

ST. HELENA
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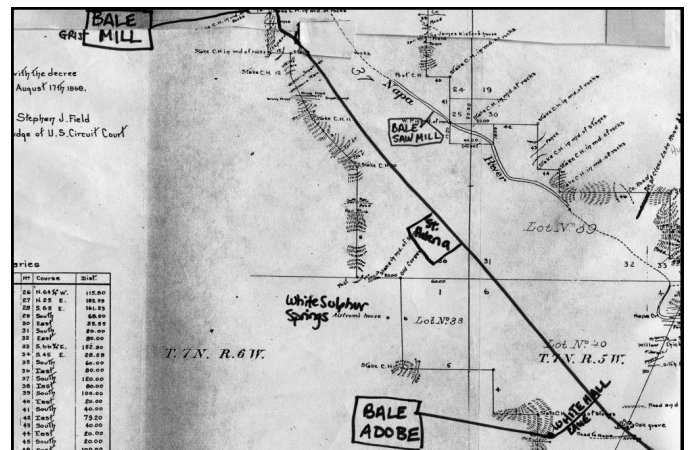
ILLUMINATING ST. HELENA'S HISTORY

Happy Birthday, St. Helena: 160 Years Old *Researched & Written by Lin Weber*

Saint Helena became 160 years old on May 16th, for it was on this date in 1854 that an Englishman named Henry Still and another man, Charles Walters, registered their purchase at the Napa County courthouse of 126 acres of land on the southwest side of what is now Main Street. The sale was for \$1,041.25 and the seller was María Ygnacia Soberanes Bale, a niece of Salvador Vallejo's. The county assessor's website dates the transaction as May 17th, the day the recorder actually wrote down the information, a minor discrepancy.



Maria Bale married Dr. Edward Bale in 1839. Their adobe was on what is now Whitehall Lane. The grist mill for grinding wheat and other grains into flour and meal, and the saw mill for making lumber from the forests on either side of the valley, were a few miles to the north (see map). When Dr. Bale died in 1849, leaving his widow and six children. Mrs. Bale took over running the businesses until they could be sold. She married Edward Peabody in 1856, who then continued to sell off Bale land until he too died in 1858.



Site map of Upper Napa Valley in 1867 shows various locations in relation to Hot Springs Township, part of which later became known as St. Helena.

There are indications that a small community of squatters was already in residence in 1853. Their presence would have been challenging for Still and Walters, but that wasn't the only obstacle these entrepreneurs faced. California history is littered with tales of investors who lost everything and towns that never quite made it.

The area had an advantage, however: White Sulphur Springs, a resort spa (California's first) that had been established in 1852, was already a draw for tourists. The presence of the nearby spa, an area already sprinkled with inhabitants, and the lack of competing purveyors of merchandise signaled a good market for a store. Still and Walters built a store with an attached dwelling somewhere on what is now the Sunshine Foods parking lot. What they sold or how they acquired their merchandise is unknown.

At its juncture with the trail to Pope Valley (Pope Street), this location was not visible to spa patrons but was accessible to the farmers working the land

continued on page 2

Anniversary of St. Helena, continued from page 1

near the gristmill a few miles to the northwest, convenient for travelers coming down from Pope Valley and handy for the squatters who were building homes nearby. A family named Walsh had already done so, and their child, Anna, was the first Caucasian to be born in St Helena (March 4, 1853). A second girl, Belle Dixon, was born 4 days later.



White Sulphur Hot Springs was built in 1852. The above photo shows five of nine cottages today (one is original). Surely it was this hot springs that spawned St. Helena's original name (Hot Springs Township). The resort, which now belongs to the Hoffman Institute, was built next to springs discovered by John York and David Hudson in 1848. Still standing are a renovated carriage house, bath-house, and dining room.

John Kister was a cobbler who claimed to have been in proto-St. Helena, along with other people, before 1855. As he told the *St. Helena Star* in 1890, "Mr. Still being here and owning the land proposed to give a few town lots to those who would build on them. So it was not long before there were one or two buildings up and the town was started with one hotel, two stores, one boot and shoe shop and one blacksmith shop."

People already squatting on Maria's property would have been happy to take Still and Walters up on their offer of free land. The people to whom Still offered lots included Kister; baby Belle's father, Hiram Dixon, and family (whose home was about 30 yards from the northwest corner of Still's store); James Page; Isaiah Taylor; a saloon keeper named Jonathan Bell; Robert Catherwood; and a pioneer butcher named Augustus Tainter. Tainter built a hotel named the St. Helena House on his property, which was just southeast of the store, near the creek.

Whether it was civic-minded generosity that prompted Still and Walters to give away what they had paid so much for or simply a need to keep unhappy squatters at bay, their venture failed to meet

with immediate success. In February 1855, Walters sold his share to Still for \$500, perhaps the same amount he had contributed to its purchase. He left town and has disappeared from recorded history. Henry may not have grieved the dissolution of their partnership. That same year he married a young woman, Agnes Embuton, of whom there is no record other than their marriage license and Agnes's name on some deeds.

Walters' departure left Still in a financial hole. Early in 1857, he began to collect money from his neighbors as payment for what he had "given" them: Kister and Dixon each paid him \$10, although Kister's lot was on the northeast side of the street and not Still's to give or sell. Augustus Tainter never paid him, and when the hotel burned down Still sold the lot to John and Eliza Wolfe for \$20. In March 1857, Still sold his store and house to a young man from Tennessee named Lewis Musgrave, who paid him \$1,000. Musgrave's tenure as a local shopkeeper was even shorter than Still's. He soon sold the store and the land beneath it for \$60 to two French merchants with connections in New Orleans, the Level brothers.

Though significant, Musgrave's addition to Still's coffers didn't solve Still's money problems. He went bankrupt by the end of 1857 and left town—without Agnes. Some of the land that he and Walters had purchased remained unsold (although it may have been occupied). It was eventually auctioned off on the courthouse steps and sold to the highest bidder, who turned out to be Augustus Tainter. The purchase price was \$50. Tainter also ended up owning much of Oak Street, and he died a prosperous man around 1877.

Despite squatters, poorly drawn deeds, corrupt lawyers, and town fathers with troubled lives, by the time the Civil War began it looked like the town was congealing. People were calling it St. Helena, although government records called it Hot Springs Township for many years. St. Helena's status as a city finally became official on March 27, 1876, the date that the governor, William Irwin, signed its papers of incorporation.

Lin Weber is a local historian. The full article may be viewed at www.shstory.com / Collections and Research / Research Library.

Museum for a Day— A Good Time Had by All

Every two years, the Historical Society pulls out all the stops to provide the community with a taste of what having a permanent museum in this town would be like. This year's event was held on Saturday, March 23rd, at the Catholic Church's gym and was attended by over 200 people. Here are some photos of a few exhibits and activity tables.



Susanne Salvestrin and Nancy Caffo quilting the antique quilt top made by Ethel McCormick, as Mike Thompson looks on.

Tractors displayed in the vintage equipment exhibit.



Mike Damonte, grandson of Litto Damonte, the "Hubcap King," in front of the Pope Valley Ranch exhibit.

Sue Wood Clark's great grandmother, Mary Dorsey Farrar, wore this hand-made dress at her wedding in 1885.



Above left, Art Carr identifies photos at the research table as Mariam Hansen looks on. Left, Susanne shows the Historical Society's promotional video to an interested visitor.



New from the Collections Committee



The Historical Society recently received a donation of photos from Lois Dorn, a reporter at the St. Helena Star from 1969 to 1971. Many of the photos she donated were part of an exhibit that hung in the Star office for many years depicting life in the newspaper shop at the Star Building. Dorn said that she wanted to "capture on film the mystique of the place." The photo shown above is from that exhibit. On the reverse side of the photo Lois wrote: Starr [Baldwin] at his desk. Note pictures of his (then deceased) mother and his cat, Beulah." Below is the Star Building as it appeared in 1970.



UPDATE ON ORAL HISTORY PROJECT By Bonnie Thoreen, Administrator

Since reviving the society's oral history project, volunteers have completed about fifteen interviews since last fall, including five interviews during Museum for a Day. Thanks to a grant from the Napa Valley Heritage Fund, we are now in the process of transcribing six of those interviews.

The list of subjects who we want to be interviewed is long and growing. We need more volunteers to spend about an hour with some of our most colorful and interesting people in the community. It is a rich and rewarding experience.

To volunteer—or if you want to be interviewed—call or email Bonnie Thoreen at 707-963-7529 or bthoreen@gmail.com.

Cornerstone

By Skip Lane, President

The first quarter of 2014 was full of activities to build momentum toward finding a permanent facility for the St. Helena Historical Society. First, we produced two videos featuring local talents, one about 60 seconds long and another just under 5 minutes long. Producer Brian Capener designed and shot them to educate our community about the current state of our collection (sad) and therefore the real need to find a home for the society. See the videos yourself on our website.

Second, a few members of the board met with the *Star* editorial Board and received a strong endorsement for the society and its importance to the community.

Third, we met several times with Victoria Blackwell, a consultant with a background in museum curatorship who was instrumental in developing and opening a highly regarded historical museum in Gig Harbor, Washington. She shared

much knowledge and “how-tos” with board members. Her ideas will help us develop a timeline for moving the Historical Society forward in the coming year.

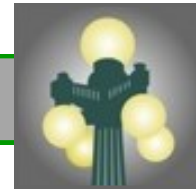
There are several other items to report since our last newsletter:

—We hosted a very successful Museum for a Day event in March, which drew an attendance of several hundred.

—We invited a third-grade class to the library and showed them several catchy artifacts from our collection, such as leather boots, sombreros, and antique household items. The students had the opportunity to view and touch, and to draw and write about them.

—We received a grant from the Napa Valley Heritage Fund that will enable us to advance our thriving oral history project by transcribing our recorded stories to print for distribution to libraries and researchers.

It was a busy quarter. Our next steps include a presentation to the St. Helena City Council with the hope that the city will support our goals and momentum.



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 HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Reverend James Mitchell, Founder of St. Helena Presbyterian Church— 140 Years Ago!

At left is a photo of Sophie and the Reverend James Mitchell, along with their young family (James, born 1889, and John, born 1884). The good reverend immigrated from Ireland, where he had become a Presbyterian minister. He founded St. Helena's Presbyterian Church in 1874 and married Sophie in 1883. The Mitchell family lived on Crane Avenue on 13 acres of land, where they raised prunes and walnuts. Reverend Mitchell was minister at the church for 43 years, dying in 1926.

Sophie was born in Sweden in 1858. Her father died before she was born. Her mother came to California and married Swen Alstrom in 1860. A year later, Swen bought White Sulphur Springs Resort, where Sophie grew up. Three years before marrying Rev. Mitchell, her parents sold the resort and moved to St. Helena, where they built the Windsor Hotel (Hotel St. Helena today).

Sophie became an accomplished artist, painting over 100 extraordinary botanical watercolors.