

## A tale of two waterfronts

History, heritage and rebirth in Benicia and Vallejo

Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, the United States Military, and a highly sought after waterfront location are probably the three largest and most important factors playing a part in the creation of Benicia and Vallejo. Today, these two towns are like very distant cousins—each grew and developed in its own unique way, but each also had one important similarity: to move forward economically with a conscious eye on the preservation of their glorious past.



First Street, Benicia

**B**oth cities also have Gen. Vallejo to thank for their names, and for the simple fact that they are even in existence at all. Within a decade of becoming a township, each city also became an important strategic outpost for the country's 19th century military. Benicia had the U.S. Army Arsenal from 1849-1964, and Vallejo had the U.S. Naval Shipyard (also known as Mare Island) from 1854-1996. Both of these bases were the first of their kind on the West Coast, and they played important and at times pivotal roles in the history of the country.

For more than a century—from almost the very beginning—the military's presence has driven Benicia and Vallejo's economies, thus becoming indelibly infused with the cities' very identities. And like many other American cities, the closing of these bases caused a loss not just of jobs and civic income, but of identity as well.

After wearing many hats, Benicia has found—rediscovered might be the better word—its identity in the quaintness of its small-town feel. Originally founded to be

a port town to rival that city across the bay, San Francisco, it became a military outpost and for a (very) short time, the state capital. Today, with a population of a little more than 27,000, this truly is a small town with

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lot of civic pride, and the best place to experience the charm is on First Street and the waterfront.

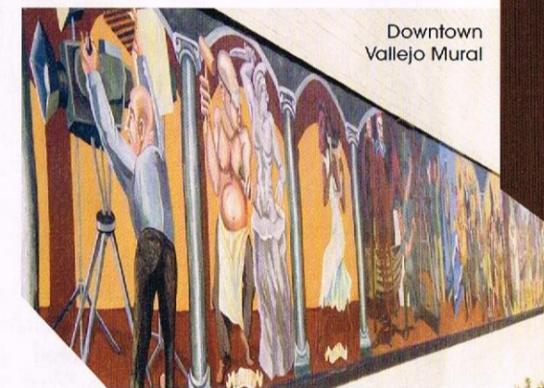
Bordered by boutiques and restaurants, and with shade trees lining the sidewalks that lead you to the water, First Street is a bona fide and quintessential "Main Street USA" in all the best senses of the phrase. One of forty "main streets" statewide, Benicia's First Street has been part of the Main Street program since 1987, a nationwide program that was started by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the 1970s. Its stated goal: to revitalize traditional commercial districts by balancing historic preservation with needed and necessary economic development.

Harbor Walk is the newest mixed-use development on First Street, housing residential space on the second level and commercial space at street level. Currently there is a Starbucks, and other retail shops

are on their way. The architecture of the buildings is reminiscent of its authentic surroundings, mostly buildings with a rich architectural and sometimes cultural heritage. According to **LIBBY MCKENDRY**, retiring Executive Director of Benicia Main Street, the building process began a few years before a foundation was ever laid. "The builder came to the Main Street

meeting and they listened very well to what residents wanted," she says.

The residential spaces on the second level of Harbor Walk perpetuate the smart growth philosophy that Benicia—as well as an increasing number of other towns across America—have embraced. Not only is there a vibrant retail core in the downtown area, but also homes, so that there is a continual flow of people through the area, both night and day, which has a positive effect on the prospects of merchants, gallery owners and restaurateurs. As McKendry states, "Studies



Downtown Vallejo Mural

have shown that a downtown is safer and shops and restaurants are utilized more when people live there."

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Regional focus

Photos: Allison Kern, Vallejo Chamber of Commerce

Vallejo waterfront

# Vallejo-Benicia

to sculptors, jewelry designers to glass artisans and even a community of musicians. Sprinkled among the various shops, the galleries are the quiet gems of Benicia.

For the history buff, or those wanting no more than a little adventure while taking a break from shopping, the historic walking tour is definitely something to experience. With 25 well-marked historic sights along the way, you can take a leisurely stroll through time, appreciating the colorful past of this charming city.

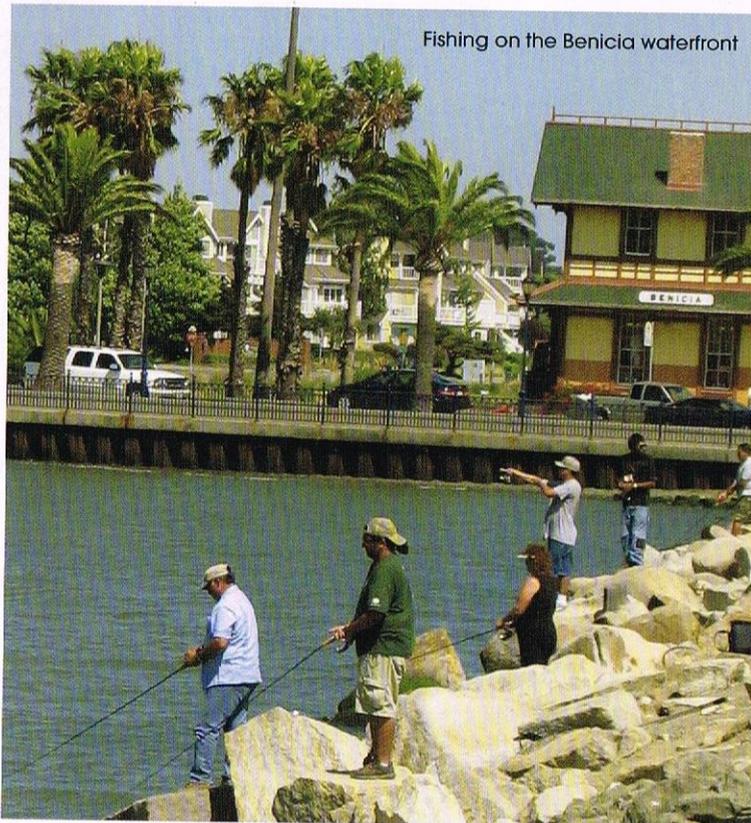
Vallejo has had a more difficult time finding its identity after Mare Island was decommissioned in 1996. "It was hard to be in office at that time," says **VALLEJO MAYOR ANTHONY INTINTOLI**, who has served in the city's government since 1977. "The identity of the city was closely linked to the base as a navy town."

Pulling through the loss of its military identity, Vallejo has seen a renaissance—almost a re-birth—with the large-scale retail development between Columbus Parkway and I-80. According to Vallejo Chamber of Commerce President **RICK WELLS**, "There are community developments and cultural happenings that are popping up on a daily, weekly, monthly basis."

There is no better place to see these "cultural happenings" than along the waterfront and in the downtown districts. Unlike what is seen in Benicia, Vallejo's waterfront is more about being outdoors, and the downtown is beginning to re-invent itself as the place to shop and eat. And like Benicia, Vallejo has a rich architectural heritage downtown and particularly on Mare Island, where the imposing homes of generations of admirals are being restored.

These days both locals and out-of-towners find the waterfront's modern Ferry

Fishing on the Benicia waterfront



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Building a convenient place to catch a scenic ride or commute on a daily basis to downtown San Francisco on the high-speed ferries that run from early in the day to well into the evening. But another highly appreciated feature is the promenade, which is a pathway along the water used for runners, bicyclists and people walking their dogs at all hours of the day. Added to the attraction is the Service Club Park next to the Ferry Building. It is not at all uncommon to see families, artists and people on their lunch break relaxing and enjoying the scenery, serenity, sunshine and cool breeze off the water.

Just recently, the Waterfront Project

was approved. After some contention and many community talks and meetings an agreement is now on the table. "We are pretty pleased with the plan, even though it is not the original one we would have liked to see," says **MARTI BROWN**, co-chair of the Vallejo Waterfront Coalition, a group that is in alliance with Vallejo neighborhood associations to make sure there is proper land utilization of the waterfront. She goes on to describe the need for consistent revitalization between the downtown and the waterfront. Yet with all of this back and forth and the final approval, the slump in the housing market has actually slowed the project down and there is not yet a date for groundbreaking,

but people remain very hopeful.

On the other side of the Carquinez Strait—Vallejo's second waterfront—on Mare Island, development is already well underway. Once the home of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, the identity search has been swifter than that of the mainland waterfront. With new high-end residential communities continuing to pop up, with existing businesses welcoming the new commercial space

available, and with Touro University's plans to create a biomedical center on its campus not far from the Mare Island Golf Course, the oldest golf course west of the Mississippi, Mare Island is dusting itself off in grand and glorious fashion.

So even though the original plan for Benicia was to be a port city that would rival San Francisco, the appeal is found in its small-town atmosphere. And with the various development and revitalization projects underway and planned, Vallejo just might become that rival port city instead. In both cases the future is exciting if divergent and was, perhaps, even predestined all those years ago. \*