

To: Grass Valley City Council

From: Quarterly Report from the Grass Valley Historical Commission

Date: Tuesday, February 10, 2026

The Five Pronged Approach to Delivering Grass Valley History to the Public

1. Free Walking Tours Continue

Saturdays from 10 am to 11:15 am at the Stamp Mill on the following dates:
April 4th, May 9th, June 13th, July 11th, August 8th and September 12th

2. The Arts Council's Audio Tour of Grass Valley

Thanks to the Nevada County Arts Council for funding a new Grass Valley audio tour which should be completed by March, 2026. Stuart Baker, who wrote and completed the Nevada City Audio Tour is writing and producing the audio tour which you can find at the Nevada City Chamber's website. The final product will be available to the City and Chamber. (attached are his production notes which the Commission has reviewed and approved)

3. Expanding the Heritage Homes Booklet

We plan to add two additional sections to the Heritage Homes booklet to include a more in-depth description of around 20 commercial locations in the downtown core. We also will add a section on each of the murals. Not only will the descriptions be in the booklet, they will also be online at the City's Storymap website.

4. Approaching Business for Historic Plaques

The 20 owners of commercial historic buildings, mentioned above, will be approached to gain consent for a historic plaque to be placed on their site. The plaque will contain details of the history of the building. The plaques will be paid for by the Commission through fundraising.

5. Pulling Together All of the Websites into One Collection

Working with City staff and the Chamber staff, we hope to identify and help install a myriad of website that celebrate the history of Grass Valley for visitors and residents alike. Besides the aforementioned audio tour and the Storymap sites, you may wish to check out the following sites:

GV NC Cultural Districts website to find out about our murals

Lisa Redfern & Rose Murphy have developed these audible walking tours:

Chinese Merchants of Mill and Main Street

Grass Valley Chinatown

Tinloy Family— Memorial Park

Women, Saints and Sinners— Mill and Chapel Streets

Wives, Waffles and Writers— Church and School Streets

Downtown Grass Valley Foot Patrol with Vince Seck

Celebrating Grass Valley History on Nevada County History Day/Month

1. May 9th History Day

In cooperation with the Nevada County Superintendent of School and the Nevada County Landmark Commission, we are moving towards our Saturday, May 9th Nevada County First Annual History Day. It is a day for families and seniors to visit a number of open historic sites and buildings along with personal group tours of Nevada City and Grass Valley.

2. May Banner Display of Historic Grass Valley People and Places

After raising \$1500 for historic banners on Mill Street, we recently found out that the City has instituted a new policy that would place our banners only on Main Street and we would be annually charged \$900 to install them. The Commission, who has no budget, is toying with next steps since our original plan has been upended.

Helping to Preserve Historic Buildings/Homes

1. The Mills Act

The Mills Act is a state law that allows homeowners to gain a reduce property tax bill for preserving and maintaining their historic properties. Attached are slides pertaining to the history and use of the Mills Act.

Unfinished Business

1. Lake Olympia Preservation

The Commission is pleased to learn that the donation of land is moving forward and we look forward to assisting the City to memorialize the lake.

2. Bronze Plaques for Walsh Mill and Old Firehouse

Our Commission, the Grass Valley City Council and the Nevada County Landmark Commission have all approved county recognition for two Grass Valley sites. It is now the obligation of the City to fund and erect these two plaques. We await direction.

3. Clean-up and Preservation of Loma Rica Railroad Trestle

The Loma Rica Trail Project is underway in the area of the historic Nevada County Narrow Gauge Trestle. The Commission seeks next steps regarding the preservation and recognition of this site.

4. Memorial Park Historic Bronze Plaque

The completed bronze plaque is waiting for a core sample to be found for its final placement. The Commission is taking this project on so it can soon be completed.

5. Signage to Honor Citizen Star Recipients

Signage which informs the public about each of the recipients has been completed and funded by the Commission. The Commission understands that the City will be installing the plaque on a bench near the stamp mill.

6. Appointing Two Commissioners

Our Commission has been recruiting community leaders to serve on our Commission. We are pleased to announce that two superb women have applied for the positions. We hope the Council will move swiftly on this appointments.

Grass Valley Smartphone-enabled Walking Tour – Tour Structure

1. Introduction at Main and Auburn Streets
 2. The colorful history of hotels in GV
 3. Supplying the miners/retail gems
 4. The Union
 5. From opera to the movies – Entertaining GV
 6. The pasty
 7. The Carnegie library
 8. Women of the West
 9. Temperance union/churches
 10. Center for the Arts
- Add-On: Heritage Homes Walking Tour

DETAIL

Stop #1 Introduction (Main and Auburn)

1. Crossroads - Old sign of Grass Valley
2. Why they called it Grass Valley
3. Maidu...before
4. Chinatown – lowest point in the valley (flooding)
5. Corden Park gold discovery
6. Mining days: The Stamp Mill and Pelton Wheel
7. The “noise” -- difference between Grass Valley and Nevada City. One day of peace per year for the miners’ picnic
8. Big mines of the area: Empire, Northstar, and Idaho Maryland
9. Texas Tommy and the Washington Brewery – Prohibition

10. In 1854, the Union Hotel was built on the South corner but was destroyed by fire in 1855. More on hotels in the next stop

Stop #2 - The colorful history of hotels in GV (Holbrooke)

1. Holbrooke Hotel
 1. Original destroyed by fire; current building is from 1862
 2. Expansion
 3. Iron doors and tunnels underneath
 4. Famous guests: Presidents Grant, Harrison, Cleveland, and Garfield
 5. Mine shafts below your feet
 6. Recent renovation
2. Temby, then the Brett Harte Inn (Harte highest paid author in America)
 1. Herbert Hoover during the depression
3. The Wisconsin (Fillmore) and the great fire of 1855
4. The hotel experience in the 1800s
5. Hotel de France and an old Sears outlet

Stop #3 – Supplying the mines/retail gems (Corner of E. Main and Mill Street, then walking down Mill to Bank)

1. Railroad to Colfax - delivering goods while shipping out gold (Sarah Kidder)
2. Mill Street was originally a trail from nearby mines
3. Incorporation of GV. 1893. Retail and services thriving: Barbers, clothing stores, bookmakers, milliners, jewelers, AJ Foster's wallpaper store, Kramm Jeweler's, 44 liquor establishments in the 1890s (tie in the WCTU)

4. Supplying the miners... GV Hardware
5. Building facades on Mill: False fronts and architectural flourishes
6. Underwriting it: Nevada County Bank – the building and its story
7. Getting around with the trolley
8. Post-mining decline and renaissance

Stop #4 - The Union newspaper (151 Mill Street)

[See attached summary]

Stop #5 - From opera to the movies – Entertaining GV (161-67 Mill Street)

1. Opera House – Biggest building in the County; Mark Twain performance
2. 1896 fire on the block; short history of fires in Gold Country towns
3. Auditorium Theater: features and role
4. Strand silent movies
5. The Del Oro: Art Deco style--from 1941; paused in the war and completed in 1946; small town movie palace
6. Mural on the backside

Stop #6: The Pasty (corner of Neal and Mill Streets – site of the Golden Pasty?)

[See attached summary]

Stop #7: The Royce (Carnegie) Library (207 Mill Street)

1. Opening in 1916; \$15k grant

2. History behind Carnegie during the Gilded Age in the US
3. Giving back for the riches: over 1,600 libraries across the country
4. Story of Josiah Royce, philosopher and local born on this site
5. Architectural design
6. Across the street: Legend of AB Snyder, excavating for a gasoline tank, the vein of gold quartz

Stop #8: Women of the West (248 Mill Street)

1. Lotta Crabtree: Highest-paid actress of her day; growing up in GV
2. Lola Montez: Her story and the replica of her home. Site of the start of governance in GV.
3. Angle of Repose -Wallace Stegner
4. Lead into the activities of the WCTU in the next stop

Stop #9: Temperance Union/churches (Church Street between Walsh and Neal)

1. Episcopal Church – Oldest Episcopal Church in CA; one of two from the Gold Rush
2. Methodist Church
3. GV Cradle of CA Women’s Christian Temperance Union (Story of Dorcus Spencer)
4. Down the street
 1. WC Jones Hospital, 1907, became NC’s first private hospital; Life for injured miners before hospitals
 2. Grass Valley Museum and cultural center

Stop #10: Center for the Arts (Church and Main)

1. Built in 1947 – car dealership, gym, Beauty School

2. 2001 – Jon Blinder
3. 2004 – Art Deco facelift and 2017 expansion; COVID challenge
4. Current role in the community

Add-On: Heritage Homes Walking Tour (need to get the name of the creator and permission to incorporate)

Rough drafts of developed scripts:

Stop #4 – *The Union Newspaper*

Newspapers live and die by their credibility—so imagine launching one that was founded by a guy everyone called “Lying Jim.” Bold move.

The Union got its start in 1864, when two newcomers rode into western Nevada County with a mission: start a newspaper that supported Abraham Lincoln and the Union cause during the Civil War. Those two men were “Lying Jim” Townsend and Henry Blumenthal, and they were paid by Union supporters to create Grass Valley’s first Republican newspaper.

Now, journalism in the Gold Rush era was very different from what we expect today. No one was aiming to be “fair and balanced.” In fact, newspapers proudly wore their political loyalties on their sleeves—especially during election season. Page two was often packed with fiery opinions, editorials, and not-so-subtle attacks on the opposing party.

And then there was Lying Jim.

Townsend had a real talent for storytelling... whether or not the facts cooperated. He regularly reported on city councils and mayors that didn’t exist, along with murders, trials, and railroad accidents that never actually happened. Truth was flexible, at best.

The first issue of *The Union* rolled off the press on October 28, 1864, printed inside what’s now the Holbrooke Hotel. It didn’t exactly win over Grass Valley readers, who mostly supported Democratic papers like the *Grass Valley National*, which opposed Lincoln’s re-election and had launched just three months earlier.

As Election Day approached—and Lincoln went on to decisively defeat Democrat George McClellan—things got messy.

According to the *Nevada City Gazette*, “one of the meanest swindles ever heard of” was attempted in Grass Valley. The paper accused John R. Ridge of the *Grass Valley National* and J. W. E. Townsend—yes, Lying Jim—of trying to pull it off.

Here’s what happened: Ridge, representing pro-Confederate Democratic interests, allegedly offered Townsend a large sum of money to sell out *The Union*. The plan was to destroy the real edition, replace it with a fake pro-Democratic version, and distribute 1,000 bogus copies.

Blumenthal caught wind of the scheme just in time. He called in a posse of Union supporters to guard the newspaper office. When Ridge showed up around midnight to make the switch, he was turned away—though he insisted he thought the deal was legitimate.

Townsend arrived nearly two hours later and confessed. He claimed he hadn’t meant to cheat his partner and said Blumenthal would’ve gotten his share of the money. Then Townsend skipped town... and was never heard from again.

With Lying Jim gone, Blumenthal took full control of *The Union*—and immediately found himself under relentless attack from Ridge and the *National*. The rivalry spilled into print and even into physical confrontations. Duels were threatened more than once, though none ever actually happened.

The feud finally cooled in April 1865, when the Civil War ended. Just days later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Both papers reported the news with black-bordered pages in mourning.

Despite everything, Ridge reportedly expressed “profound regret” over Lincoln’s death. And in a moment that surprised many, John Ridge and Henry Blumenthal marched arm in arm in Grass Valley’s procession honoring the fallen president.

The Union has remained in daily circulation since 1864. The building in front of you was constructed in 1903 and housed the paper for 76 years before it moved to Glenbrook Basin—a few miles north of here. Remarkably, *The Union* is one of the only daily newspapers in California to survive continuously from that era. (*Confirmation pending.*)

Stop #6 – *The Pasty*

You might not recognize the word *pasty*—but once you hear the story, you won’t forget it.

A pasty is a handheld meat-and-vegetable pie, and it’s been around since 13th-century Britain. At first, it was food for the wealthy, but by the 1800s, it had become the go-to meal for miners in Cornwall, England. When Cornish miners came to California during the Gold Rush, they brought pasties with them—and Grass Valley never let them go.

That thick, crimped crust wasn't just decorative. It worked like a built-in handle, so miners could eat without getting arsenic dust—or other mining poisons—from their hands onto their food. They'd eat the filling and toss the crust away.

And according to Cornish folklore, that discarded crust wasn't wasted—it was left as an offering to the Bukas, mischievous little goblins believed to live in the mines. Keep them fed, and they'd (hopefully) keep accidents from happening.

Miners' wives usually filled pasties with beef, rutabaga, potato, and onion. Sometimes they even carved their husbands' initials into the crust so no one mixed them up. When the pasties arrived at the mine, the women would call out, "*Augie, Augie, Augie!*" The miners would shout back, "*Oy, oy, oy!*"

If you've ever been to a parade in Grass Valley or Nevada City, you may have heard the town crier keep that tradition alive by calling for the same response.

Pasties were perfect fuel for long days—miners often worked 12-hour shifts, and a pasty could keep them going. Some even had two meals baked into one: savory meat and vegetables on one end, and something sweet—like apples or jam—on the other. No utensils required.

These days, pasties are usually just savory—but the tradition lives on.

And if all this talk has made you hungry, you're in luck. Marshall's Pasties is just across the street, and you can taste a little piece of Gold Rush history for yourself.

The Mills Act

by Terry McAteer

Assessor Rolf Kleinhans and his team want to educate the public about potential tax relief available through the Mills Act. This California program provides financial incentives for property owners to restore and preserve qualified historic buildings in exchange for reduced property taxes. Enacted in 1972, the Mills Act allows cities and counties to enter contracts with historic property owners who commit to rehabilitation, restoration, and maintenance of the property.



A 10-Year Contract

Mills Act contracts have a minimum initial term of 10 years. The contract automatically renews each year on its anniversary date for an additional year, thus unless the City or owner files a notice of non-renewal, a Mills Act contract has a term of 10 years. If a contract is cancelled, the owner must pay a cancellation fee, and then the lower of the factored base year value or current market value will be enrolled for the following lien date (January 1).

How Does it Work?

After a property owner enters into a Mills Act contract, the Assessor is notified by the local contracting government agency, and the property is then valued under the rules and regulations of the Mills Act and Revenue and Taxation Code. Property valuation is determined by the "income" approach, which is based on projected income for both owner occupied and income producing properties. Then the projected income, less certain expenses, is divided by a capitalization rate determined annually by the California State Board of Equalization and Revenue and Taxation Code section 439.2 (b) or (c). This value is the property's "restricted value". This value is then compared to both the current market value and the factored base year value of the property. The lowest of these three values is then enrolled. This valuation process occurs every year as of January 1. Properties enrolled in a Mills Act contract are notified by mail of their Mills Act values for that year as determined by the Assessor.

The restricted value can be considerably lower than the other values, creating tax savings for the property owner. For more information, please see the [State Board of Equalization Guidelines](#).

Image C

Mills Act

Mills Act property owners are an integral part of preserving Truckee's unique historic past. The purpose of Mills Act contracts is to provide tax incentives to property owners in exchange for preserving and/or restoring qualified historic buildings.

Mills Act Applications

Applications for the Mills Act program are made through [Mills Act Application Form \(PDF\)](#). Photos of the interior and exterior of the structure must be submitted as part of the application package.

A complete application must be filed prior to September 1, with a signed and executed agreement provided to the Community Development Directory by December 1, in order for the contract to be in effect for the following year. Contracts not signed and executed by December 1 will be carried over for recordation to the following year.

Annual Reporting

Owners of Mills Act properties are required to submit an annual self-reporting form to document ongoing eligibility for the Mills Act program. The [Mills Act Self Reporting Form](#) can be submitted online.

For more information, please email [Laura Dabe, Senior Planner](#) or call 530-582-2937.





MILLS ACT APPLICATION FORM

DEPARTMENT USE ONLY

MILLS ACT APPLICATION YEAR: _____

CDD FEE COLLECTED: \$ No F 99

APPLICANT TO COMPLETE

APPLICANT NAME(S) _____ PHONE _____

APPLICANT EMAIL _____

APPLICANT ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PROPERTY OWNER NAME(S) _____ PHONE _____

PROPERTY OWNER EMAIL _____

PROPERTY OWNER ADDRESS _____ CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PROPERTY ADDRESS _____ ASSESSOR'S PARCEL NO. _____

ZONING _____ GENERAL PLAN DESIGNATION _____

APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

OWNERS SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____