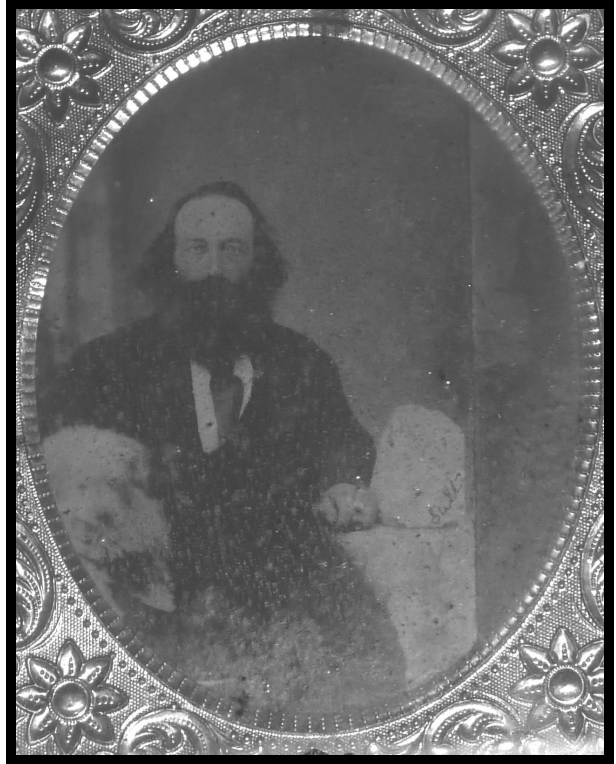


Hayward's Salty History: John Johnson

People have been harvesting salt along the Hayward shoreline for thousands of years, going back to the early Ohlone people.

But the first person to collect large amounts of salt to sell commercially was a man named John Johnson.



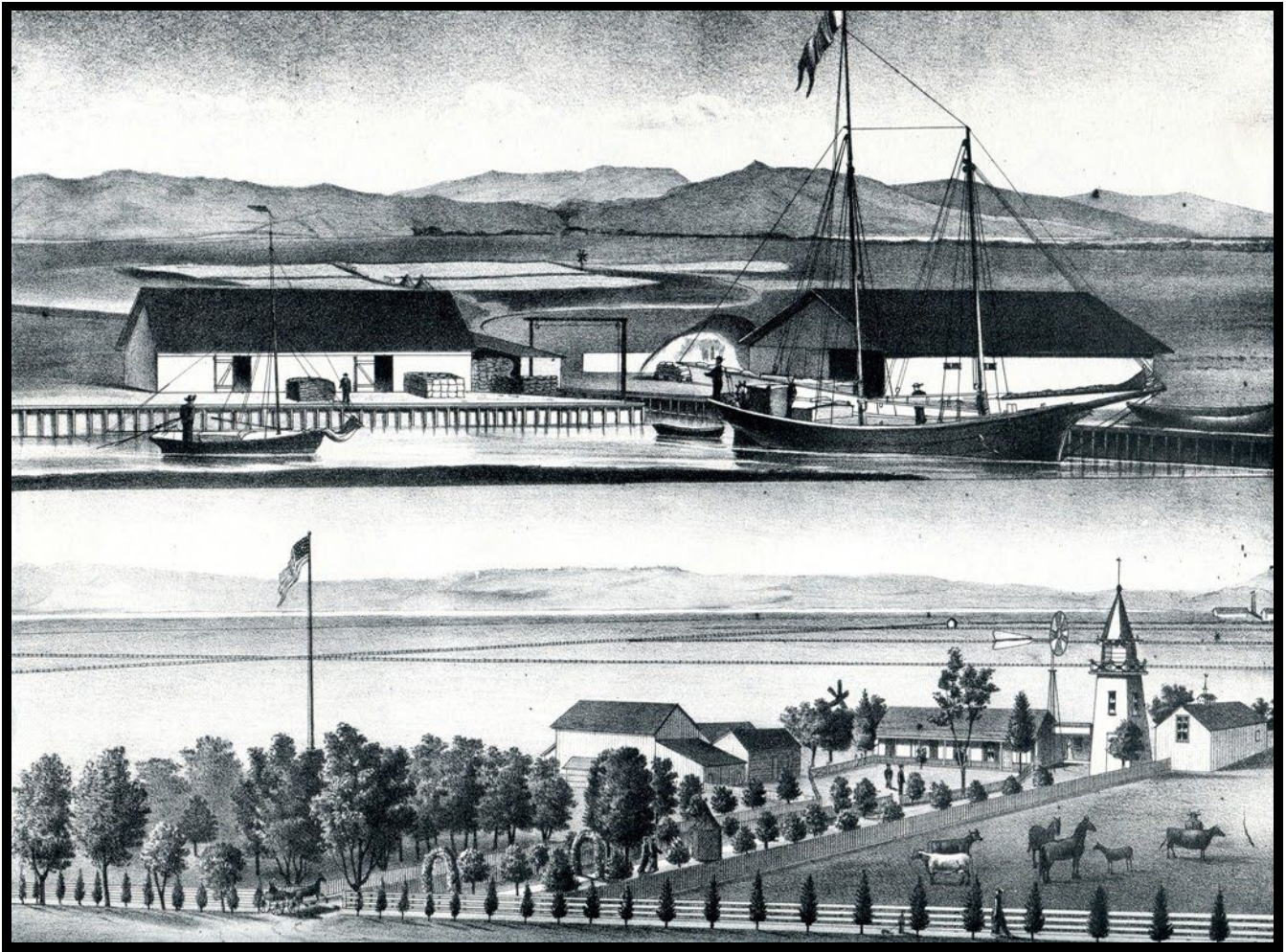
This photograph, taken in 1856, shows John Johnson posing with a bag of salt and his dog, two things he must have been proud of.

John Johnson was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1818. His family owned a **distillery**, a factory that makes alcohol for drinking, but his parents died in a fire when he was quite young. He stayed for a while with his older sister, but then, when he was only 13 years old, he signed up on a boat to be a sailor and sailed away. He traveled around the world as a sailor, serving on different ships, and learning many skills that would come in handy later.

In 1850, as a sailor aboard the *S.S. Louise Field*, Johnson arrived in California. He worked for a while in different odd jobs in San Francisco and Oakland. By 1852, Johnson had found a place to settle. He bought 14 acres of land along the Mt. Eden shoreline, near the Hayward side of today's Hayward-San Mateo Bridge.

Johnson began harvesting salt on his land. He built small walls or **levees** to hold back the water. This let the natural saltwater of the bay **evaporate** or dry up in the sunshine, leaving white crystals of salt behind. When the salt was dry enough, workers would scoop the dry salt crystals into boats to take across the bay and sell to people all across the country. Johnson named his land "Johnson's Landing," for the boats that would land there

to take the salt across the bay to be sold in San Francisco. In his first year alone, John harvested five tons of salt from his 14 acres.



An Illustration of John Johnson's home and namesake landing as it appeared in an 1878 Alameda County history.

Johnson was doing so well in the salt business, he decided to try out another business idea. He built a small hotel on his property, among a grove of shady trees, and called it the "Mt. Eden Grove Resort." Visitors would come from all around the bay to stay in this hotel, and also to hunt the ducks, geese, and pheasants that called the salty marshland home.

Johnson was considered an excellent host at the hotel. He loved to tell stories to anyone who would listen about his past as a sailor and his travels around the world. The newspaper *San Francisco Call* said of Johnson, "No man ever had a more adventurous life than John Johnson." These tall tales made Johnson a local celebrity.

Johnson met a woman named Augusta Lorentz, and he married her in 1855. Augusta was also from Germany and had recently come to California. They eventually had a son, and named him August, after his mother. When their son August was old enough, he helped to pilot the family's boats across the bay to deliver the loads of salt to sell.

August helped to grow his father's salt business. By the time Johnson died in July 1897, his salt operation and resort covered more than 350 acres, and harvested over 2,500 tons of salt each year. Others followed his idea, and soon other companies, like the Oliver Salt Company and the Leslie Salt Company, were all harvesting salt from the salty waters of the bay. But John Johnson was the first to try it on that scale, and we remember his story today.



A c. 1913 image of a Johnson family salt plant building. John Johnson died in 1897. By the time this photo was taken his son, August Johnson, placed his name on the sign and was still running his father's business. Also notice the pile of salt to the left.