Nancy Kelsey
(November 24, 1823 – August 15, 1896) was an American woman who is known for being the first white woman to see Utah, Nevada, and the Sierra Nevada mountains. Her husband and brother, David, Samuel, and Andrew, joined the Bear Flag Rebellion in 1846.

Overland to California

During the 1840s, Nancy Kelsey was a member of a wagon train of pioneers who ventured westward. On September 30, they reached the center of the San Joaquin Valley. The party continued on foot to the vicinity of Sutter’s Fort, where they decided to establish a mining camp called Rancho Lupyomi. They established a mining camp in Sonora in 1843, and eventually, they moved to the vicinity of Kelseyville.

Personal life

Nancy married Benjamin Ben Kelsey on October 25, 1838 in Barren County, Kentucky. Her husband and his brothers, David, Samuel, and Andrew, arrived in northern California at the end of 1843; they were at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. On September 24, they found the Mary’s River that was in Marsh’s description; now called the Mary’s River, near Owens Lake, and on to Oasis, Nevada.

After abandoning the wagons, the party proceeded on foot with pack horses. The party was attacked several times, witnessed the fatal remains of other ambushes, and had their provisions stolen. Nancy was quoted:

"We left our wagons and finished our journey on horse-back and drove our cattle. I carried my baby in front of me on the horse. At one place the Indians surrounded us, armed with their bows and arrows, but my husband leveled his gun at the chief and made him order his Indians out of arrow range."

Life in the west

During 1842, Nancy and Ben Kelsey worked for John Sutter collecting elk hides at Bear Lake, California. In 1843, while she was pregnant, they left Sutter’s employ and drove cattle north along the California-Oregon Trail east of Mount Shasta, past Klamath Lake, and on to Oregon City. Along the way, they were attacked nearly constantly by Native Americans, of whom one was shot dead very close to Nancy. While in Oregon, Nancy delivered Sarah Jane Kelsey, who died after eight days. Nancy became pregnant almost immediately and delivered daughter Margaret September 14, 1843 in Oregon. After selling their cattle, the family loaded up with goods and returned to California where they settled on 2,000 acres (810 ha) at Calistoga, and later moved to Barren County, Kentucky.

In 1844 the Kelsey home about 1 mile (1.6 km) south of Calistoga was attacked by Native Americans, Nancy Kelsey rolled her daughter into a blanket; both survived. While tensions were growing in the spring of 1846, Nancy delivered son Andrew Kelsey on April 7, bringing the total of living children to three.

Bear Flag Rebellion

During the Bear Flag Rebellion in 1846, while the Kelsey brothers joined John C. Fremont in declaring California’s independence from Mexico. Nancy Kelsey, Mrs. John Sears, and Mrs. Benjamin Dewell sewed the original “Bear Flag” from a pattern drawn by William L. Todd, a nephew of Mary Todd Lincoln. Nancy Kelsey has been referred to as the “Betsy Ross of California” for her contributions to the flag, after which the Bear Flag Rebellion was named. The words “California Republic” were inked in pokeberry juice, the fabrics borrowed from the little available and many said the bear looked more like a pig but it only had to serve for twenty-four days from June 14, 1846 until the U.S. Navy claimed California for the U.S. and raised an American flag at Monterey. On June 28, 1846, Fremont and Ben Kelsey became enemies when Kelsey refused to kill José de los Reyes Berreyesa, a Mexican neighbor and the twin sons of Francisco de Haro; they were killed by Kit Carson.

The Sonoma Gang

In 1848, Nancy delivered Mary Ellen Kelsey on June 26 at Sutter’s Fort. Ben left Nancy and the four children behind when he took fifty Pomo men from his brother Andrew’s ranch southwest of present-day Kelseyville, on Rancho Lupyomi at the American River, in the Sierra foothills near Sutter’s Mill. Once at the diggings, he sold all the company’s supplies to other miners and returned home to Sonoma, ill with malaria, but with a $16,000 profit. At this time, while still sick, he shot a Native American dead for “acosting” Nancy who had ridden home from town to get him medicine. Only one or two of their abandoned Pomo workers were left behind by Ben Kelsey, who was killed by Kit Carson.

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survived in hostile territory, suffering from starvation and malaria. Andrew Kelsey and another partner, named Stone, had forced the wife of one of their workers into concubinage and sent her husband off to live with Nancy and Ben Kelsey. When the mistreated husband returned to his people, he was tortured. Shortly thereafter, Stone and Andrew Kelsey were killed, but the details are highly variable among sources. This event provoked the Bloody Island Massacre, although the 60-100 Pomo Indians who were killed on Bloody Island by the U.S. Army and volunteers were not the ones responsible for the deaths of Stone and Kelsey.

Seeking revenge, Ben Kelsey and a group of vigilantes called "The Sonoma Gang" murdered "dozens of innocent Native Americans in Napa and Sonoma counties" in retribution for Andrew's murder. Seven of the vigilantes - but not Ben Kelsey - were captured and charged with murder, but bailed for $10,000 in the first-ever decision by the Supreme Court of California. Abandoning their bail, at least three of the seven sailed for Humboldt Bay aboard the schooner Ayerson.

**Northwestern California**

In April 1850, the Union Company was formed by 33 members - including survivors of the Josiah Gregg expedition to Humboldt Bay - with the goal of finding and settling lands around Humboldt Bay to supply the inland mines. Of the 33, ten were part of the Sonoma Gang, including Ben Kelsey.

In September 1850, Ben and his brother Samuel came to Humboldt County, California, rejoining the other members of the Union Company, including five of the seven released members of the Sonoma Gang. Ben had killed a Native American chief on their overland trip to Humboldt Bay and his reputation got to town before they did, a Eureka correspondent wrote: "Kelsey of Sonoma (the Indian killer) is on his way here with his own and several other families." Nancy and Ben built a fancy house at the northwest corner of the Arcata Plaza, at 9th and H streets. The Kelsey men burned two Wint villages and killed several Native Americans. They were in Northwestern California about twenty-two months during which time Kelsey's brothers had injured and killed natives and caused harm to intercultural relationships that would lead to the 1860 Wiyot Massacre, while Ben opened up wagon trails to the mining areas from Crescent City, California. The Kelsey National Recreation Trail follows 8 miles (13 km) of the route between Scott River Road and Paradise Lake.

Nancy delivered Nancy Rose on February 14, 1851 in Sonoma at about the same time as Ben Kelsey became sick with tuberculosis. They lost their fancy house in Arcata to foreclosure after which Ben, Nancy and the four children moved around a lot through Sacramento and San Joaquin to San Luis Obispo for one year, moved to Gilroy for fourteen months, and moved again to the Kern River mines where Kelsey mined and operated a toll bridge for 18 months. From there, the family moved to Four Creeks for two years and finally to Mexico in late 1859 after Nancy delivered her last child, William Walter Kelsey, on October 22 in Arizona, bringing the family to four surviving children (out of 10 pregnancies), six girls and two boys.

**Surviving the Comanches**

Seeking drier weather for her husband, the family moved to Mexico in 1859, and then to Texas in 1861 where Nancy, Martha Ann and two younger daughters survived an attack by Comanche. Nancy loaded guns and told the children to hide. Her two oldest girls hid, but 12-year-old Mary Ellen was captured and found the next day scalped, stabbed and with a fractured skull which she survived but suffered mental illness until her death six years later.

**Final moves**

In 1864, the family returned to California, at first in San Luis Obispo, then settling near Fresno in 1865. The wandering continued; the family moved to Inyo County, survived the approximately 8.0 1872 Lone Pine earthquake, which Ben said was the only thing that ever frightened him. Ben worked in the Cerro Gordo Mines, and finally the family moved to Los Angeles where Ben Kelsey died on February 19, 1889, aged 76.

Nancy Kelsey outlived her husband and spent her final years on farms in Santa Barbara County, California, where she was a midwife and an herbalist. Her vocabulary was described by one newspaperman as such that "would have given any genteel hostess the vapors." She told her interviewer of her eventful life "I have enjoyed riches and suffered the pangs of poverty. I have seen U.S. Grant when he was little known; I have baked bread for General Fremont and talked to Kit Carson. I have run from bear and killed most all other kinds of smaller game." She had borne eight surviving children, out of 10 pregnancies.

**References**


**External links**

- Nancy Kelsey at Find a Grave

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Nancy Roberts Kelsey from Historical Figures of the Movement West. Portrait by artist-historian George Stuart. Catalog name NancyKelsey. Portrait by artist-historian George Stuart. Courtesy

Nancy Kelsey (August 1, 1823, Barren County, Kentucky – August 10, 1896, Cuyama, California) was a member of the Bartleson-Bidwell party. She was the first white woman to travel overland from Missouri, seeing Utah and Nevada before crossing the Sierra Nevada mountains into California on November 25, 1841. Wife of Benjamin Kelsey, and the mother of eight surviving children, she is sometimes referred to as the "Betsy Ross of California" for her role in creation of the original Bear Flag from which Bear Flag.
Nancy Kelsey (1823-1896) was 17 years old and the mother of an infant daughter when she became the first woman to travel to California on a wagon train in a group that included her husband, their baby, and about 30 men. Young women like Nancy were vital to settling the West. The travelers knew so little about the terrain that some had brought boat-building equipment thinking that when they got to the Great Salt Lake they would be able to build and board boats and float down to the ocean. Kelsey and Group Persist Despite Obstacles.