Historian

January/February 2026 ♦ Vol. 70, Issue 1

of the
Tuolumne County
Historical Society
Sonora, California

Museum Hours:

Tues. & Thurs. (10-4)
Wed. (1-4)
Fri. & Sat. (10-3:30)

History Research Center:

Tues.—Fri. (10-4)

Letter from the President

Fellow Members,

Some of you may have heard that I was recently hospitalized. On November 1, I sustained a serious femur and hip socket injury. I had surgery on November 2 at Doctor's Hospital in Modesto and spent the next two weeks there recovering before relocating to Golden Sonora for some residential rehabilitation. I finally made it back home on December 5, and now I'm receiving home health care. My recovery is projected to take several more months before I can put any significant weight on my right leg.

Things need to move along at the Society, Museum, and History Research Center without having to depend on my return. Linda Crocker has agreed to step in as President and chair the meetings. Brad Fisher has been doing a great job running the HRC and coordinating the Museum along with a wonderful group of volunteers from the Genealogical Society. We have a small but excellent core group of volunteers who I am sure will be able to keep things running smoothly in the coming months.

If you have been thinking of volunteering at the Museum or HRC, this would be the time, as we can really use more help right now.

Chuck Holland

Thank you Mike Ghiorso for your years of service on the board. Your updates on the Dome have been invaluable.

Welcome New Members:

Jon Sturtevant
Christopher Spina
Christine Walpole
Marie Wilson
Natasha Eaves
Cory Countryman
Lisa & Paul David
Richard Wilson
William Richards (Student)
Jo Ann Strumpf
A. J. Schweiker
Sue Collie

Christmas Open House

Christmas Tree Lane, Courthouse Square

Erika Lawson, Linda Crocker, Betty Sparagna

Bruce Alves, Linda Emerson

Dec. 16, 2025

A Gift of Dubious Value

By Rob Gordon

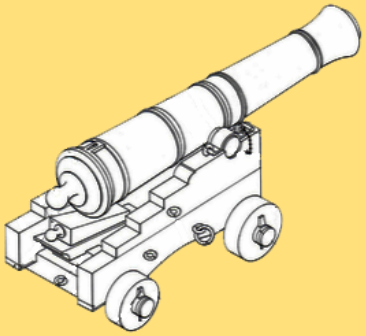
Donations of various items to municipalities have happened almost as long as there have been communities. These gifts were offered for several reasons, often by someone who took pride in their local burg or wished to demonstrate their appreciation for a town that had enabled them to prosper—or for less altruistic reasons. Perhaps the justification for these contributions was for a combination of the above factors or even those beyond what is listed.

During the nineteenth century, it was quite legal for an individual to buy and possess a cannon. These weapons of war were often readily available, and at bargain basement prices. The American government was often at war with some entity or another, internal or external to the country's borders. Warfare requires the manufacture of numerous weapons of war, which, in the occasional periods of peacetime, become excessive and burdensome to the government. The fact that weapons were rapidly evolving during this century, only added to the glut of surplus weaponry, including cannons of various sizes.

Enter the Heslep brothers—Augustus, William, Joseph, and Benjamin. These ambitious brothers were pioneers to California, coming to Sonora sometime late in 1849. Here, they engaged in various business endeavors, including mining, lumber, flour milling, and as merchants to the gold rush mining population. Both William and Joseph were involved in the creation of the city and county governments: William was a member of the common council and Joseph served as county supervisor and assistant treasurer. Joseph was instrumental in the creation of the first courthouse in Sonora.

Augustus left Sonora early on, making his home in San Francisco. There, he abandoned his medical training and entered the law profession, with mixed results. Despite his move to San Francisco, he apparently retained affection for Sonora, and a desire to make a donation to this town. His choice was a cannon, an extremely large one at that.

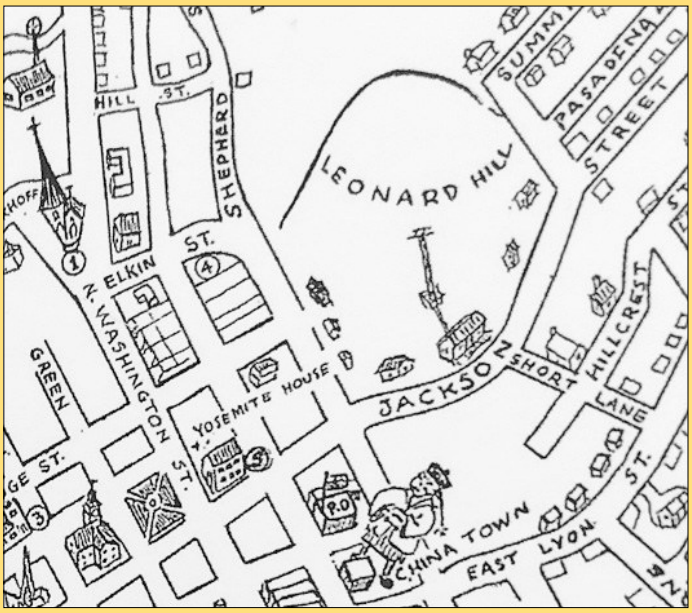
In 1853, Augustus bought the cannon at an auction for an undisclosed price. This gun had been manufactured at the Fort Pitt Foundry, in Pittsburgh, PA, for the U.S. government and eventually found its way to private ownership in San Francisco, where it became surplus inventory. Said to be nearly eleven feet long and weighing just short of five thousand pounds, Heslep had it transported to Sonora. Imagine the difficulty the teamsters experienced as they transported such a massive load to Sonora!



This is what the cannon would have looked like.

Placed on the knoll north of town that later became known as Leonard Hill, the cannon was employed to fire salutes on important occasions. When fired, its roar could be heard in Jamestown and often broke windows and disturbed home foundations. These offensive results led to the cannon gaining an unsavory reputation with much of the local populace. The cannon endured multiple location changes over the coming years, as well as the indignity of being spiked and pushed into Sonora Creek. Although eventually resurrected for a time, by 1885 the town council directed it be sold to the highest bidder. A local foundry offered no money but agreed to swap the huge cannon for a much smaller version already in their possession.

What then happened to this huge piece of artillery is unknown. Was it cut up by the foundry and employed as raw material for more mundane objects? Rumors abounded in subsequent years but for all intents and purposes that was the end of the Heslep Cannon.



Sonora and Vicinity, 1959

Downtown Sonora and Leonard Hill

Museum Corner

Speaker Series - 2026

The 2026 programs will start with the Speaker Series that highlights and uplifts the layered histories of Me-Wuk, Mexican, Latin American, Chinese, and African American communities in the Motherlode, honoring their legacies and contributions.

This initiative is made possible through the collaboration of the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians, ConAmor Building Bridges, Columbia College, and the Tuolumne County Historical Society.

For updates on the series:
https://www.facebook.com/TCHSociety/

Upcoming Events

January 14—3:00 p.m.
Tuolumne County Library, Greenley Rd., Sonora

Setting the Stage: Beyond Gold—Stories Across Cultures, Speakers—Lindsay Lane of Columbia College and Mike Merrit of Columbia SHP

February 19—3:30 p.m.
Opening of the Speaker Series
Columbia College Library (Shuttle service will be provided from parking lots to the library.)

Presentations by Kyle Cox of the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Indians and Dr. Stephanie Beaver-Guzman

Cinco de Mayo Exhibit

Cinco de Mayo display in Museum

The Exhibits Committee just completed a temporary display about the origins of Cinco de Mayo.

Cinco de Mayo as celebrated in the U.S. is not a Mexican holiday. It is an American holiday, created in California by Latinos during the United States' Civil War to remind the public, Latino and non-Latino, of the importance of **freedom and democracy**. The first observance of this holiday was in the Gold Rush town of **Columbia, Tuolumne County**.

Mexico's 1810 Declaration of Independence abolished slavery, granted women the right to own property, and extended citizenship to Indigenous, Black, and white populations. Yet when California transitioned to U.S. statehood in 1850, many Mexicans found themselves fighting in the state's first constitutional convention to preserve those rights.

Cinco de Mayo history in Columbia

In an effort to topple the democratically elected government of Mexico, the French emperor, Napoleon III, used the United States' preoccupation with its Civil War to invade Mexico in 1862. The forces of freedom and democracy appeared to be losing in the U.S. and in Mexico.

On **May 5, 1862**, the Mexican army unexpectedly stopped the French imperial army dead in its tracks at the city of Puebla. By May 27, 1862, news reports arrived in San Francisco about the Mexican victory at the Battle of Puebla. The good news arrived by stagecoach in Sonora.

Columbia has the honor of having held the first celebration of the Battle of Puebla, which had occurred three weeks earlier.

Mark your calendar!

TUOLUMNE COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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The Mission of the Tuolumne County Historical Society shall be to discover, collect, preserve, and disseminate knowledge about the history of Tuolumne County and the State of California.

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Tuolumne County Museum & History Research Center

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History Research Center: 209-532-4227
http://tchistory.org, info@tchistory.org

Change in address or contact information?
Contact Linda Emerson—memberships@tchistory.org

In Memory of

Cate Culver

Catherine (Cate) Caldwell Culver passed away on October 25, 2025. After a career as a commercial artist, she and her husband, Jerry, retired to Tuolumne in 2017. Cate authored the *Chispa* (Vol. 57, No. 1, Jan.-Mar. 2017) article, "Daughter of Dardanelle," describing the High Sierra where she spent much of her childhood. A few years later, in an effort to preserve the history of Sonora Pass, she wrote *The History of Sonora Pass and Its People, 1860-1960*. Last year, the TCHS published her second book *The History of Dardanelle, 1923-2023*.

Cate's artistic talent and love of history will be missed. Condolences to her family.

Cate Culver's photo is from *The History of Dardanelle, 1923-2023.*