Hotel, remaining with them until the end of January, 1850. Then he opened the Anglo-Saxon Hotel on Front street, and continued the business with good success until the fall of that year.

### **The outbreak of cholera, however, induced him to leave for San Francisco in November, 1850**

He left for the east coast again with \$17,000 worth of gold dust in his sack. He did not get far and soon leased the Commercial Hotel in San Francisco, on the corner of Jackson street and Jones Alley. He made it one of the leading hotels in the city, patronized by the best class, when the disastrous conflagration of May 4, 1851 destroyed the hotel and left Mr. Backus with only \$50 in his pocket.

Backus stepped aboard the Sacramento boat the next day, determined to go back to the mines and retrieve his fortune. On reaching that city, he was offered a position as clerk at \$150 a month and board. This position he retained until the end of December, 1851.

### **A government clerkship changes the course of Backus' life**

Receiving a government clerkship, he went to Vallejo, then the state capital, and with this begins another and more prominent chapter in the eventful life of the worthy pioneer. At this time, too, begins the literary activities of Mr. Backus, letters from him giving the best resume of matters, political and general, of all published, appearing in the Eastern and other papers. Fortunately he kept a diary of those early days--a perfect treasure house of facts and circumstances used for this article. He took an active part in the great struggle over the State capital, working energetically in the interests of Sacramento.

### **Backus in Sacramento: Clothing trade, harbormaster, interest in the shipping industry**

Mr. Backus clerked in the Legislature until May, 1852, when he began a business in Sacramento for himself on J street, in the clothing trade, gradually enlarging his business and launching out into new areas until he was one of the most extensive dealers in central California. In April, 1853, he was made

harbormaster, holding the office for two years. Then and afterward he was largely interested in Sacramento schooners and shipping. In 1851 he built for himself the fine mansion at the corner of Tenth and E streets, then one of the finest residences in the city, and bringing out his family from the East to occupy it.

### **Saves friends in Sacramento blaze**

In March, 1852, Mr. Backus became the Sacramento agent for Charles Crocker, who was then carrying on a store at Negro Bar, and later on he admitted Mr. Crocker as a partner. November 2, 1852 there occurred the great fire, which destroyed almost the whole city, his store among others. His house and one other were the only houses left on Tenth Street north of J Street.

### **He fed and housed his friends through two catastrophic blazes**

Among them were E. B. Crocker and wife, whom he was instrumental in saving from the horror of that fearful night. There was great suffering at this time, and the price of provisions went up to fabulous rates, yet through all Mr. Backus went unflinchingly and nobly, helping his friends, although himself one of the greatest losers. The general election had just taken place, and the ballots, etc., had been carried to his house and were thus saved. He was a member of the common council of Sacramento (sitting with Mark Hopkins) in 1853, which built up the city, improved its streets, etc., and was active in railroad matters.

### **In 1855 he was elected Public Administrator, holding the office for two years**

In February, 1854, he went into business in partnership with W. R. Strong, of Sacramento, now so well known, and was again extensively launched into business, only to lose everything again by fire on July 12, 1854..

### **Civil War days: Backus called for volunteers and outfitted them**

In the war Mr. Backus was for the Union, and when Lincoln's call for volunteers was made, he at his own expense published a notice calling for volunteers. He organized three companies, and at great expense and difficulty outfitted them, through the Union Club of Sacramento. His efforts kept them together until the war department sent out an officer, Colonel Kellogg, to take command.

He aided in organizing the Union Club of Sacramento. It was formed of men whose united action did more than almost any other cause to keep California in the Union, and stifle the hot Southern desire for secession and war, although the leaders of this element were Backus' close personal friends. The money raised by Mr. Backus and the Union Club was the means of arousing the movement that placed this State among the loyal commonwealths and steadied the feelings of all. His son, General Samuel W. Backus is now Postmaster of San Francisco, but was his father's right-hand man in all of this.

### **For seven years Mr. Backus was in the internal revenue service in San Francisco**

At this time wife Julia died in San Francisco. In 1864 he married Elizabeth Willett. Backus accepted the agency of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1875 at the important station of St. Helena, the wine center of California, a position which he still holds with satisfaction to the business public. His beautiful cottage home in the eastern part of the town [no longer exists] is the picture of home-like comfort. Wife Elizabeth died in 1888 and in 1889 he married Emma in St. Helena.

### **A powerful writer, a careful businessman, a good conversationalist, a genial host**

Mr. Backus has always been a clear-sighted and acute observer of the events of which he has made a part. His popularity is shown by his long occupancy of his present position, where he has to meet and adjust affairs with all classes of people, not less than by the majorities which he has received when a candidate for public office. He is an honored member of the Pioneer Society of San Francisco, and of Washington Lodge, No. 20, F. & A. M. of Sacramento. His motto through life has been, "Duty: results take care of themselves."

Gurden Backus died in Oakland on November 30, 1907. His funeral was held at St. Helena under the auspices of the Society of California Pioneers and the Masonic lodge of Napa county. A great throng from San Francisco, Oakland, Napa and St. Helena was present. Masonic ceremonies were carried out.

**Lot 18, Block C; Wife Elizabeth C. Willett Backus, 12/19/1888, same location**

**Sources:**

- A Memorial & Biographical History of Northern California
- Illustrated Chicago, The Lewis Publishing Company, 1891
- *San Francisco Call*, Volume 102, Number 179, 26 November 1907
- Backus Family History viewed at <http://backushistory.info/getperson.php?personID=116552&tree=backus1>
- Findagrave entry at <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=47730286>