

*Benjamin Davis Wilson*  
*A Riverside Original*

*Rancho Jurupa*  
*Alta California*  
*1843 - 1847*

*Winter 2023*

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## PROLOGUE

At the request of historian H. H. Bancroft, Wilson dictated his memories four months prior to passing in 1878. *Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico* recount stirring, courageous activities in New Mexico that end with his Rancho Jurupa exploits in California.

*Observations et al* include a narrative of the southern California campaign of the Mexican American War. The ranchero from Jurupa led Americans in combat, interacted with General Kearny, Commodore Stockton, Captain Fremont and key Mexican principals. He knew better than most what occurred, more than fifty percent of *Observations* is dedicated to this activity.

Born in Tennessee then seven years in Mississippi before arriving in New Mexico in 1833. Eight years' experience interacting with Chiricahua Apache in the wilderness and as a Santa Fe merchant bartering merchandise caravanning down the Santa Fe Trail.

Departing New Mexico early September, Wilson reached the San Bernadino Valley in November 1841 with the Rowland-Workman expedition joined by more than one hundred and forty American and Mexican immigrants<sup>1</sup>. Not yet thirty years old his merchant success in Santa Fe generated income to fund initial California activities. An inveterate entrepreneur, Wilson transported twenty trunks of serapes, probably Navaho sourced, for sale in California.<sup>2</sup> He would also convey Mexican silver across the Old Spanish Trail to his new land.

The next three decades he utilized seven careers to experience incredible achievements in real estate investment and development; merchandising; grape, wine and citrus production; political office. His greatest achievement, co-development of a deep ocean port to serve southern California citizens and facilitate imports and exports of the region.

In less than a decade he was one of the four richest pioneers in Southern California. He later resided in downtown Los Angeles and eight miles further east at his beloved estate, Lake Vineyard. His grandson, General George Patton, Jr. was born there. The *Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens* reside on this estate.

don Benito Wilson was *The Unique American of the Nineteenth Century*. No other citizen achieved more from more careers with more success nor with such dedication to welfare for the common good. A classic rags to riches story from an intrepid American.<sup>3</sup>

## SETTLING IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN 1830 - 1845

Antonio Armijo led the first commercial caravan from Abiquiú, New Mexico to Los Angeles in 1829. The *Old Spanish Trail* saw extensive use by Mexican and American pack trains until the mid-1850s. Serapes, other woolens from New Mexico exchanged for thousands of California horses and mules. Immigrants and contraband livestock also traveled the Trail. The Rowland-Workman expedition of 1841 included Anglo Americans and New Mexican crew members seeking to settle in California.

Dropping down from the Cajon Pass, caravans encountered the Santa Ana River winding through the San Bernardino Valley, it served Indigenous Cahuilla's and Serrano's long before arrival of Hispanic and Anglo immigrants. Juan Bandini, administrator for the newly secularized Mission San Gabriel and Antonio Mario Lugo were granted sixty-eight thousand acres here. In 1838 Bandini petitioned and received from Governor Alverado thirty-one thousand acres on both sides of the Santa Ana River. Five years later he sold sixty-seven hundred acres to Benjamin Wilson. Lugo's grant for the remainder, San Bernardino Rancho, stipulated his sons provide a colony of settlers.

An essential priority, to recruit sufficient settlers with agriculture skills and abilities to counteract persistent Indian assaults into the Valley. The Utahs and desert dwelling bands raided consistently for livestock. Pegleg Smith, among other bandit outlaws added to the woes of the rancheros.

*Genizaros* residing near Abiquiú were Pueblo Indians who became Hispanized. Mexican citizens with mixed ethnic background, predominately Indigenous-Spanish heritage. Without firm tribal identity, they could not return to their rancherias. They fought Apache, Comanche and Ute nations responsible for their enslavement in New Mexico which adapted and qualified them to serve the need in frontier California.<sup>4</sup>

Given special grants in New Mexico, they built homes, farmed, raised stock and in protecting their settlements provided a front line defense. These traits, individual ownership with community cooperation would work well in the San Bernardino Valley where soil, water and climate created an *Eden* for crops, pasture and people.

Recruited by Hipolito Espinosa and Lorenzo Trujillo the Abiquiú immigrants settled just south of the present city of Colton in 1843. After failure of Lugo's settlement the New Mexicans negotiated with B Wilson and J Bandini in 1845 and were awarded two thousand, two hundred acres, *the Bandini Donation*, to defend Jurupa Rancho against livestock rustling outlaws. The Agua Mansa and La Placita de los Trujillos villages evolved as émigrés and new arrivals settled along the river. Benjamin Wilson's friend, aide and then neighbor, Lorenzo Trujillo, led this colony of Genizaros that established the upper Santa Ana River Valley.<sup>5</sup>

#### *RANCHO JURUPA 1843 - 1847*

When Wilson traveled to the capital in Monterrey spring 1842 with John Rowland he would not accept personal commitments imposed on grantees. Further, the thirty-one year old made three unsuccessful round trips to San Francisco searching for a Yankee Clipper ship bound for China. A young man with Mexican silver in his pocket looking for adventure.

Interestingly, he found more risk and peril than he could ever imagine when he acquired a six thousand, seven hundred plus acre portion of the Jurupa Rancho land grant. In 1843, Juan Bandini sold a portion of his grant for one thousand silver pesos. Wilson set about creating a home, cattle ranch then married a neighbor's teenage daughter, Ramona Yorba, spring 1844. She gave birth to Maria de Jesus Alvarado that December. Their son John Bernardo born December 1846 while Wilson served as a POW in the pueblo of Los Angeles.

Wilson was the *original* American pioneer in now Riverside city - county, California. In addition to cattle ranching, military and civic affairs occupied his five years in Rancho Jurupa.

Soon after settling on Rancho Jurupa, he and a friend were ambushed by the grizzly they stalked that had reduced his cattle herd. Several months in recovery from injuries to shoulder, hip and a punctured lung were required before eliminating the ferocious animal. It was the first of at least four near death experiences the young Tennessean suffered during his Rancho Jurupa period.

#### *BATTLE OF PROVIDENCIA February 1845*

Wilson co-led the campaign of neighbors and fellow rancheros to resist an incursion into southern California by then Governor Micheltorena. A Mexican government appointee, Micheltorena brought soldiers including criminals, derisively referred to as *cholos*, from Mexico to enforce his policies. The situation as Wilson saw it,

*Hence, when it was announced that a revolution had broken out in the North against Micheltorena and his rabble, and that they were on their way here [southern California] in pursuit of the California Revolutionists, all classes joined the movement with great alacrity, to get the country rid of what was considered a great scourge.*

Teaming with William Workman, they led just fifty American and Mexican volunteers in a two day confrontation with the Governor's forces. The first evening Wilson, under a white flag, reached the Micheltorena camp to parley American volunteers. They deserted the Governor once Wilson produced don Pio Pico with his offer of land. Micheltorena then abandoned the campaign and returned to Mexico. Pio Pico appointed Governor, the first native son to govern California. But not for long.

don Benito was appointed Alcalde for the Inland Territory, now Riverside and San Bernardino Counties by Pico, the last governor in Alta California under a Mexican government. Wilson's years in New Mexico trading with at the same time defending against Apache prepared him well for this assignment. An Alcalde duties melded law enforcement with judicial responsibilities.

### *INDIGENOUS CAMPAIGNS July, August 1845*

Governor Pico directed Wilson to impede raiders rustling cattle and terrorizing remote ranchos. A posse of eighty, including many *Genizaros* neighbors, patrolled several days when Wilson, scouting on lookout, caught sight of mounted men. At first their leader believed Wilson and companion were locals and engaged in friendly chat. Just as don Benito recognized the cropped ear the bandit fired an arrow and Wilson returned fire with his musket. The arrow lodged in his shoulder but Joaquin was knocked from his horse and soon expired from a second musket ball. More vandals raced for the open desert ahead of the posse but were pursued and ultimately captured.

Discovering he was poisoned, they camped nearby where Lorenzo Trujillo sucked the wound, the best remedy available. Within days swelling and pain subsided so that Wilson could mount up again. The posse moved on, discovered the camp but could not dislodge them from defensive positions. With wounded and exhausted members and horses, he abandoned the expedition, set out to rendezvous at Rancho Jurupa for fresh horses and provision another campaign. After arranging care for the wounded, the posse was now reduced to near sixty. Another near-death episode for the thirty-four year old ranchero.

The next expedition set off for Cahuilla country in the Coachella Valley where fugitives resided between raids. Released from the San Gabriel Mission after secularization, some former acolytes went rogue to survive. Arriving at Aqua Caliente Wilson paroled with Chief Cabezon.

Members of the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians today are descendants of Chief Cabazon, a leader of the desert Cahuilla Tribe from the 1830s to the 1870s and have called the Coachella valley home for more than twenty-five hundred years. Cahuilla's were living near Indio when President Ulysses S. Grant issued an executive order in 1876 creating the Cabazon Reservation for six hundred surviving members. The Reservation was defined as three parcels of raw desert totaling twenty-four hundred acres. Current land area now sixteen hundred acres in parcels spread over sixteen miles. The Cahuilla collectively numbered as many as ten thousand in the 17th century.

Wilson made clear should Cabezon not gather the cattle thieves, his party would track them to kill or capture. The Chief could not frighten Wilson from an attempt to penetrate the desert summer environment. His years interacting with Apache in New Mexico deserts gave him the experience and confidence that convinced Cabazon to round up the rebels.

Wilson's observation on a summertime visit to the Coachella Valley,

*We stayed there that night, and all the next day with the most oppressive heat I had ever experienced, it was so hot that we could not sit down, but had to stand up and fan ourselves with our hats, the ground would burn us when we attempted to sit.*

The Cahuilla's returned carrying the renegades' heads they then threw at Wilson's feet. The expedition returned to Rancho Jurupa leaving their excess supplies and rations with Chief Cabazon.

Still frustrated by a lack of success on an earlier failed campaign on the Mojave, Wilson recruited ten trappers to augment the posse and renew the mission. They located the village again after an eight day journey, attacked the entire day without success. In a parley to offer terms of surrender, the rebels shot Wilson's close companion, Evan Callaghan. Assuming he had died, the posse reacted by firing until all were slain. The women and children were returned to Mission San Gabriel on their trek to Jurupa Rancho.

### *MEXICAN AMERICAN WAR July 1846, January 1847*

American settlers raised '*The Bear Flag*' at Sonoma. General Jose Castro, the Mexican military comandante at Monterey, set out to suppress the uprising. Commodore Sloat was now convinced hostilities between Mexico and United States justified acting on his own. He ordered Stars and Stripes flown July 7, 1846 at the capital and later at Yerba Buena. Castro, concerned his forces were insufficient, withdrew South for more volunteers. Commodore Stockton now in charge and without further instructions set out to conquer California.

In Los Angeles, General Castro and Governor Pio Pico not confident their military could succeed, abandoned the Californians. Major Fremont's battalion marched up from San Diego to join Commodore Stockton, the united force entered Los Angeles unopposed on 13 August. Stockton still feared Castro's departure a hoax, and asked Wilson to confirm their departure. Brevetted captain by the Commodore, Wilson recruited volunteers to verify Castro had indeed crossed the Colorado River.

After confirming Castro's departure and instructing neighbors to monitor troop movements, Wilson and compatriots relaxed by hunting in the mountains a few days. The powder and shot expended were very soon to be needed for more serious purposes.

Confident in their control of the pueblo, the American leaders departed. Captain Gillespie with fifty Marines left in charge under martial law. While inadequate in numbers to maintain order, the arrogant, insensitive and racially intolerant Gillespie quickly generated fierce opposition. Resentful former officers, Flores, Carrillo, and Andres Pico assumed command of a new uprising. Their assault began September 22<sup>nd</sup> by surrounding Gillespie' marines and after skirmishes led to a U S withdrawal to Monterey. Once again the pueblo under Mexican control.

While leading volunteers to reinforce Captain Gillespie, Wilson diverted to Rancho Santa Ana del Chino to relieve Colonel Isaac Williams surrounded by armed Californians. Wilson's command included neighbors, Rowland, Robidoux and twenty young Americans. On arrival at Chino, Wilson argued the situation untenable, recommending immediate withdrawal through the mountains to relieve Gillespie in the pueblo. Younger volunteers with little respect for the Californians believed, *No! We can whip all they can bring against us.*

In combat the next day a Californian neighbor Carlos Ballesteros, a Wilson friend, was killed charging the ranch house. Five Americans including Louis Robidoux were wounded. The Americans kept a hundred attackers at bay until the tar roof set afire that evening. Wilson surrendered his command before all perished.

Marched into Los Angeles and imprisoned as POWs, the Americans were saved from a quickly assembled firing squad by the intercession of Cuibulo Varela, another close friend of don Benito. Later they were threatened with a one way trip to Mexico City to stand trial as traitors. However, William Workman convinced Californians they would then pay with their lives if Americans later victorious.

Stockton, Fremont and General Kearny marshaled their forces in two successive days of conflict near Santa Ana, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of January 1847 to claim California a second time for the United States. Wilson and colleagues were released allowing Wilson to liaison Californian and US military leaders to mitigate the conflict with minimum bloodshed, keeping ill will to a minimum.<sup>6</sup>

## APPENDIX

- **B D Wilson Timeline**
- **Collected Memories of B D Wilson,**
- **Bancroft Library – Original Cover Page - 1877**
- **End Notes**
- **Bibliography**

### ***B D WILSON TIMELINE 1841 - 1847 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA***

Nov 1841 – Arrived southern California with Rowland Workman party.  
Spring 1842 – With John Rowland visited Governor Alverado in Monterey to discuss Land Grants.  
1843 - Purchased six thousand plus acres of Rancho Jurupa, constructed residence(s) and rancho.  
1843 – Genizaros from Abiquiu, New Mexico arrive to settle near now Colton, CA.  
March 1844 - Married Ramona Yorba, daughter of neighbor Bernardo Yorba owner of Rancho Santa Ana.  
Fall 1844 - Survived near death encounters with grizzly bear devouring ranch cattle.  
Feb 1845 - Co-led So Cal volunteer army at the Battle of Providencia to oust incumbent governor.  
Apr 1845 - Appointed Alcalde for now San Bernardino and Riverside counties by new governor.  
Jul-Aug 1845 - Survived several expeditions pursuing raiders of So Cal frontier ranchos.  
May 1846 - United States declares War on Republic of Mexico.  
Aug 1846 - Brevetted Captain, by Commodore Stockton.  
Aug 1846 - Capt. Wilson led American volunteers in combat at Rancho Santa Ana del Chino.  
Sept 1846 - Led American POW contingent during three month internment.  
Sept 1846 - Californians drive Capt. Gillespie from Los Angeles, regain control of pueblo of Los Angeles.  
Jan 1847 - Released by don Andres Pico 6<sup>th</sup> Jan prior to final engagement of the War.  
Jan 6-9 1847 - Liaised with Mexican and US military to minimize bloodshed and peril.  
Jan 8-9 1847 - Final engagement in So Cal theatre of Mexican War, near Santa Ana.  
Fall 1847 - Drove two thousand head of cattle to Northern California to facilitate sale of Rancho Jurupa.  
Fall 1847 - Relocates to City of Los Angeles, residence next five years.

**COLLECTED MEMORIES OF B. D. WILSON**  
*Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico*

In the last half of the nineteenth century Hubert Howe Bancroft assembled a remarkable collection of material recording the history of California and the Southwest. What Bancroft was not able to obtain in the original, he sent staff to copy. Thomas Savage secured copies of manuscripts, as well as dictation from pioneers including Benjamin Wilson. Early in 1900s Bancroft sold this collection to the University of California, Berkeley including Savage's transcript of *Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico* completed late in 1877.

The Bancroft Library retain the original manuscript of *Observations* transcribed by Mr. Savage from the hand-written original of Don Benito's niece, signed December 6th, 1877, four months prior to his passing in March 1878.

Wilson achieved incredible success in Southern California where he enjoyed elite status. Unfortunately, don Benito concluded *Observations* after describing activities during his residence at Rancho Jurupa. He continued a record of outstanding achievements the following thirty years as politician, real estate mogul, pioneer in citrus and wine production, statesman, civic leader, philanthropist. A most productive period during which he ranked among the wealthiest pioneers of southern California. A profile of these years, in the city of Los Angeles and his Lake Vineyard estate, may be found in *BD Wilson Life Sketch, California Period* on his website.

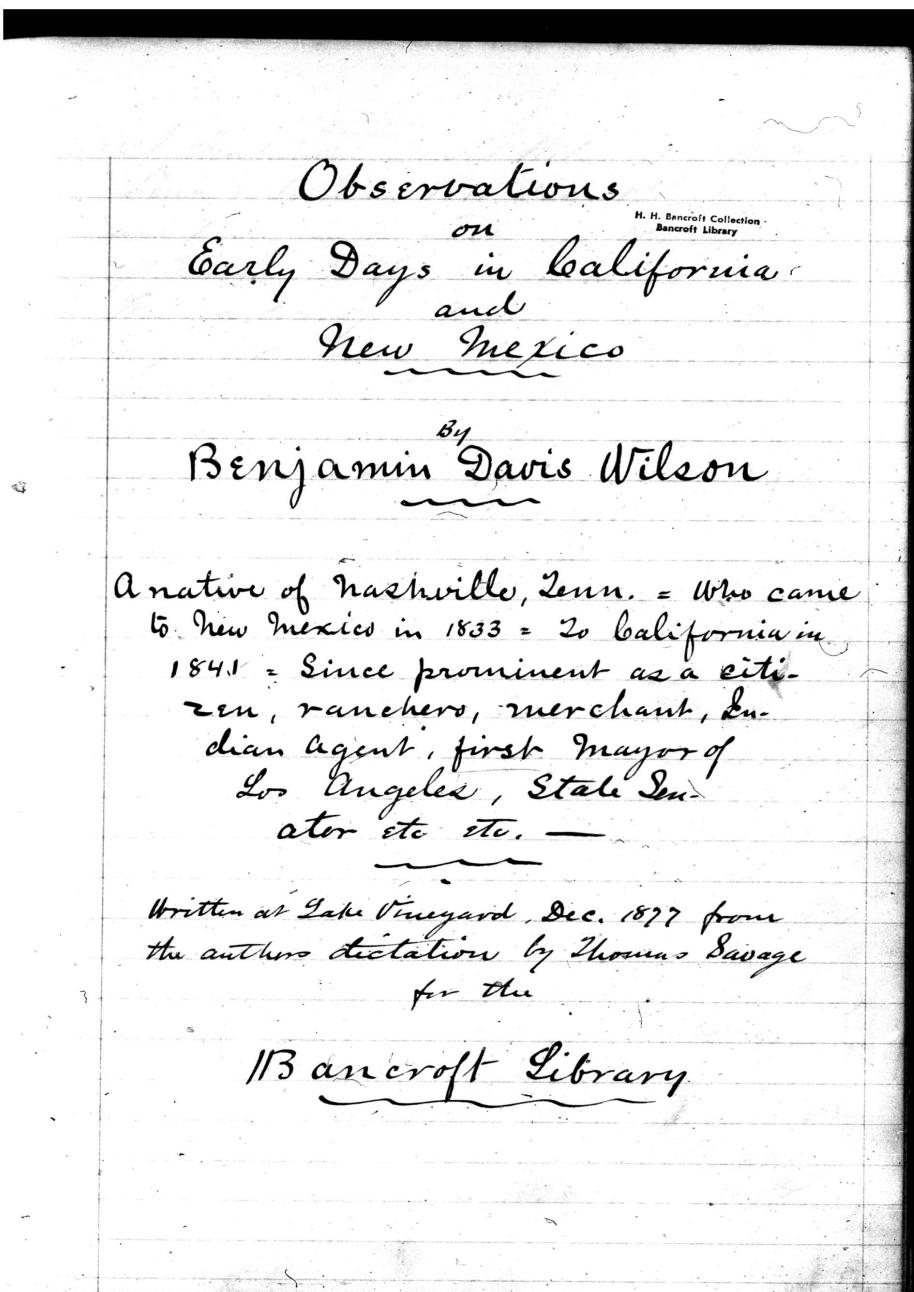
**B D Wilson biographical articles on - [benjamindaviswilson.com](http://benjamindaviswilson.com):**

<i>Benjamin Davis Wilson, A Unique 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tennessean.</i>	<i>[Tennessee &amp; Mississippi Periods]</i>
<i>Observations on Early Days in New Mexico.</i>	<i>[New Mexico Period]</i>
<i>Observations on Early Days in California.</i>	<i>[Rancho Jurupa Period]</i>
<i>B D Wilson Life Sketch.</i>	<i>[New Mexico Period]</i>
<i>B D Wilson Life Sketch.</i>	<i>[California Period] - (Rancho Jurupa, City of LA, Lake Vineyard)</i>
<i>A Riverside Original</i>	<i>[BD Wilson &amp; Settlement of Riverside City &amp; County]</i>

Commentary by the author, in both *Observations* articles referred above, clarifies principal activities and occupation, includes historical perspective for the California period, addresses omissions and inaccuracies in the narrative. Whether Benjamin Wilson kept a diary is not clear but unlikely, more probable he relied on documents and memories.

Picture him residing at his estate, now *The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens* within the city of *San Marino, California*, overlooking a private lake, occasionally gazing at the mountains, the highest now *Mount Wilson*, reminiscing to his grandniece encounters with renegade Indians, engagement in a California civil war ousting a sitting governor, and combatant and emissary for American military leaders in the Mexican American war.

Information concerning early years on the Santa Fe Trail, check out [santafetrailearlyyears.com](http://santafetrailearlyyears.com)



A native of Nashville, Tenn. .. who came to New Mexico in 1833 .. to California in 1841  
Since prominent as a citizen, ranchero, merchant, Indian Agent, first Mayor of Los  
Angeles, State Senator etc

Written at Lake Vineyard, Dec. 1877 from the authors dictation by Thomas Savage  
for the  
Bancroft Library

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> (Rowland, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> (Jenkins, 1964) Mexican Archive # 6389 [1964]

<sup>3</sup> (Wilson, 1877) Except where end-noted, this article leans heavily on Wilson's memories, *Observations on Early Days in California and New Mexico*. *Observations et al* are available on [benjamindaviswilson.com](http://benjamindaviswilson.com). Or they may be requested from *The Bancroft Library* or the *Southern California Historical Society*.

<sup>4</sup> (Vickery, 1984)

<sup>5</sup> (Vickery, 1984) (Whelan, 1973)

For background of settlement by Genizaro pioneers in the San Bernardino Valley we relied on J C Vickery's *Defending Eden*. Harold Whelan's *Eden in the Jurupa Valley*, is another valuable resource for 1840s immigration.

<sup>6</sup>(Porter, 1911) We relied on *General Stephen Kearny and the Conquest of Southern California* for background to this War.

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