

Wawona History

Fact Sheet

An ideal camp location due to its verdant meadows, nearby river, surrounding pine and oak trees and abundant game, Wawona was called “Pallahchun” (meaning “a good place to stop”) by early tribes – the first people to inhabit the area – because it was a logical midway site between the foothills and Yosemite Valley.

In 1855, Galen Clark, a miner whose health had suffered in the Gold Camps, passed through the Wawona Valley area with a party of tourists bound for Yosemite. Entranced by the beauty of the place, Clark returned in 1856 and built a crude 12-by-16 foot log cabin near a spring on the west end of the meadow. The main trail into Yosemite Valley ran near his place, making it inevitable that travelers would stop along the way. “On their return trip,” said Clark, “they would be out of provisions and, as I always had a good supply of fresh venison and trout, they would call on me for meals.” That was the beginning of Clark’s Station, later called Big Tree Station and the predecessor of the Wawona Hotel, though the present-day hotel is located on the far side of the meadow where Clark moved his “inn” before 1860.¹

Clark’s personality added to the popularity of the Wawona area, and he became famous for his hospitality and knowledge of the mountains. Unfortunately, he was also known to be a poor businessman and soon encountered financial difficulties. Clark took a partner in 1870 to share the financial burden, but the business continued to fail and in 1875 the collection of buildings, sawmill, blacksmith shop, and water ditch passed into the hands of Washburn, Coffman and Chapman.

In 1878, a kitchen fire destroyed all of the old buildings at Clark’s Station and the entire establishment was rebuilt and opened the following year. The only buildings to survive the fire of 1878 were the stables and Long White (now named “Clark Cottage” in honor of Galen Clark), which was opened in 1876.

The necessity to rebuild provided Washburn – who took over the management of the hotel after Washburn, Coffman and Chapman dissolved – and his new partner, Johnny Bruce, the opportunity to construct more substantial and modern hotel facilities. Within a week of the fire, they hired Joseph Shelly, builder of the Long White, and staked out a large two-story building that would include a lobby, sitting room, dining room, office, and 25 guest rooms. Although accounts vary, it is believed the new hotel was ready and open for business in the summer of 1879.

Later that year, Big Tree Station welcomed distinguished guest, Ulysses S. Grant. Grant traveled 12 hours from Madera to Wawona by stage, where the Mariposa Brass Band greeted him with “Hail To The Chief.” According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “So much road dust covered the General that he looked as if he had been engaged in the most hotly contested battle of the wilderness.”²

In 1882, Washburn’s wife suggested the Indian word, Wah-wo-nah – meaning “Big Tree” – as a more fitting name for the hotel complex than Big Tree Station. By Sept. 10, 1882, her name was official for the hotel and post-office, though it took a few years before local residents and guests acknowledged the change.

By 1883, Wawona had outgrown its reputation as a pioneer stage stop and primitive inn to become a self-sustaining mountain resort of importance and appeal. Two years earlier, Washburn and Bruce had paid to enlarge a natural cavity carved into a giant Sequoia tree that blocked a new road they were building. The Wawona Tunnel Tree, with its 8-foot-wide and 26-foot-long opening quickly became a

¹ Yosemite’s Historic Wawona, by Shirley Sargent; Page 12.

² Yosemite’s Historic Wawona, by Shirley Sargent. Page 34.

tourist attraction, and visitors to the area often stayed at Washburn's neighboring hotel. In addition to the tunnel tree, a general store, blacksmith shop, wagon shop and saloon kept visitors occupied.

The Wawona Hotel hosted several prominent guests during its early history. Distinguished visitors included President Theodore Roosevelt, John Ruskin, Lily Langtry, Bernard Baruch, Diamond Jim Brady, William Jennings Bryan, William Harrison and many others.

Wawona continued under the direction of the Washburn family until 1932, when the Wawona Valley area was added to Yosemite National Park and Yosemite Park & Curry Co. took over the operation of the hotel.

Today, the Wawona Hotel is operated by DNC Parks & Resorts at Yosemite and remains one of the most respected mountain resorts. With its historic white wooden buildings, verandas overlooking sprawling green lawns and Victorian interiors, the hotel is the perfect setting for a relaxing vacation. The National Historic Landmark and Historic Hotel of America features 104 guest rooms, including 54 rooms with access to shared bathrooms. Guestrooms without private bath are often compared to a European-style hotel room, with restroom and shower facilities conveniently located in each building.

Wawona's charming Victorian-style guestrooms are furnished with a mix of authentic and reproduction period furniture, upscale country décor, overstuffed chairs, marble-topped dressers and cozy terrycloth bathrobes. A \$400,000 guest-room renovation was completed in March 2002, in which forty-eight rooms received new wall coverings, window treatments, carpeting, furniture, bedding, lighting and bathroom fixtures reflecting the historic hotel's mid-19th century character and style.

Visitor recreation options at Wawona include golf, swimming, tennis, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, ranger-led walks and tours of the Pioneer History Center and nearby Mariposa Grove of Big Trees.

For more information on the Wawona Hotel, lodging packages or to make hotel reservations, call 559-252-4848 or visit online at www.YosemitePark.com.

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