

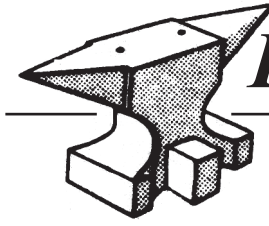
settled there in April 1838, the first American resident of what is now Contra Costa County. His nearest neighbors were “Californios,” who prized generosity and hospitality. After realizing that Marsh was a skinflint and preferred being alone they shunned him. In fact, the neighbors he got along best with were the Bolgones Indians who lived near his rancho. He treated them kindly and doctored their maladies, and they helped him build an adobe, plant orchards and a vineyard, and plough fields. He taught them how to trap otters for fur to exchange for food and clothing. Marsh acquired thousands of head of cattle for his rancho in exchange for medical services.

Visitors to the rancho included John C. Fremont, Kit Carson, John Bidwell, and just about everybody else who came across the plains and over the Sierra Nevada before the Gold Rush. Marsh had known Capt. John Sutter in Missouri and their relations were not always cordial, but Sutter sent people in need of medical attention to Dr. Marsh’s rancho when Sutter himself could not help them. Dr. Marsh was deeply involved in California’s short-lived independence from Mexico and later American statehood. When gold was discovered, he arrived on the scene early enough to become fabulously rich. Legend holds that he buried a hoard of gold somewhere on his rancho.

In 1851 Marsh met Abigail Tuck, or “Abby,” a woman from Massachusetts who had come to California for her health and had been teaching school in Santa Clara. After a whirlwind courtship of two whole weeks, they were married. The following spring their daughter Alice was born. Dr. Marsh was extravagantly generous towards Abby. He decided to build the finest home in California, almost opposite the old adobe they had been living in. It was to be made of stone and brick and have a tower 65 feet high. As the house was being built Abby’s health began to decline. Alice was four years old and the house not yet finished when Abby died in August 1855.

Dr. Marsh, though rich, continued his parsimonious ways and hated increasing what he paid his vaqueros even though wages in the region inevitably went up. He was widely disliked for this plus he had to deal continually with squatters and cattle thieves as well as disgruntled employees. On September 24, 1856, while on his way to Martinez, he was robbed and killed by three vaqueros who had worked for him. In the absence of a will, Charles Marsh and Alice were each awarded half of Dr. Marsh’s estate. Charles brought his wife and children to California and they lived in the stone house for some years. Charles pursued the murderers for ten years, who were finally caught one by one, tried, and sentenced. Charles became a justice of the peace in Antioch and some of his descendants are still living today.

Alice had been turned over to foster parents who unfortunately treated her poorly. But when she was 18 she inherited a sizable fortune and she married William Walker Camron. They lived extravagantly for a few years in what is now the Camron-Stanford House on the shores of Lake Merritt in Oakland. They had two daughters, one who died at a young age and one who never married. Interestingly, the Castro and Marsh family came together in 1913 when Dr. John Marsh’s great-granddaughter Irene married the great-grandson of Victor R. Castro’s aunt Josefa Castro Soberanes. She had married J. M. Soberanes, a member of Portola’s 1769 Expedition.



El Cerrito Historical Society

P O Box 304, El Cerrito, CA 94530

elcerritohistoricalsociety@yahoo.com

Vol. 30
No. 2

The Forge

March 2014

The Official Publication of the El Cerrito Historical Society, Copyright © 2014

Our Next Event: The John Marsh House

***7:00 PM Tuesday, March 25
Arlington Park Clubhouse
1120 Arlington Blvd., El Cerrito***

For our next program Gene Metz, the President of the John Marsh Trust, will present a program on the Marsh House. Its well-known builder, Dr. John Marsh, came to Contra Costa County in the 1830’s, established a ranch, and built an adobe home. He used Native American labor to construct a stone manor house, the first in the East Bay. Dr. Marsh was killed near Pacheco, apparently by disgruntled former employees of the Marsh rancho. The adobe home is now gone and the site is currently being excavated. The stone house is in ill repair. It is located within the relatively new Marsh State Park.

The El Cerrito Historical Society is a volunteer, non-political, non-profit corporation that has as its purpose the preservation and appreciation of the history of El Cerrito. It does this by providing educational and research opportunities; by the collection of historic photographs, documents, artifacts and cultural objects; by advocating the preservation of historic resources in the city; and by encouraging others to help further these aims. Anyone may join; dues are \$25 (Household member), \$60 (Sponsoring member), and \$300 (Life member).

Dr. John Marsh

by Barbara Hill

The 1882 book “History of Contra Costa County, California,” published by W. A. Slocum & Co., includes a lengthy biographical sketch of John Marsh. It is by far among the longest of the hundreds of biographies that the book includes. Mr. Marsh was the first American settler and landowner in what is now Contra Costa County. Although written about 25 years after Marsh’s death, it omits many important biographical details

John Marsh was born in Danvers, Massachusetts on June 5, 1799. He was an avid student who managed to work his way through Harvard University. He also mastered Greek, Latin, and French. His dearest wish was to continue through Harvard Medical School but he lacked the funds. He took a job as tutor to the children of the commander of an Army fort in the territory which was to become Minnesota and Wisconsin, hoping to earn enough money to return to Harvard.

As soon as he arrived at the fort he hated the place, but was determined to stay two years. During that time he became the first schoolteacher in what is now Minnesota. He had quite a temper and maintained classroom discipline by the use of rigorous punishment. He also got a head start on what he hoped would be his medical training by studying with the fort’s doctor, who unfortunately died before being able to sign any kind of certificate.

Marsh also earned extra money delivering mail from the fort to Prairie du Chien during the dead of winter and assisting the local Indian agent. He spent quite a bit of time with the Sioux Indians and fell in love with Marguerite Decouteaux, whose father had been a French-Canadian fur trader and whose mother was Sioux. She helped him compile a dictionary and grammar of the Sioux language and he taught her to read from a French Bible. He was very impressed with her intelligence and she moved in with him.

At the end of his two years on the frontier Marsh had not accumulated as much money as he needed to return to Harvard. But he returned East anyway, hoping to be paid some additional money for his services assisting the Indian agent. Just before he left, he found out that Marguerite was pregnant. Marsh still did not have enough money for medical school but he did return to Danvers for a visit to his family. He never told them about Marguerite or the baby. He returned to the frontier accompanied by his brother Caleb as far as Detroit, but then insisted on going onwards alone.

Marsh returned to find himself the father of a son who he named Charles. He also had an appointment as an official assistant Indian agent in Prairie du Chien and spent several years in that job. At some point his family heard rumors of a wife and child from a Danvers woman who had taken a teaching job on the frontier. They wrote to ask him point-blank about it. Marsh managed

to cover it up by telling them partial truths: that he was not and never had been married; and that the woman who had heard the rumors had never been closer than 500 miles to Prairie du Chien.

As an Indian agent Marsh was too partial to the Sioux tribe. At one point he found out that the Sac and Fox Indians were planning to attack the Sioux and tipped them off. The Sioux responded by ambushing and massacring an advance party of the Sac and Fox. Marsh was obliged to take Marguerite (who was pregnant again) and his son to safety in Illinois, where he paid a quack herb doctor to take them in and to educate his son Charley. Marsh then returned to Prairie du Chien. Marguerite was miserable in Illinois and she ran away to rejoin him. As soon as she got to Prairie du Chien she went into labor and had a baby girl. Unfortunately she was at the end of her endurance after walking hundreds of miles through the wilderness. Both she and the baby died.

Marsh was devastated. He intended to leave Prairie du Chien right away but was caught up in the Black Hawk War. During treaty negotiations at the end of the war it came out that Marsh had sold guns to the Sioux. A warrant was issued for his arrest and he fled to Missouri. He joined a party of mountain men heading for the annual Rocky Mountain rendezvous and he explored the areas of the Yellowstone, Laramie, and Bighorn Rivers with them. Then he settled in Independence, Missouri as a trader of goods destined for Santa Fe.

In 1836 Marsh went to Illinois to visit his son, then 9 years old and still living with the herb doctor. He told Charley he intended to sell his business in Independence and go farther West or to South America and would send for him when the time was right. Marsh returned to Independence to find it suffering from a depression. He could not sell his business and could not even pay his creditors; in addition, he learned that the warrant for his arrest was about to catch up with him. He fled by joining a caravan on the Santa Fe Trail.

Marsh stayed in Santa Fe long enough to learn Spanish. Then he joined an exploring party on its way to California via northern Mexico. After arriving at the little pueblo of Los Angeles he learned that there was no doctor of any sort in the entire area. So he applied to the Mexican authorities to allow him to practice medicine. They accepted his Harvard diploma as being as good as a medical license, and he styled himself “Doctor” John Marsh thereafter.

Most of Marsh’s patients paid him in cowhides (which were often used as the local currency). After less than a year, he managed to sell his hides for \$500, and headed north in search of a rancho to buy. But foreigners could not acquire land in California unless they were Roman Catholic, so he was baptized at Mission San Jose. He then explored much of the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys and even spent some months in San Francisco when it was still the village of “Yerba Buena.”

In 1837 Marsh bought Rancho Los Meganos [“the sand dunes”] from Jose Noriega. He



John Marsh's Great Stone House, ca 1870, courtesy of the Nat'l Park Svc