

### **Honorable Gurden Backus III**

+Hon. Gurden Backus III– Born 11/6/1820, buried 11/26/1907, Lot 18, Block C; Wife Elizabeth C. Willett Backus, 12/19/1888, same location.

He was born in the old Green Mountain State, November 6, 1820, and is therefore at the time of this writing nearing the close of the sixties, yet as active, as energetic and as young in appearance as if he had yet to touch the half century. Of his earlier days and of his family we present the following:--His father was a contractor and builder of ships, and built the flag ship Saratoga at Vergennes, Vermont, which whipped the English at the battle of Plattsburg; was on board himself as volunteer. He died in Burlington, Vermont, 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. He 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.

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 was an active worker for Harrison in 1840, and was a member of a log-cabin club. 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 twelve days after he reached his majority.

#### **A 49er 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, and New York in March, for the long trip across the continent, driving a six-mule team from the city of St. Louis. He tramped the whole seventy-five miles from Cumberland to Brownsville, being three days and a half on the old National road. The long journey was successfully accomplished with the usual hardships and difficulties, but without serious mishap, and the Golden State was reached August 29, 1849, the arrival in Sacramento, then the objective point for everyone, in the September following. After a few days in this city, Mr. Backus went up to Redding's Diggings in the northern end of the Sacramento Valley, but did not remain long after the winter rains came on. He made his way back to Sacramento, through miseries and difficulties, such as can only be appreciated when heard from the lips of the men who underwent them. He took a position in the Empire Hotel, kept by Keefe & Butler, the latter a brother of the celebrated General, at \$195 a month and board, 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 transfer his energies to another point, and accordingly we find Mr. Backus in San Francisco in November, 1850, homeward bound for the East, with a comfortable little pile of \$17,000 worth of gold dust in his sack. He did not get farther than that city, however, and soon leased the Commercial Hotel, on the corner of Jackson street and Jones Alley, where Colonel Haraszthy now has his wind depot, paying no less than \$800 for his monthly rental. He made the house the best and one of the leading hotels in the city, for he always does his best, and was patronized by the best class, and fairly earned money for a while, having bought the house and enlarged it, when the disastrous conflagration of May 4, 1851, swept the hotel and all its contents out of existence, and left Mr. Backus with only \$50 in his pocket.

Nothing daunted he 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 accosted by a Jewish merchant, J. Pinchover, on the levee, and offered a position with him as clerk at \$150 a month and board. This position he retained until the end of December, 1851, and then, 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. He went one night through the rain and darkness, up the Sacramento River for State Senator Henry E. Robinson, to assure his vote for the final test.

### **Career in Sacramento**

Mr. Backus clerked in the Legislature until May, 1852, when he began business in Sacramento for himself on J street, in the clothing trade, gradually enlarging his business and launching out into new departments of enterprise until he was one of the most extensive dealers in central California. In April, 1853, he was made Harbor-master of Sacramento, holding the office for two years, being then and afterward 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 still ranking with any for beauty and comfort, surrounded by trees, shrubs and flowers, 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, midnight, 1852, occurred the great fire, which destroyed almost the whole city, his store among others. His house and one other were the only houses left north of J street on Tenth street, and he fed and housed his friends for some time to the number of sixteen or more, among them 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. 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, July 12, 1854, at midday. In 1855 he was elected Public Administrator, holding the office for two years.

### **Civil War Days**

The war feeling that resulted later in the desperate civil struggle was already rising high. In all this Mr. Backus was for the Union, "first, last and all the time;" and when Lincoln's call for volunteers was made, he at his own expense published a notice calling for volunteers, organized three companies, and at great expense and difficulty outfitted them, through the Union Club of Sacramento, and 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, 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 his 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, so well known for his many public positions and his great worth of character, now Postmaster of San Francisco, was his father's right-hand man in all of this, and he himself went East and served honorably and well throughout the civil struggle.

For seven years Mr. Backus was in the internal revenue service in San Francisco, going to that city in 1861. Sixteen years ago he accepted the agency of the Southern Pacific 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 is the picture of home-like comfort, being surrounded by trees and veritably embowered in flowers and flowering shrubs. 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.

Mr. Backus has always been a clear-sighted and acute observer of the events of which he has made a part. He is a powerful writer, an exact and careful business man, a good conversationalist, and a most genial host. 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."

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#### THRONG FOLLOWS BIER

NAPA, November 25, 1907 — The funeral of Gurden Backus, one of the best known pioneers of California, was held at St. Helena today 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. Backus resided in California 58 years.

He was a member of the vigilance committee of both San Francisco and Sacramento and resided in San Francisco from 1862 until 1890.

His son, Samuel Backus, was postmaster of San Francisco for eight years.

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