



By [Vallejo Times-Herald](#)

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Gen. Mariano Vallejo, at one point a millionaire who owned vast tracts of Northern California land, ended up in tight financial circumstances after California entered the Union. His enterprising son-in-law, John Blackman Frisbie, helped to keep him in the comfort of his home in Sonoma — but also managed to nearly drive him to the poorhouse.

Frisbie, an Army captain, arrived in Sonoma in mid-1848, in charge of a rough-and-tumble company of New York volunteers. Educated in law and ambitious, Frisbie mustered out of the Army following the end to the Mexican-American War. He stayed in the Sonoma area, quickly learned Spanish and was drawn into Vallejo's family circle and business affairs. In 1850 Frisbie obtained Vallejo's power of attorney, which gave him a significant amount of control over the general's finances, and in 1851 married the general's oldest daughter, Epifania or Fannie.

Frisbie is widely considered the founder of the city of Vallejo, given his significant role in planning and promoting the new city that bears his father-in-law's name. With Frisbie's help, Gen. Vallejo found investors who said they would underwrite his efforts to make Vallejo the capital city of California. Two legislative sessions began in the new city, in early 1852 and 1853, only to reconvene in Benicia and Sacramento because of inadequate preparations in Vallejo. Gen. Vallejo had spent nearly \$100,000 of his own funds on the capital city project, but the other investors didn't deliver on their promises. Disillusioned, he sold Frisbie the Vallejo townsite for \$25,000 in 1854.

While the dream of a capital city was gone, Frisbie had been working hard to get the U.S. government to buy Mare Island for a West Coast naval base. The island was purchased in 1853 and the Navy base opened in 1854. At the start of the Civil War, one of the new Union military units was the Vallejo Rifles, mustered in on Sept. 8, 1861. Frisbie was appointed the first captain of the unit. He was promoted to the rank of general by Gov. Leland Stanford in 1862, and the title remained with him for the rest of his life.

Frisbie didn't have a formal law practice in California but did get involved in some important legal cases, including the effort to defend the title to Gen. Vallejo's 84,000-acre Rancho Suscol land grant, which included the Vallejo townsite. On March 24, 1862, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a lower court's confirmation of the grant. Using his lobbying skills, Frisbie pushed successfully for a bill, approved by Congress in 1863, that enabled him and some friends to retain their Suscol land grant holdings by buying land at the government price of \$1.25 an acre.

That worked for men with ready cash, but not for Gen. Vallejo who already was paying high interest on mortgages — mortgages that Frisbie had expedited.

Gen. Vallejo and his wife, Dona Francisca Benicia, were at times bitter about what they considered Frisbie's mismanagement. Dona Francisca, in a letter to her son Platon, called Frisbie an "ingrate" and added, "but he is an American and we can't hope for anything but

But Frisbie came through for the Vallejos in 1866, when Vallejo lost his 228-acre Lachryma Montis homestead in Sonoma. Thomas Madden, one of the lawyers who had represented him during the hearings on his Suscol land grant case, held a \$17,500 mortgage on the estate and assumed ownership when Vallejo couldn't pay off the note. The general had to rent the property for \$150 a month. But in late 1871, Frisbie paid Madden \$21,000 for Lachryma Montis and four months later deeded the property to Francisca Benicia Vallejo.

In overseeing the development of the city of Vallejo, Frisbie had control of local transportation, banking and farming interests. He also donated land for the construction of the community's first public school, city park and cemetery; and donated land to many of Vallejo's early churches. But in 1876, Frisbie went broke. His banking institution, the Vallejo Savings and Commercial Bank, had invested heavily in Bonanza stocks. When those stocks spiraled downward, he began selling off assets to satisfy creditors. Those assets included the Bernard Hotel in Vallejo and the White Sulphur Springs resort, now known as Blue Rock Springs, east of the town. He also lost his own private estate, a mansion on the southeast corner of Virginia and Sutter streets, overlooking the town of Vallejo.

In 1878, Frisbie left with his wife and children for Mexico, where he befriended and worked for President Porfirio Diaz — and became richer than he had been in California. One of his biggest achievements for Diaz was a lobbying effort that led to the reversal of a hostile U.S. trade policy toward Mexico. The president rewarded him with a generous fee and an old gold mine that hadn't been worked for 200 or more years. Frisbie and a partner developed the property and it made them millionaires. Frisbie remained a prominent figure in Mexico for many years. He died in Mexico City in May 1909, at age 85.

While Frisbie is buried in Mexico City, the tallest monument in Vallejo's old St. Vincent's Cemetery bears his name. The lone grave marker in the family plot bears the name of Frisbie's son, Mariano Guadalupe Frisbie, who died at age 4 in the Napa Valley in 1856. More information on John Frisbie is available at the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum, 734 Marin St. Also, there is a great deal of information on Frisbie in *General Vallejo and the Advent of the Americans*, authored by Alan Rosenus.

- Have some local history notes to share? Email me at genoans@hotmail.com or send any material care of the Times-Herald, 420 Virginia St.; or the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum, 734 Marin St.

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The Frisbie-Walsh House is at 235 East L Street in Benicia, CA. This [Gothic Revival](#) style cottage was built shortly before 1850; it is a prefabricated house (the timbers cut, numbered, hauled to Benicia and assembled at the site). Gen. M.G. Vallejo commissioned New England architect Andrew Jackson Downing to design three similar houses, one for himself, one as a wedding gift for his daughter Epifania (Fannie) and son-in-law John B. Frisbie (the Frisbie-Walsh house), and one originally owned by Captain Schillibar (it was destroyed in the great 1906 San Francisco earthquake). Vallejo's house, named "Lachryma Montis," is now a museum in nearby Sonoma, CA.

John B. and Fannie only lived in their house for two years. They sold it to Capt. Walsh who lived there until the 1880s.