The Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party: Impact on California, the West and America

In our previous episodes we've shared the amazing story of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party of 1844, and how their true pioneer grit opened the West for hundreds of thousands who followed - seeking fame, fortune or just a better life. Traveling over 2,000 miles, they endured many hardships and overcame at times what seemed to be unsurmountable obstacles. Through good planning, perseverance and strong bonds, they were able to keep their eyes focused on their goal that was just over the next mountain – Alta California.

But their amazing journey didn't end when they reached their new home. In fact, for many of the party it began again. This time, though, their journey was not one of plains, deserts, mountains, rivers and miles. It was a journey of shaping the history of the newly formed California Republic. In this episode we're going to review a summary we recently came across that outlines the impact they had on California and the westward expansion. Let's look at a few of them, starting with the party leaders.

Impact on California

After many years as a trapper, government blacksmith and guide, Elisha Stephens settled into an easier life. He initially established his farm in what is now Cupertino, California, and a creek there bears his name. Finding it "too crowded" he moved to Kern County and spent the rest of his years tending bees and raising chickens. It wasn't until 150 years later, in 1994 that he finally received recognition for his leadership of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party with the dedication of Mount Stephens in the Sierra Nevada.

Dr. John Townsend became the first American licensed physician in California and established a successful practice, along with several other business ventures. He was elected the first non-Spanish alcalde, or mayor, of San Francisco, and used his influence to shape local politics. Unfortunately, he and his wife Elizabeth would die from Cholera while treating an outbreak in San Jose in 1850, leaving behind their infant son.

Martin Murphy Sr. established his home near Gilroy, California, and named it San Martin in honor of his patron saint. Located on the stagecoach route from Monterey to San Jose, visitors were always welcomed with Irish hospitality. And never forgetting his deep religious faith, he built a small chapel on his property that was open to all. Like many others of the Murphy family, he served the community as justice of the peace. An astute businessman, along with his sons acquired thousands of acres of land that would set the stage for the agricultural boom to follow.

Chief Truckee continued to "show pioneers the way west" for years after helping the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party. In 1846 he played a role in the Mexican American War. Understanding the impact that the settlers would play in California, he encouraged his people to be educated by the pioneers. In his honor, Truckee, California and the Truckee River now bear his name.

Many others of the party would leave their mark on the early development of California.

Upon reaching California, Moses Schallenberger was charged with locating and acquiring supplies for the U.S. Navy and delivered supplies to gold miners along the Yuba River. After the death of his sister Elizabeth and her husband, Dr. John Townsend, Moses adopted their infant son and established a large orchard. He became one of San Jose's earliest horticulturists.

Caleb "Old" Greenwood would make several trips back over the Sierra Nevada, guiding more settlers to California. And in the Spring of 1847, he would help organize the Donner Party relief efforts.

Isaac "Old Man" Hitchcock and his daughter, Elizabeth Patterson and her 5 children settled near Santa Cruz, California where they would play a significant role in the development of the community. Hitchcock became a founding member of the first Masonic Lodge in Santa Cruz.

Sarah Armstrong Montgomery would later marry Joseph Wallis and acquired the Mayfield Farm in what would become Palo Alto, California. An astute businesswoman, she invested in the San Francisco and San Jose railroads and lobbied for the building of the California Avenue station. A staunch advocate of women's rights, she would recognize for her efforts in suffrage education.

After his heroic rescue of Moses Schallenberger, Dennis Martin settled in what would become Menlo Park, California, establishing the lumber business in the area and building the St. Denis Chapel in 1853.

Of all the members of the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy Party, the Murphy family would make the most significant and lasting impact on the development and history of California.

John Murphy and his brother Dan established a trading post in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada that helped fuel the gold mining boom in the late 1840s and early 1850s. In addition to accumulating significant wealth, they acquired substantial holdings of land and cattle. At one point, Dan would be known as a Cattle King of both Nevada and Idaho and would be the largest landowner in the United States. And John would use his resources to build infrastructure and serve the community of San Jose, being one of the regidores, or sheriffs elected in 1847 to support the mayor in keeping the peace. And during the early 1850s he served several terms on the San Jose City Council, providing policy and guidance for the rapidly growing gold-rush driven population.

Early on James Murphy played a role in establishing the lumber industry in the area, and building the Lieidesdoff Pier in Yerba Buena, later San Francisco. He and his wife Ann Martin Murphy settled near San Jose where he became an influential landowner and farmer, planting one of the first olive orchards in Santa Clara County.

Ellen Murphy, with her husband Charles Weber founded the town of Stockton, California, where she was known for supporting many social causes. She was also known for her kindness and hospitality, serving as a hostess for travelers along the El Camino Real.

Mary Murphy and her husband James Miller settled what is now known as Marin County and played a pivotal role in the development of San Rafael. They became one of Marin's largest landowners, eventually holding over 8,000 acres, which provided the basis for their farming, cattle, horse and mule breeding and dairy farming businesses.

But by far, Martin Murphy, Jr. and Mary Bolger Murphy and their family made the most significant impact on the development of California at both the local and state level. After selling their rancho near Sacramento, California, they initially purchased about 4,300 acres in Santa Clara Valley. Land that would eventually become Silicon Valley.

Acquiring hundreds of thousands of acres of land, they ignited the agricultural economy of California, introducing Norman horses for farm work and wheat production. Along with new varieties of wheat they also initiated the development of orchards and brought in new equipment to improve the land and productivity. Using their extensive resources, they would accelerate the development of San Jose, building the first permanent brick structures that would be utilized by the city.

Their impact was not limited to just economic development. They played significant roles in shaping the political landscape of California. In one fashion or another, they all engaged in serving at the local and state level. Both Bernard and Patrick Murphy would serve multiple terms as state legislators and senators. And Bernard and Martin J. Murphy would be driving forces in the financial and banking industry of early California.

But let's don't forget Mary Bolger Murphy. Known as a kind, caring woman, she was also a driving force behind the Murphy family and a strong proponent of education – one of the reasons the left Ireland in 1820. Working with Archbishop Al-a-mainny and the Sisters of Notre Dame De Namur, she and Martin Murphy, Jr. through donations of land, money and political influence, played a key role in the establishment of what is now Santa Clara University and Notre Dame de Namur.

When 52 weary pioneers were finally reunited at Sutter's Fort in the spring of 1847, they had endured hardships and accomplished more than we today could possibly imagined. Little did they know that their simple goal of a better life and achieving religious freedom would result in opening a new path that would be followed by thousands of pioneers with the same hopes and dreams. While they had visions for the future, they probably had no idea of how significantly they would shape the land that would become California.