

Hayward's Salty History: John Johnson

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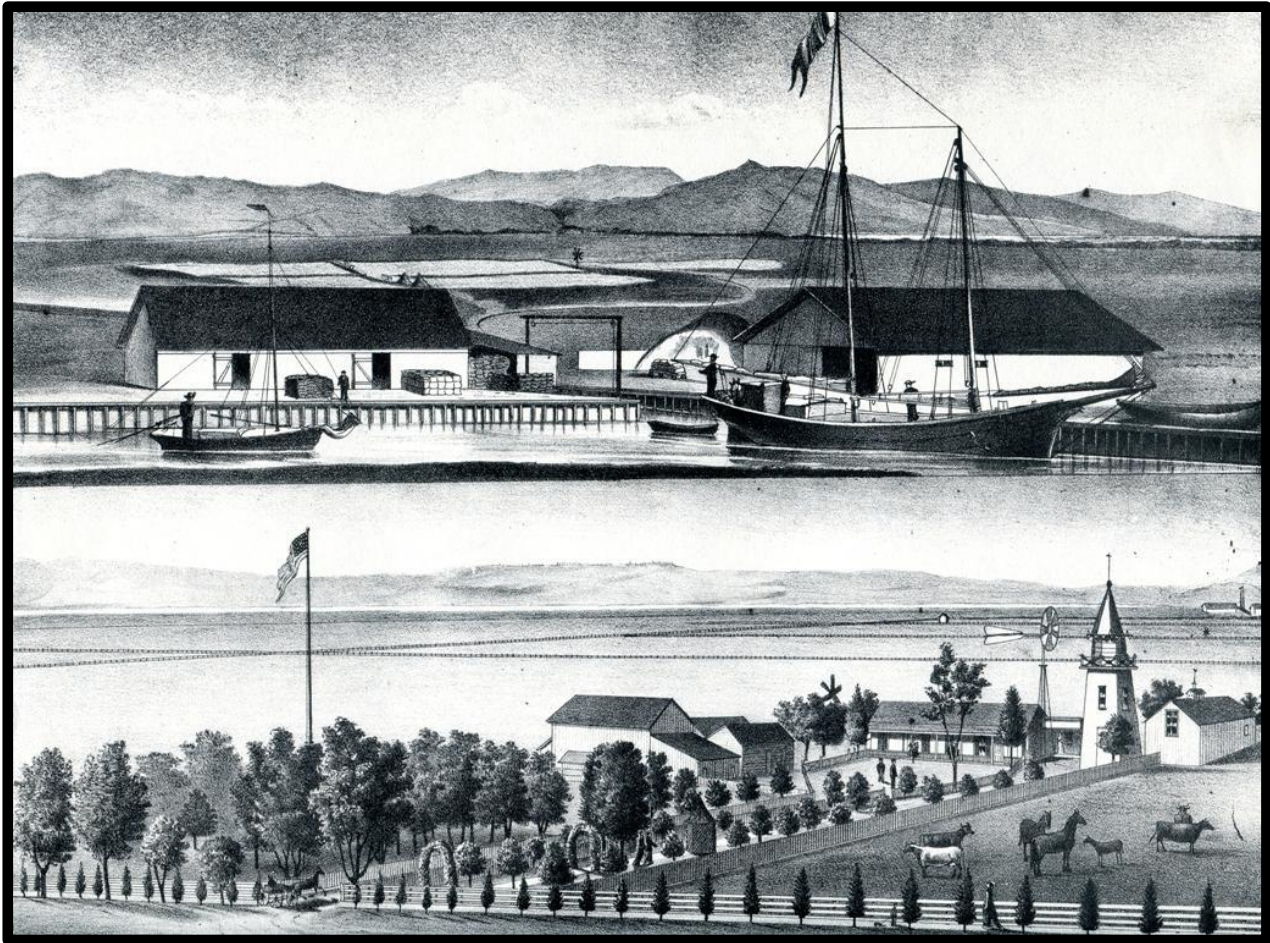


A c. 1856 photograph of John Johnson posing with a bag of salt and his dog, two things he must have been proud of.

Until relatively recently, the harvesting of salt along the Hayward shoreline was a major industry. While Ohlone people had been harvesting salt that naturally accumulated in places along the shoreline for thousands of years along the shoreline. However, John Johnson was the first to collect large amounts of salt to sell commercially.

Johnson himself was an immigrant. Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1818, he was raised by an older sister after the rest of his family perished when their distillery caught fire. Perhaps wanting to leave his sorrow behind, at age 13, Johnson began his career as a sailor. He traveled the world on various merchant vessels learning trade and navigation—skills that would come in handy later.

Eventually in 1850, aboard the *S.S. Louise Field*, Johnson arrived in California. Initially, he worked odd jobs in San Francisco and Oakland. By 1852 Johnson settled on the Mt. Eden shoreline near the area of today's Highway 92 and the Hayward-San Mateo Bridge.



An Illustration of John Johnson's home and namesake landing as it appeared in an 1878 Alameda County history.

Johnson immediately began harvesting salt on his land, aptly named "Johnson's Landing". It was reported that in his first year alone, John yielded five tons of salt from his 14 acres. He also had two small schooners to ferry his products to market across San Francisco Bay.

Johnson saw other opportunities in the hotel business as well. He built a small hotel among a grove of shady trees and allowed the hunting of the ducks, geese, and pheasants that called the salty marshland home. He was aided in this venture by his wife, Augusta Lorentz whom he married in 1855. Augusta was a German native as well and a recent arrival to California.

Several newspapers noted the high demand for holding events and functions at the “Mt. Eden Grove Resort” as it came to be called. Johnson himself seemed to be one of the biggest draws for visitors. He would regale anyone who would listen with tales from his seafaring past and world travels. The *San Francisco Call* said of Johnson, “No man ever had a more adventurous life than John Johnson. He has furnished more romantic stories than any other man in California.”

These tall tales made Johnson a local celebrity. And as Johnson’s reputation grew, so did his business interests. August Johnson, John’s son, began piloting the family’s schooners across the bay and helped oversee the expansion of the family’s salt business.

By the time Johnson died in July 1897, his vast salt operation and resort covered more than 350 acres with yields of 2,500 tons of salt annually. Although evidence of his business interests is long vanished from the shoreline, the story of John Johnson is still with us today.



A c. 1913 image of a Johnson family salt plant building. John Johnson died in 1897. By the time this photo was taken his son, August Johnson, placed his name on the sign and was still running his father’s business. Also notice the pile of salt to the left.