

# **Post Offices of Chico**

1851-2024

A

Chronology

with

Historical Notes

by

**Don Alger & Ray Rolls**

A Publication from

**SONS IN RETIREMENT**

**Bidwell Branch 110**

**History Group**

**Chico, California**

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**Researching Chico's History**

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# SIR Publication Information

SONS IN RETIREMENT (SIR) is a social organization for men. The organization is designed to be a luncheon club composed of men no longer involved in full-time occupations. The purpose of SIR is to promote the well being of men through association of other men interested in increasing their quality of life through developing new friendships, and through activities with physical and mental social involvement.

SIR branches sponsor a variety of activities and the Chico Branch 110 has an active "History Group" which involves exploring topics related to Chico's historic buildings, institutions, businesses and people. Besides enjoying monthly meetings with discussions of topics of interest and some more formal presentations, some members are involved in pursuing original research on topics of historic interest in Chico.

These research projects are driven by individual's curiosity and often result in a significant amount of information which seems worthy of sharing. Besides the desire to share the information, there is often a strong desire/goal of the preservation of this historical information for other interested people.

These desires often lead to consideration of publishing the results of the research. Various options are available but the idea of having a publication crediting the SIR organization with the origin of the efforts leading to publications seemed attractive.

# Preface

This project represents a classic example of a topic which originated from a totally different project. While pursuing the history of the Collier Hardware building in Chico, California, the unexpected discovery was made that the United States Post Office resided in the building for a short period of time. That immediately led to the question "where was it before that?" That led to a very interesting diversion into what could be described as a major "rabbit hole" and the production of this document.

It should be pointed out that the authors are not historians in terms of any academic credentials. We have backgrounds in science and engineering but have been driven by very keen curiosities about a variety of Chico history topics.

We also have a strong desire to try to contribute to the preservation of historical information at a level more oriented toward the interested lay person as opposed to a professional historian. That means we are more likely to rely on existing information with the intent of retrieving, organizing and summarizing information as opposed to seeking out information from original sources found in rare papers in relatively obscure sources which the average interested person would not be inclined to access.

This, in part, implies that there will be less documentation than a professional historian would expect. Endeavors to provide authentication to afford the opportunity for analysis that the average reader might be curious about or wish to pursue further by relying on easily accessible sources will be the focus for our documentation.

In addition, this presentation will represent more of a chronology vs. a history with occasional relatively brief historical comments related to narratives of *how* or *why* events happened and not often about the significance of the events.

# Acknowledgements

**Barbara Alger** has not only been a constant supporter and advisor but also generously provided her assistance in editing and proofing.

**Kathleen Gabriel** has generously shared information she has researched on Chico Post Offices. She was born and raised in Chico, and has researched and published on aspects of downtown Chico. In 2024, she was President of the Chico Heritage Association and is a valuable resource on Chico history.

**Randy Taylor** who is a Board Member and Volunteer for the Chico History Museum and a local historian is primarily responsible for developing the Chico Post Office display at the Museum.

**Dave Nopel** who is a Board Member and Volunteer for the Chico History Museum and an enthusiast for local history has been available for questions throughout the project.

Meriam Library Special Collections has been the source of most of the photos either from the John Nopel Photograph Collection or the Northeastern California Historical Photograph Collection.

**Ron Braziel**, who is a member of the SIR History Group and the Webmaster for the SIR organization, provides the opportunity for digital publication on the local SIR website.

**Jim Braziel**, who is a member of the SIR History Group, has generously offered to help fund the publishing costs for the publications resulting from these research activities.

# Introduction

Until the late 1840s, there was very little emigration to California. However, in 1848, two events changed that dramatically.

In early February 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially ended the Mexican American War with the ceding of territory to the United States. This included what is now the entire southwestern United States including California and parts of Wyoming and Colorado.

Just a week before the signing of the treaty, James Marshall spotted gold in the water near the mill he was constructing for John Sutter. That August, his discovery became headlines in eastern newspapers and the Gold Rush was on.

California's population exploded, and therefore the need for connecting California with the rest of the country through the U. S mail became a priority.

In November 1848, Postmaster General Cave Johnson began the process of establishing Post Offices in California. By Christmas, steamships were carrying mail from New York to California via the Isthmus of Panama. When the ships reached Panama, the mail was taken off and transported via land about 50 miles to the Pacific Coast. Another steamship collected the mail and headed north to California.

In the 1850s and 1860s Congress tried a variety of methods of overland mail transportation methods and routes including the Pony Express in 1860.

After the Civil War, mail continued to be carried to California both by stagecoach and steamship, until the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

Getting mail from Sacramento to Chico, or Rancho Chico in the 1850s, was dependent on stagecoach service.

The 1851 construction of a bridge over Big Chico Creek allowed stage mail transportation on the Marysville-Shasta Road and an application for postal service, a post office and a postmaster ensued. Mail service in the Chico area began in 1851.

A very interesting sequence of post office locations, contract units, sub-stations, Branch Units, Non-Personnel Units (NPU), and postmasters provided the basis of mail service in the Chico area from 1851-2024.

# Post Offices of Chico\*

## Chronology

| <b>DATES</b> | <b>EVENT/LOCATION</b>  |
|--------------|--|
| 1851         | Post Office in Bidwell's <b>Original</b> store   |
| 1853-1861    | At Bidwell's adobe house with John Bidwell as Postmaster   |
| 1861-1869    | 1 <sup>st</sup> and Broadway in Bidwell's General Store  |
| 1869-1871    | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (exact location undetermined)   |
| 1871-1894    | 1 <sup>st</sup> and Broadway in Bidwell's Building   |
| 1894-1907    | In Dorn Building on 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street   |
| 1907-1916    | Masonic Building (currently Collier Hardware building)   |
| 1913         | The Chapman Branch of the Chico Post Office opened in the Oakdale Drug Store with the expectation of it being designated substation # 1      |
| 1916         | Substation #3 of the Chico Post Office opened in the store of Zumwalt and Miller in the Chico Vecino at 2 <sup>nd</sup> Avenue and Esplanade |
| 1952         | Branch Post Office at 173 East 3 <sup>rd</sup> Avenue  |
| 1916-1960    | 5 <sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway Midtown Post Office  |
| 1957-2007    | Terrace Pharmacy Sub Station   |
| 1961         | New Post Office at 550 Vallombrosa was established   |
| 2012-2020    | New Branch Post Office Unit at 554 Vallombrosa   |

\*This project was part of the Sons In Retirement (Branch 110) History Group of exploring topics related to Chico's historic buildings, institutions, businesses and people.



# Post Offices of Chico

## Chico Postmasters Chronology

| DATE | POSTMASTER           | LOCATION  |
|------|----------------------|---|
| 1851 | Alexander H. Barber  | Bidwell's <b>original</b> store                                 |
| 1853 | John Bidwell         | Bidwell's Adobe   |
| 1861 | John Bidwell         | Bidwell's General Store at 1 <sup>st</sup> & Broadway           |
| 1865 | Thomas Bidwell       | Bidwell's General Store at 1 <sup>st</sup> & Broadway           |
| 1869 | Wesley Lee           | Bidwell's General Store at 1 <sup>st</sup> & Broadway           |
| 1869 | William Neil DeHaven | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (1 <sup>st</sup> location) |
| 1871 | Louis A. Hildreth    | Bidwell's General Store at 1 <sup>st</sup> & Broadway           |
| 1883 | John M. Ormsby       | Bidwell's General Store at 1 <sup>st</sup> & Broadway           |
| 1885 | Jo. D. Sproul        | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1887 | Robison M. Jones     | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1988 | George L McIntosh    | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1989 | H. T. Batchelder     | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1894 | J. G. Lewis          | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1898 | William W. Wilson    | North side of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street (2 <sup>nd</sup> location) |
| 1902 | John Wesley Magee    | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Street & Masonic Building                       |
| 1911 | Harry S. Moir        | Masonic Building  |
| 1914 | Benjamin F. Hudspeth | Masonic Building and 5 <sup>th</sup> and Broadway               |
| 1923 | George P. Morse      | 5 <sup>th</sup> and Broadway                                    |
| 1941 | John H. Vaughan      | 5 <sup>th</sup> and Broadway                                    |
| 1961 | Royal Brown          | 5 <sup>th</sup> and Broadway and 500 Vallombrosa                |
| 1963 | Irving A. Cleek      | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 1968 | James Pierce Butler  | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 1989 | Leon Thur            | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 1990 | Alexander J. Valdiva | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 1993 | Clinton R. Powell    | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2003 | Gregory M. Smith     | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2012 | Ann Glynn            | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2014 | Kelli A. Love        | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2016 | Talisyn Hodson       | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2018 | Balraj Joshi         | 550 Vallombrosa   |
| 2021 | Kathleen Mulholland  | 550 Vallombrosa.  |

### Sources:

*Chico Record*, .p. 1 and 8; April 16, 1916, and p. 1, October 27, 1923.

Postmaster Finder website:

<https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/postmaster-finder/postmaster-finder-faq.htm#pmffaq-content-1>

# Post Offices of Chico

## Postmaster Appointments\*

\* Two sources provided the following information.

1. <https://historyhub.history.gov/f/discussions/24029/how-are-postmaster-appointments-decided>
2. <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/postmaster-finder/postmaster-finder-faq.htm#:~:text=Regulations%20required%20that%20postmasters%20execute,selected%20through%20the%20merit%20system>.

According to the United States Postal Service, from 1836 to 1971, postmasters at the larger Post Offices were appointed by the President, by and with the consent of the Senate. Postmasters earning less than \$1,000 per year were appointed by the Postmaster General, generally upon the advice of the local congressman or townspeople. Regulations required that postmasters execute a valid bond and take an oath of office. Minors were ineligible, and U.S. citizenship was required for appointment to all but the smallest Post Offices. Prior to 1971, it was also required that postmasters live in the delivery area of their Post Office. Since 1971, postmasters have been selected through the merit system.

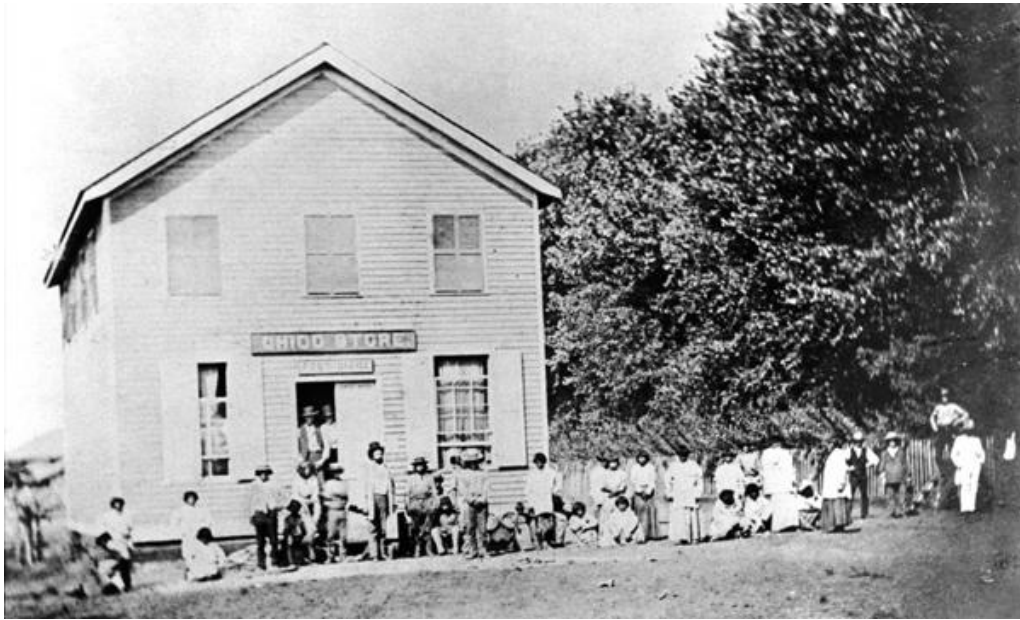
The exact reasons and methods that a person was nominated for postmaster probably varied somewhat over time and from place to place. Political patronage was often involved.

Efforts to determine the appointment process other than for a few Chico Postmasters have not been pursued. It has been determined (somewhat by accident) that Wesley C. Lee, Irving A. Cleek and Benjamin F. Hudspeth were actually approved by the Senate and appointed by the President.

# Post Offices of Chico

## Historical Notes

1851 Bidwell's Old Store



Post Office sign more clearly shown

John Bidwell in front of store [Leek, p. 67]

Numerous sources e.g. [McGie, p. 92, Wells, p. 282; and a Chico History Museum Display] indicate that John Bidwell obtained the contract for postal service in 1851 (July 1851 by one source) and the first Postmaster was appointed soon after (in October 1851). This coincides with 1851 being when a bridge over Big Chico Creek was constructed, which allowed stage service to deliver mail to Rancho Chico on the road to Oregon, the Marysville-Shasta Road (now the Esplanade).

The store was a large wooden building. The lower part was used as a store and post office and the upper part as a Masonic Hall. [White, p. 32]. The photo shows the distribution of goods to the Indians in 1852. [White, p. 33].

An enduring relationship was established when John Bidwell was befriended by the Mechoopda after he purchased the Mexican land grant of Rancho del Arroyo Chico. Most Mechoopda, as well as residents from other villages, moved to Bidwell's ranch, where they worked. John Bidwell employed many Indians on his ranch.

The store building was torn down in 1860 [White, p. 33].

**Alexander H. Barber** was the first Postmaster of Chico Post Offices and finally achieved recognition when a Branch Post Office in downtown Chico was established and named in his honor in the early 2000s.

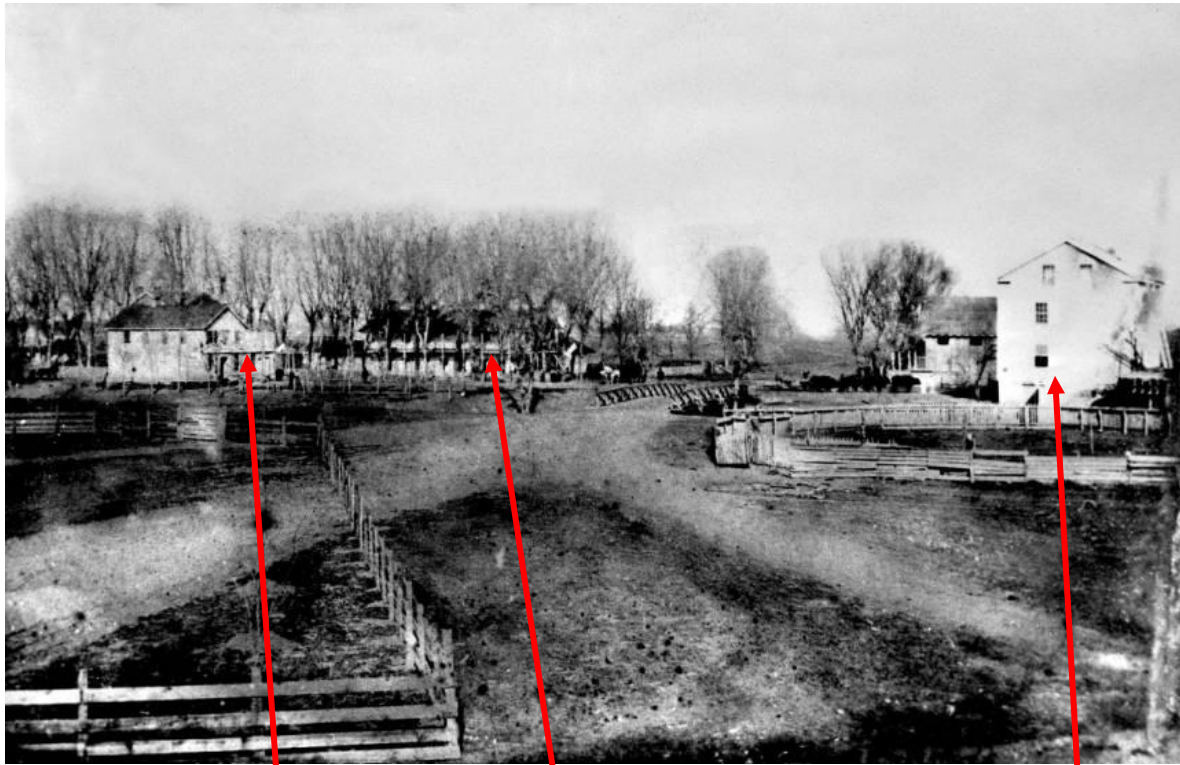
He worked for Bidwell as his Ranch Manager and supervised various activities around the ranch. He died on January 7, 1866, and is buried in the Chico Cemetery.

No explanation as to why John Bidwell was not the first Postmaster was found. An unsubstantiated reason may have been that he was heavily involved with attempting to establish treaties with the Indians in 1851 and may have simply delegated the responsibility to Alex Barber.

The Post Office only resided in the store briefly before it moved to Bidwell's newly constructed Adobe house which was built in ca 1852 [White, p. 51]. The exact date of the move of the Post Office to the Adobe was not determined, but Bidwell became the Postmaster in 1853.

Since some may not be aware of the existence of this original store, as were the authors, the question of exactly where this structure was located arose. The location of the first Post Office relative to some other significant structures at that time is shown in the following picture from ca 1858.

## Post Office Location



**Store/Post Office**

**Adobe**

**Flour Mill**

This photo, ca 1858, shows the Post Office building/Store after an addition. The store was razed in 1860 [White p. 51].

The Adobe was built in 1852. It was indicated [White, p. 51] that the Adobe was razed in ca 1874 and this was substantiated by an article in *The Weekly Butte Record*, April 25, 1874.

“The old adobe on the Bidwell premises, so familiar to old residents of Chico, is undergoing the process of demolition. In a little while it will have entirely disappeared and those who have known it long will know it again no more forever. In its time it has witnessed Chico’s growth from nothing to be the most flourishing town in Northern California.”

The original Flour Mill was built in 1853. It was razed and a new one was built with more efficient grinding equipment in ca 1859 [Gillis and Magliari p. 136].



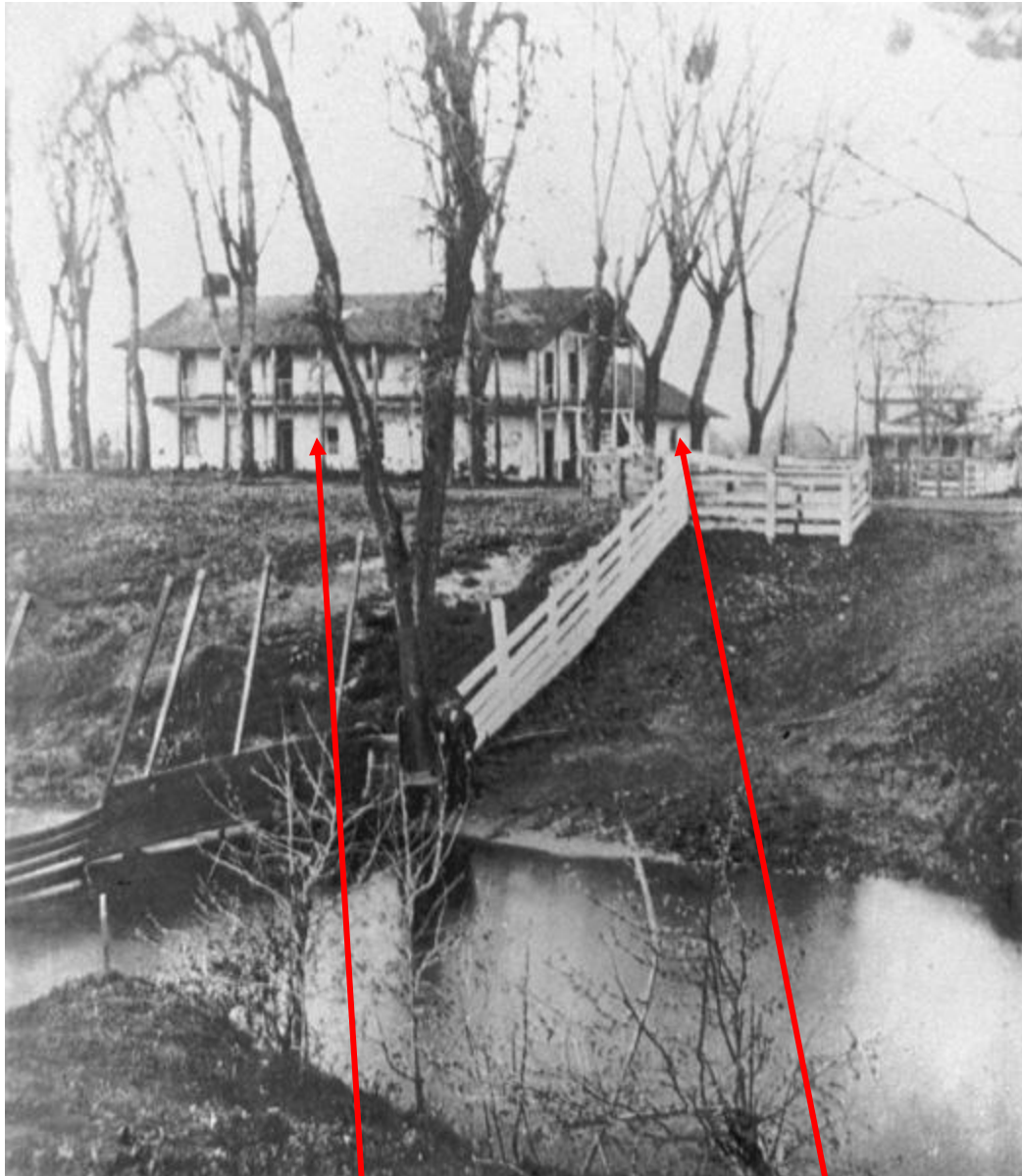
## 1853 Bidwell's Old Adobe



**Adobe House**

The Adobe house was initially constructed in ca 1852 and an addition was added in ca 1858.

John Bidwell assumed the duties of Postmaster in 1853 and the postal service was moved from the Store to the Adobe at an undetermined date.



**Original Adobe**

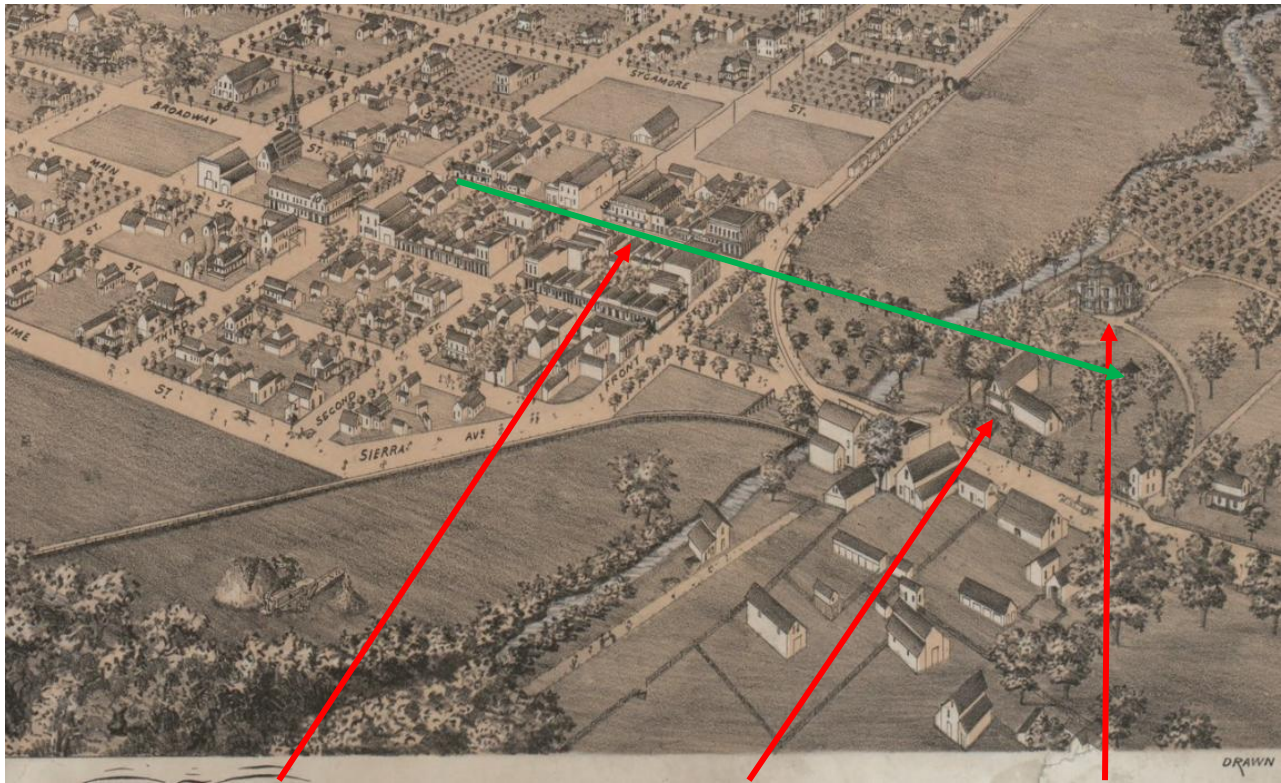
**Addition**

The Adobe photo taken in ca 1868 with the addition in ca 1858 is more clearly shown.

The question of the location of the Store and Adobe relative to the Bidwell Mansion arose.

The often cited 1871 "Birds Eye View" of Chico is shown on the next page and was consulted to resolve the question of location of these older buildings relative to the Bidwell Mansion, which was completed in 1868

“Bird’s Eye View 1871”



**Extension of Broadway**

**Bidwell's Adobe House**

**Bidwell Mansion**

However, the artist's rendition of the relative location of the Mansion and Adobe is not accurate. Bidwell's Mansion was much closer to the Adobe than shown and was actually between the Adobe and the extension of Broadway.

More accurate representations are shown on the following pages.

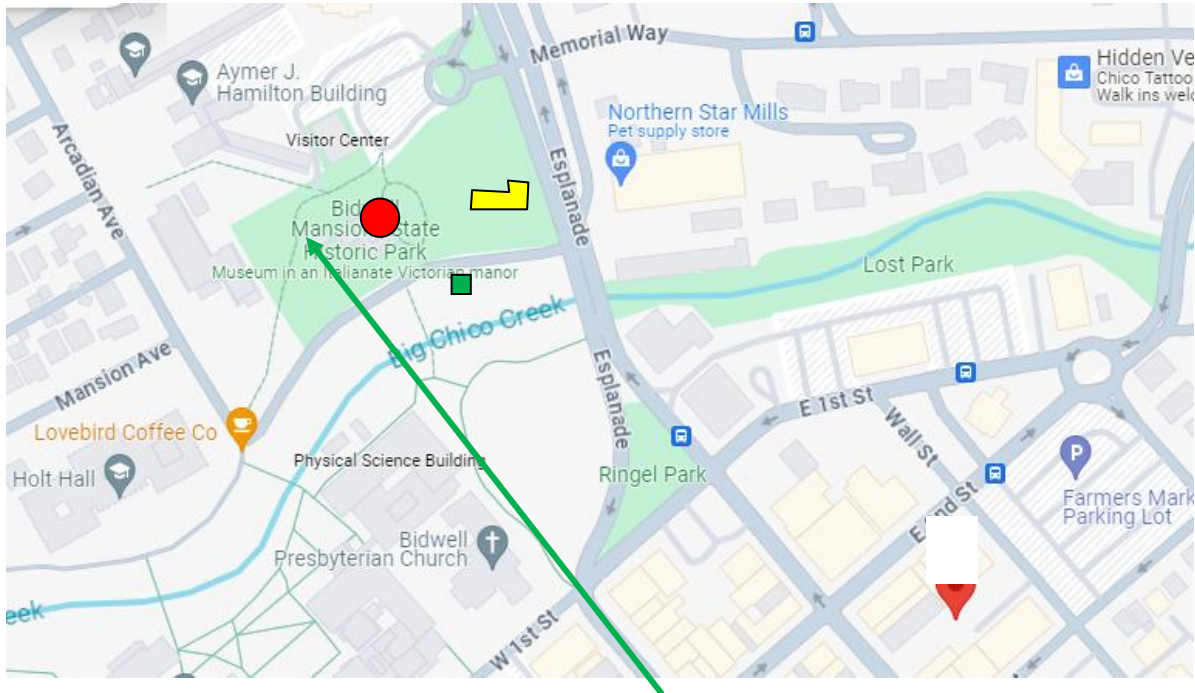




*Artist's rendition of the Bidwell Mansion prior to the razing of the Old Adobe*

This artist's rendition, which resides, as of 2024, in the Pioneer Museum in Oroville, California, gives a slightly more accurate representation of relative locations but makes it appear that the Mansion is closer than it actually was. The relative locations are accurately shown [White, p. 52] and on the following page relative to the current Chico landscape?

## Location of Buildings



● is Bidwell Mansion; ■ is Bidwell's Original Store; L is the Adobe

→ is the extension of Broadway

As indicated previously, the current Bidwell Mansion is East (toward the Esplanade) from the extension of Broadway.

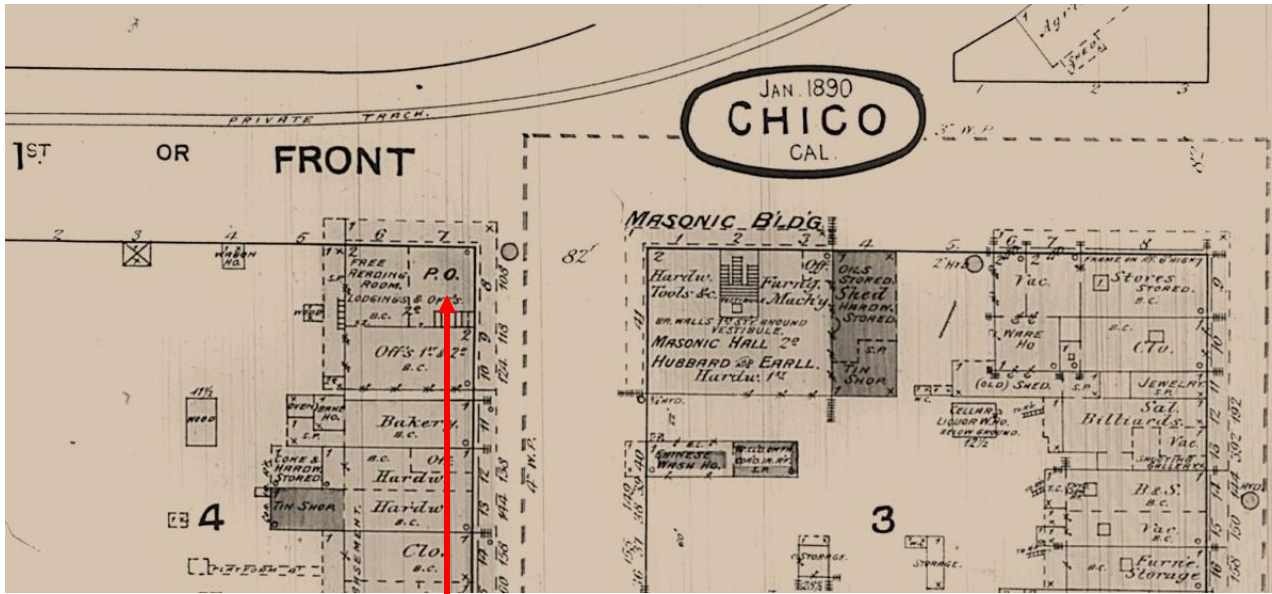
1861-1869 and 1871-1894 Bidwell's Store at First and Broadway



Two photos of Bidwell's General store built in 1861 at the corner of Broadway and Front Street ( currently First Street).

The Post Office was in the corner on the bottom floor as is shown on the 1890 Sanborn map.





P.O. is the abbreviation used to designate a Post Office.



This is a photo of what may have served as Bidwell's office



This is another photo inside Bidwell's Building at First and Broadway, showing a product of Bidwell's many agricultural ventures.

Since the exact dates of these photos are not known, there is uncertainty as to where in the building these photos were taken. The uses of the first and second floor changed over the years as demonstrated in the following.

Besides functioning as a Post Office and general store, it was described as the "first public hall" in Chico [*The Chico Record, May 30, 1936*].

"The first public hall was built by General Bidwell in 1861.....It was a two-story building, with a large open room in the second story. Surrounding the room was a rostrum, seated with benches. The room was about 60x70 feet in dimensions. The center was seated with movable benches, without any backs or simply boards set on supports. ....The lower floor was occupied by the J. Bidwell & Co. general merchandise store, the post office, the telegraph office and Wells Fargo & Company's office."

The second floor was used as a meeting place for various organizations including the Masons. In 1861, the Masons began a ten-year lease for use of the second floor. They moved into the building across the street (currently Collier Hardware) in 1871.

At some point, the second story of the building was remodeled and arranged for offices, and by 1890, there was no general store shown on the Sanborn map on the first floor, although the Post Office remained there.

John Bidwell continued serving as Postmaster when the Post Office moved from the Adobe to his General Store at Front Street (now First Street) until he was elected to Congress in 1865. He turned his store over to Thomas Bidwell (his brother), who bought him out. [Nancy Leek, <https://goldfieldsbooks.com/2020/03/22/thomas-bidwell-the-rest-of-the-story/>].

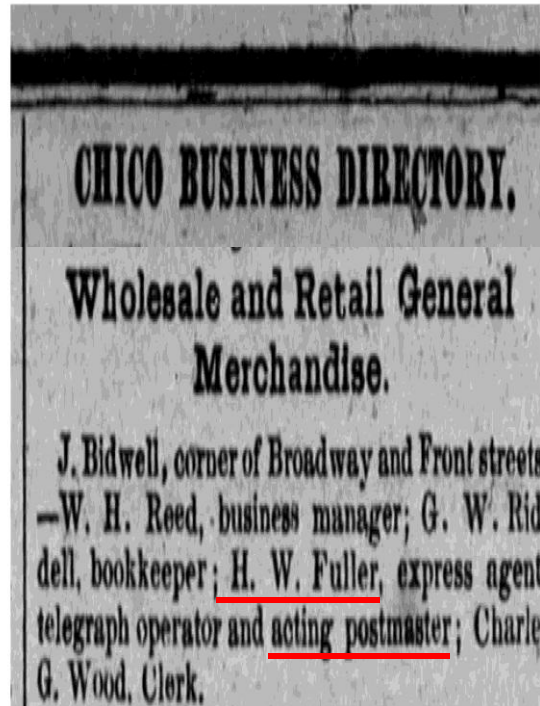
Thomas Bidwell also became the Chico Postmaster in 1865.

Thomas's health was not strong — he may have suffered from tuberculosis. After graduating from St. John's in 1855, he decided to come to California. There he could work for his brother and the climate would be better for his health. At first he managed the Rancho Chico orchards.

When John Bidwell returned from Congress in 1867 he hurried to see his brother. He wrote to Annie that "he was so emaciated and looked so feeble that I thought he could not live more than a few days at most." He survived a few more months, but died on September 8, 1867. He was buried in Chico Cemetery.

Thomas Bidwell was initially replaced by an acting postmaster.

May 22, 1868



Wesley Lee was appointed by President Ulysses Grant as the Postmaster of Chico in January of 1869. Wesley C. Lee had started the Lee Pharmacy in Chico in 1857.

He held the Postmaster position for less than a year due to the pharmacy demanding more of his time.

By November, William N. DeHaven was the new Chico Postmaster and the Post Office moved out of Bidwell's General Store. More discussion of this situation appears on the following pages with the 1869 location of the Post Office.

However, the Post Office moved back to the General Store in 1871 where it remained there until 1894.

Beginning July 1, 1863, free mail delivery was authorized in cities where income from local postage was more than sufficient to pay all expenses of the service. Within a year, free delivery of mail by salaried letter carriers was offered in 65 cities nationwide. By 1880, free delivery was offered in 104 cities, and by 1900, in 796 cities.

During this time, mail was addressed only to "John Doe, Chico" or "John Doe, Rancho Chico" until April 1902 when mail "delivery" was instituted and people had individual addresses and mailboxes.

If people did not come to check to see if they happen to have mail at the Post Office, notices were placed in local papers for notification of available mail.

Chico Enterprise  
06 Feb 1880, Fri - Page 2

**CHICO LETTER LIST.**

**L**IST OF LETTERS remaining in the post-office at Chico, Butte county, Cal., for the week ending Feb. 6, 1880.

Persons calling for any of the following letters please say "advertised," and give the date of this list.

|                  |                     |
|------------------|---------------------|
| Anderson, Amanda | Israel, W H         |
| Blest, William   | Julien, S D         |
| Chapman, C K     | King, Miss K F      |
| Cox, J           | Mallory, Miss Mary  |
| Connor, J G      | Richardson, R       |
| Deardoff, Daniel | Robinson, J K       |
| Engle, R P       | Starkit, Bill       |
| Gleason, Geo J   | St. Clair, Mrs Anna |
| Goss, Joseph     | Stanley, John D     |

L. A. HILDRETH, P. M.

Chico Enterprise  
20 Feb 1880, Fri - Page 2

**CHICO LETTER LIST.**

**L**IST OF LETTERS remaining in the post-office at Chico, Butte county, Cal., for the week ending Feb. 20, 1880.

Persons calling for any of the following letters please say "advertised," and give the date of this list.

|                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Crawford, Robert   | Kennedy, James     |
| Campbell, J M      | Knox, W R          |
| Carlisle, Wm B     | Lewis, J L         |
| Cornwell, Ozias M  | Mason, Sylvester   |
| Drake, James R     | Mead, Miss Bell    |
| Driscoll, George   | Morantez, Pallina  |
| Gaffney, Michael D | Odell, Griffith    |
| Hicks, West        | Robinson, J W      |
| Jacobs, J M        | Rutherford, Joseph |
|                    | Smith, G W         |

L. A. HILDRETH, P. M.



## 1869-1871 North Side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street

### **An extract from the 1871 "Bird's Eye" Map**



**2<sup>nd</sup> Street**

**Masonic  
Building**

**Broadway  
Bidwell  
Store**

The exact location of the Post Office during this period has not been determined. One source [Chico History Museum Display] indicates it was "near the Noonan Building on the NE corner". The identity of the Noonan Building in the above map has not been determined. The possible location in the office of the *Northern Enterprise* (see comments below) would suggest it might be "above Wood's Hall Building over Harker and Dorn's Store" [*Northern Enterprise*, May 1869]. However, the location of these sites on the above map has also not been identified.

In addition, the curious reasons for the move from Bidwell's General Store to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street in 1869 and then back to the store in 1871 has not been verified. However, some reasons for the move may have been that it was a very busy and probably stressful time for Bidwell, and he perhaps he did not to want to resume Postmaster responsibilities.

Some of the possible turmoil in Bidwell's life influencing the change in Post Office locations may have involved the following issues.



In 1865, before he left for Washington D.C., Bidwell had decided he should have a more appropriate house and began construction of a three-story mansion with all the modern conveniences [Leek p. 76]. This project had to be continued when he returned to Chico in 1867.

Alexander Barber, Bidwell's Ranch Superintendent and significant participant in the Indian 1851 treaty negotiations [White, p. 82] and the first Postmaster died in January 1866 while Bidwell was in Washington, D.C. One more distraction!

In 1867, when Bidwell returned to Chico, after serving in Congress, he found himself in debt resulting from a series of mismanagement decisions on the ranch [Leek p. 78]. Attending to the ranch, under those circumstances must have been very stressful.

Since the next Postmaster was not appointed until January 1869, Bidwell probably also had responsibilities for finding an acting Postmaster.

In June 1867, the Union Party convened to select a candidate for Governor of California. Bidwell was highly popular and confident he would be nominated [Leek p. 82]. However, he did not receive the nomination.

Then, on April 16, 1868, he was married to Annie in Washington, D.C., at her parents' home. They arrive back in Chico on May 25, 1868 [Leek, p. 83]. It took approximately a month of travel time each way to and from California. John and Annie then had to put the final touches on Bidwell Mansion.

It is not clear how much time and effort John Bidwell devoted to finding the next candidate for Postmaster, or how the hectic preceding years influenced his decision to not be the Postmaster again, but by November 1869, **William Neil DeHaven** was appointed the new Chico Postmaster.

The question remains as why the Post Office was moved out of Bidwell's Store in 1869 and then back into the store in 1871. A reasonable answer to that question is that William DeHaven was Editor of a local paper, the *Northern Enterprise*, in 1869 and that office was on the north side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. It seems likely that the Post Office was moved to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street for DeHaven's convenience. DeHaven was elected to the State Assembly in the September 6, 1871, election [Wells, p. 171] and was replaced by Louis A. Hildreth as Postmaster. For whatever reason, the Post Office was then moved back to Bidwell's General Store until 1894.

## 1894-1907 North Side of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street



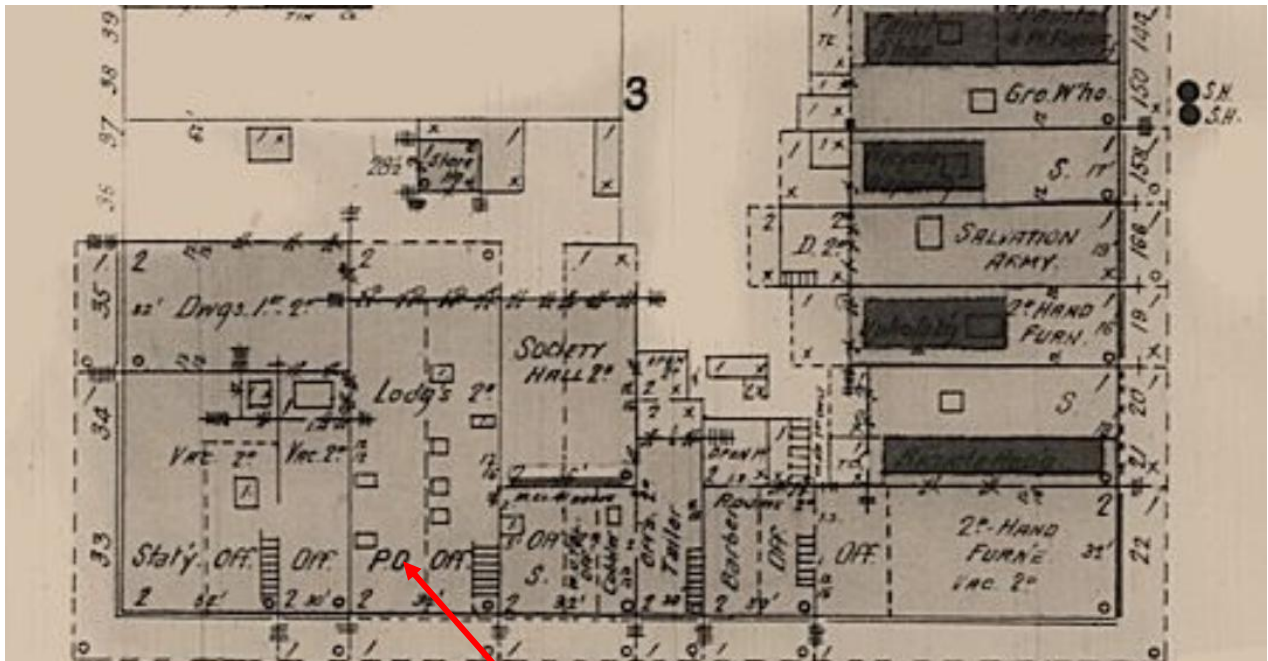
**Picture of the Post Office ca 1902**



The location of the 1902 Post Office relative to 2024 establishments can be guessed based on the similar sequence of five windows as shown in the two pictures above. The current establishment at the site of the 1902 Post Office is the Banshee Restaurant.

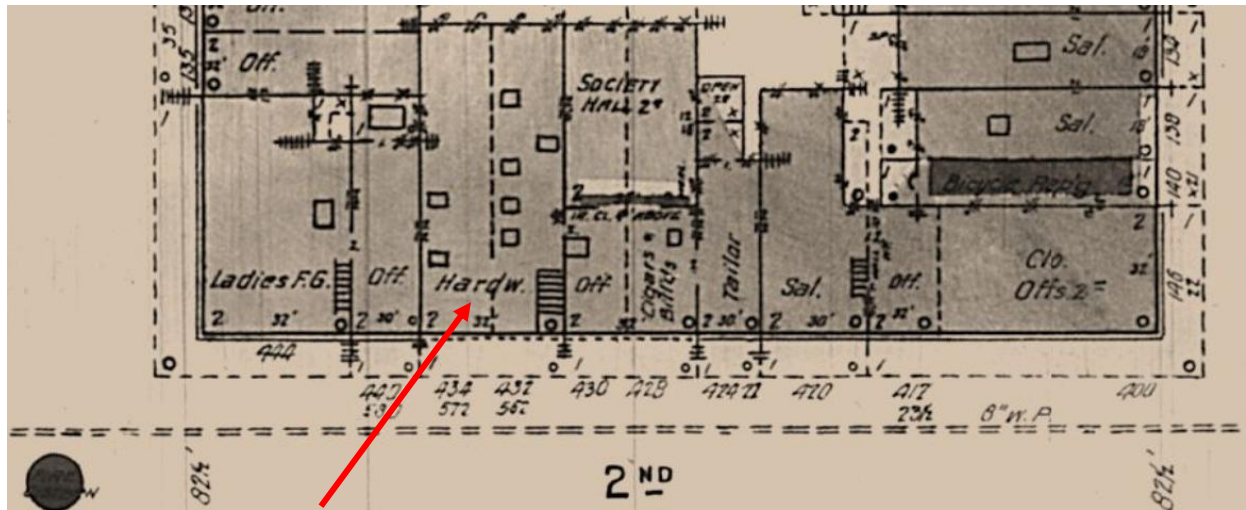
In addition, examination of Sanborn maps for 1902 clearly shows the location of the Post Office.

## 1902 Sanborn map showing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Street Post Office



Post Office Location

## 1909 Sanborn map showing 2<sup>nd</sup> Street



Since the Post Office moved in 1907, the 1909 Sanborn map clearly shows the absence of the Post Office at this site where it was in 1902 with a Hardware store in its place.





**Two pictures of the inside of the Post Office ca 1905**



**Picture of the Post Office ca 1902**

Note the sign on the delivery wagon designating "Rural Free Delivery". Rural Free Delivery was first tried on October 1, 1896, in West Virginia. Within a year it was operating in 29 states.

In 1899, the Post Office Department decided to "experiment" with extending RFD across an entire county. It was judged a success and rural free delivery became a permanent service on July 1, 1902. The first rural route in California was on February 1, 1897 in Campbell, California, and the Chico route was established on April 1, 1902. The word "free" was dropped in 1906, since it was understood.



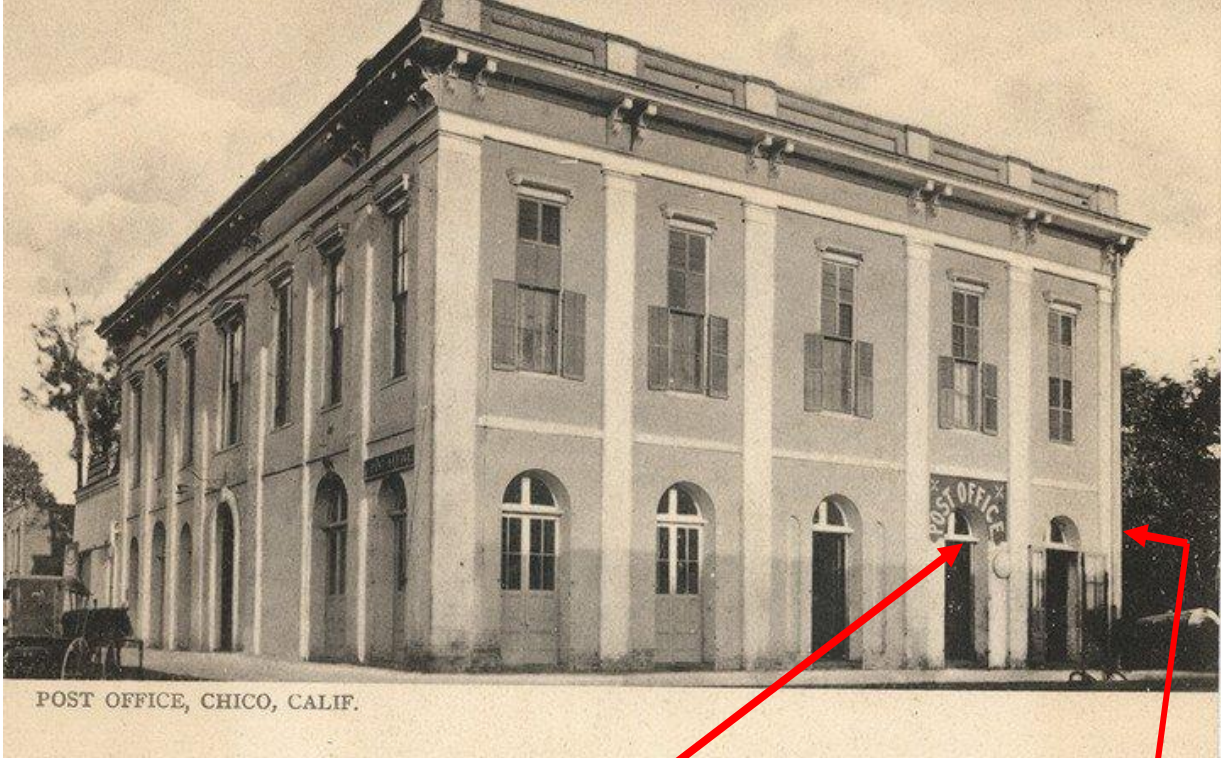
**Photo (ca 1914) showing the method of mail service from Chico to Cohasset**

An interesting responsibility of some Post Offices was to transfer mail to other Post Offices. The first contractors to carry mail between Post Offices were horseback riders. Then there was a preference for use of stagecoaches. By 1845, Congress abandoned its preference for stagecoaches; with contracts being awarded to the lowest bidder for what "may be necessary to provide for celerity (promptness), certainty and security of such transportation". Postal clerks shortened the phrase to three asterisks or stars (\*\*). These bids became known as star bids and the routes became known as star routes.

The first Cohasset, California post office was established February 20, 1888, and lasted until 1920. A "star route" from Chico to Cohasset was operated to transfer the mail from Chico to Cohasset.



1907-1916 Masonic Building (Collier Hardware)



POST OFFICE, CHICO, CALIF.

**Broadway Entrance**

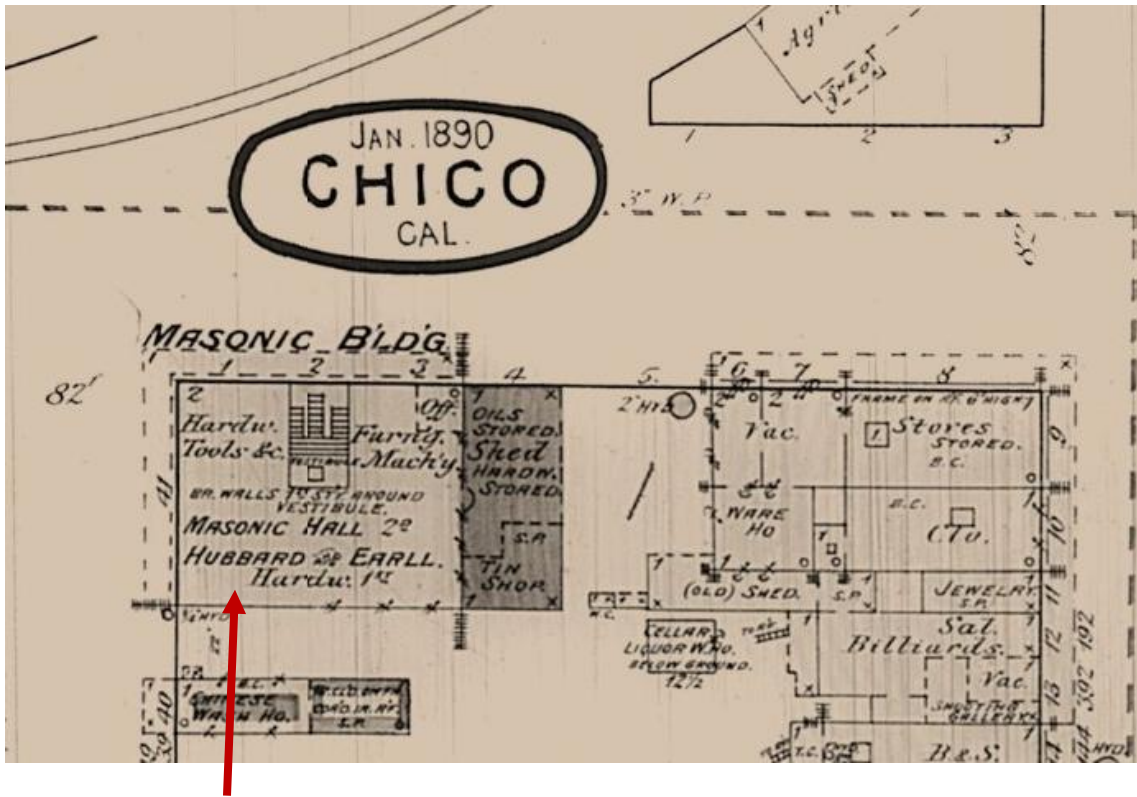
**South side Entrance  
(see next page)**



**First Street Entrance**

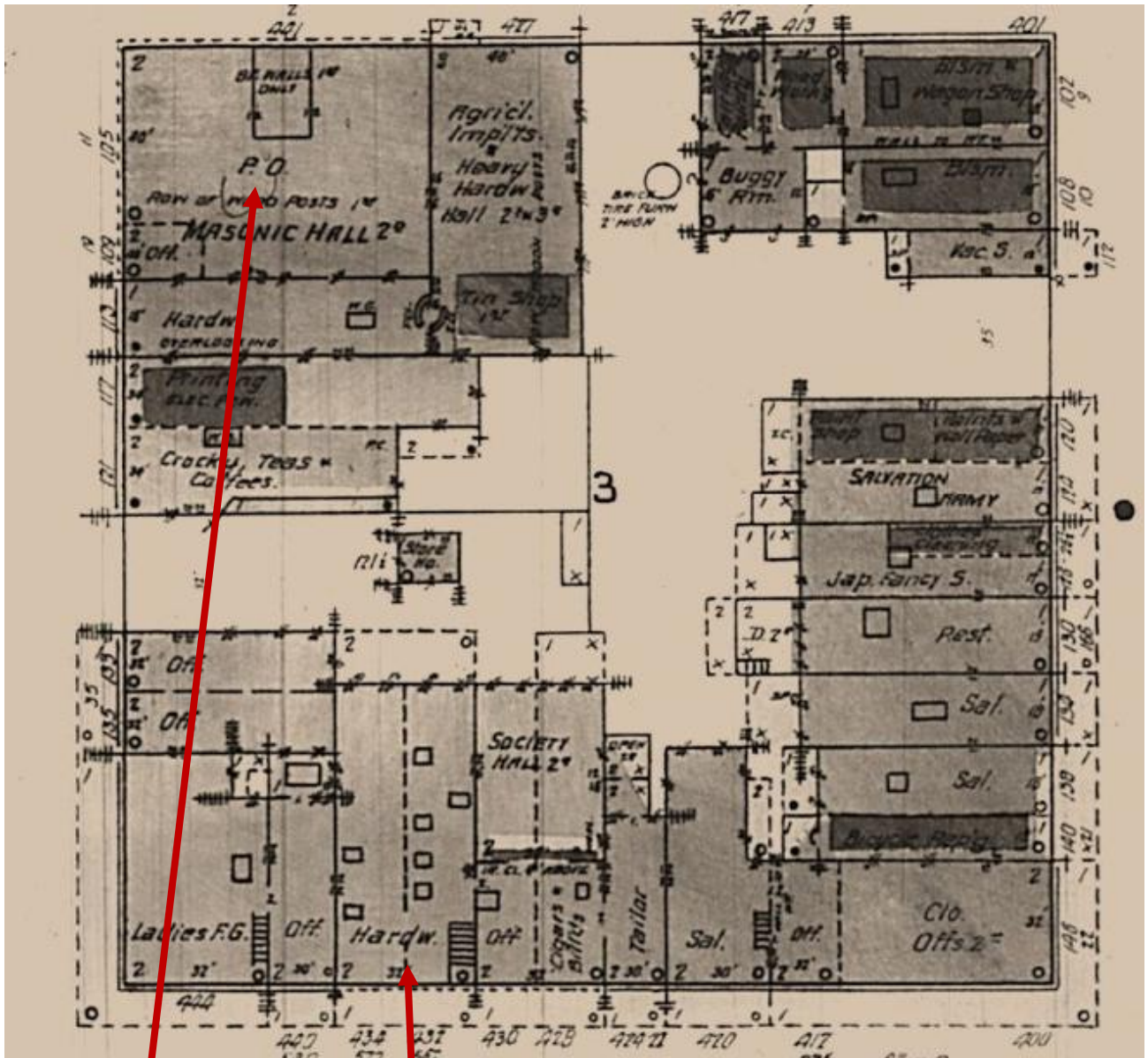


As of 2024, it was possible to still see the indication of the south entrance to the Post Office inside Collier Hardware.



1890 Sanborn map showing a hardware store in the Masonic Building



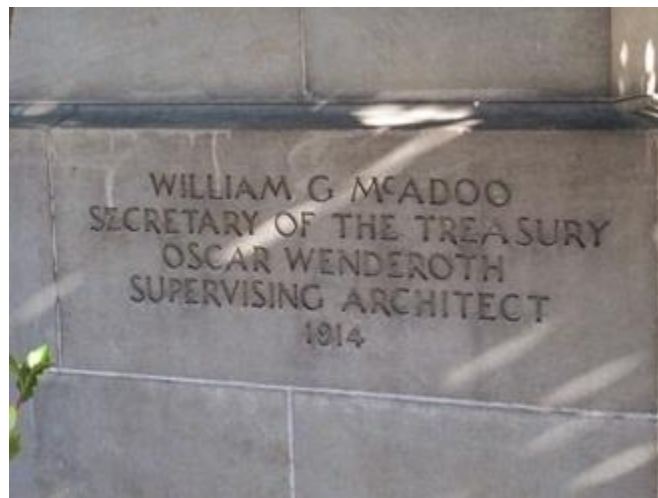


This 1909 Sanborn map shows the Post Office in the Masonic Building and a hardware store on 2<sup>nd</sup> Street where the Post Office was previously

1916-Present Fifth and Broadway (141 W. 5<sup>th</sup> St.)



**A 1936 Photo**



Construction of this building occurred in 1912-14, but it was not occupied by the Post Office until 1916.



On January 11, 1985, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as "U.S. Post Office-Chico Midtown Station", but is more commonly known as the Downtown Chico Post Office. The National Register number is 85000122

Besides housing the Post Office it also contained a variety of Federal Offices and has also been referred to as the Federal Building.

The Chico Midtown Station is significant as an example of a small combined Post Office and Federal Building. A relatively small number of this building type were constructed in California before 1926.



1951-61 Branch Post Office at 173 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue.



**Plaque designating a one time postal affiliation**



This site was originally thought to be a sub-station but in a personal communication with Bruce Crowson, he indicated that it was in fact a fully fledged Branch Post Office.



This photo is compliments of Lain Hensley, the current owner of the building, who provided a tour of the facility with interesting insights into details of the construction with respect to Postal Inspector's viewing opportunities from the attic.

The picture shows what is a fully fledged Post Office as opposed to a sub-station in a small area of a regular business such as a grocery store or pharmacy.


## Sub-Stations

These were postal units administered by a Post Office. It usually referred specifically to contract stations, which were not delivery offices but provided services such as selling postal supplies. They were often created to provide a convenience for customers in certain sections of a city or to alleviate the work load of the main Post Office.

## Sub-Station #1 or 2?

The sub-station #2, was in a Knotwell's Oakdale Drug Store, opening in 1913 before the post office had moved to the new building on 5<sup>th</sup> St. [*Chico Record*, December, 28, 1913, p. 4]. The numbering system of the early substations has not been clarified so there is some uncertainty in the proper substation number.

## Sub Station #3

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>The Chico Enterprise<br/>08 Sep 1916, Fri · Page 4</p>  <p><b>NEW SUB P. O.<br/>OPENS FOR<br/>BUSINESS</b></p> <p>Substation No. 3 of the Chico post-office is open in the store of Zumwalt &amp; Miller, in Chico Vecino, today. Stamps, money orders and registered matter will be handled through the new branch postoffice.</p> | <p>Realizing the needs of the patrons of the postoffice living in Chico Vecino, after the postoffice was moved from First and Broadway into the Federal building, Postmaster Hudspeth has finally succeeded in getting the sanction of the Postoffice Department at Washington, D. C., to establish what will be known as <u>Chico station No. 3.</u></p> <p>The residents of Chico Vecino will be able to buy and cash money orders, register letters, secure stamps and stamped paper and to send parcel post matter without coming to the main post-office.</p> <p>The postmaster has made requisition for a large package and letter box which will be installed at the station, and a collection will be made each day.</p> |
|--|--|

**Zumwalt & Miller**  
Second and Esplanade  
Chico Vecino.

**ZUMWALT & MILLER**  
Chico Vecino Grocers  
"Quality First"





**Terrace Pharmacy photo ca 1958**

Bruce Crowson was co-owner of Terrace Pharmacy, which existed from 1957-2007, and had a postal Sub-Station during all or nearly all of that time. The Pharmacy conducted essentially all functions of the main Post Office except for issuing passports. During this time it was designated as Sub-Station #1 [Personal communication from Bruce Crowson].

No endeavor to attempt to determine other sub-stations after it was noted that there were many and they often did not last long [personal communication from Rich Olson].

## 1961-Present Main Post Office 550 Vallombrosa



This building became the main Post Office in 1961 and was indicated by USPS as the address of the Postmaster for Chico since that time.

## ca 2012-2020 Barber NPU, 554 Vallombrosa



NPU stands for Non Personnel Unit (i.e. there are no postal employees present) and it was used in Chico for personal mail boxes.

As of July 2024, this site was still affiliated with the USPS but was no longer an NPU, although the internet searches still describes it as an existing NPU. It was a functioning Branch Unit from at least 2012 to March 5, 2020, when a fire occurred and it was closed for this usage. The exact original date has not been determined, so it could have been created somewhat before 2012.





Street view from the parking lot showing the 554 building with the name of the Post Office Branch Unit



**Close-up view of the sign for the A. H. Barber Unit.**

A. H. Barber was the first postmaster for Chico Post Offices in 1851, when it was in John Bidwell's Original Store. He was finally honored by this Unit bearing his name.

# Resources

## Written Sources

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Leek, Nancy, *John Bidwell: The Adventurous Life of a California Pioneer*. Chico, CA. ANCHR, 2010.

McGie, Joseph F., *History of Butte County: Volume I*. Butte County Board of Education, 1982.

Wells, Harry & Gilbert, Frank & Chambers, W. L., *The History of Butte County, California in Two Volumes*, This work contains material that was originally published by Harry Wells of San Francisco in 1882. The publication is currently within the Public Domain.

White, Gregory G., *Loveliest of Places: A Study of the Pre-Mansion Historical Resources of Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park*. California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2015.

## Web Sites

Special Collections Photos

Special Collections Sanborn maps

Newspapers.com

[California Digital Newspaper Collection](https://cdnc.ucr.edu/) <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/>

Postmaster Finder <https://about.usps.com/who/profile/history/postmaster-finder/postmaster-finder-faq.htm#pmffaq-content-1>

Polk City Directories

## Personal Communications

Kathleen Gabriel: Please see comments in Acknowledgements page

Dave Nopel: Please see comments in the Acknowledgements page.

Bruce Crowson was the co-owner of Terrace Pharmacy from 1972 until it closed in 2007.

Lain Hensley is the current owner of the building at 173 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue where the Branch Post Office existed from 1952-1961.

Rich Olson was a Chico postal service employee for 39 years starting in 1971.