



Livermore Heritage Guild
P.O. BOX 961, LIVERMORE, CA 94550
ORGANIZED 1973

CHAPTERS OF LIVERMORE HISTORY

BRICK MAKING IN THE LIVERMORE VALLEY

by Dan L. Mosier

Brick making in the Livermore Valley probably began at Alexander Esdon's brickyard, located at the corner of Railroad and Livermore Avenues in Livermore. In 1870, Esdon dug a small clay pit and erected a crude firing kiln that molded enough bricks to build the first brick building in Livermore. This two-story building became the Farmers' Union. I believe it was torn down in the 1960s. It is not known if Esdon sold bricks for other buildings constructed in Livermore in the 1870s.

Commercial brick making in the valley began in 1889 with the Remillard Brick Co. in Pleasanton. This brickyard was established on the Southern Pacific Railroad about one and one-half miles northeast of Pleasanton. The clay deposit adjacent to the plant was 25 feet thick and was mined by a drag-line scraper operated by an electric hoist. The clay was loaded into cars and hauled by motor to the plant, where it was passed through wet pans, cut by soft-mud machines, dried under sheds, and fired in two 16-compartment Hoffman kilns, with a capacity of 20,000 bricks per day. Only common brick and stock brick were manufactured. These bricks did not have any trade name on them.

In 1893, Remillard produced 10,000,000 bricks. About 110 men were employed for six months, and this force was reduced to about 4 to 10 workers during the rainy months. Many examples of the Remillard's product still line Main St. in Pleasanton; a fine example is the Johnston Building built in 1896. The brickyard was destroyed by fire in June 1935, ending 46 years of operation.

The grounds of the old Livermore Fire Brick Works are now being developed into a new shopping center. About 1910, the plant was built to burn magnesite, mined in the mountains near Livermore. That same year, the Livermore Fire Brick Co. took over operations under the management of F.A. Bishop, to manufacture fire brick from the clay on the property, which was on the Southern Pacific Railroad at the west end of Livermore.

In 1918, W.S. Dickey Clay Manufacturing Company, based in Kansas City, bought the brickyard to supplement the output of its subsidiary, the California Brick Co., at Niles. Clay was obtained from the property and mixed with clays from Amador and Placer Counties for the right consistency. This fine mixture was molded into fire brick, face brick, ornamental brick, hearth and mantle tile, and terra cotta.

In 1920, the brickyard contained six downdraught kilns (two 30-foot and four 26-foot), two round muffle kilns serviced by a 50-foot stack, one American repress machine with a capacity of 25,000 bricks, one auger machine with a capacity of 25,000 bricks, and one dry press with a capacity of 20,000 bricks. About 50 men were employed.

One of the most interesting orders gleaned from the newspapers was in 1932 when the company shipped over 40,000 bricks and 10 tons of fire clay to the Philippines for use in the construction of a factory. The bricks were packed in cartons, each holding 10 bricks, and the fire clay was transported in sacks. The brickyard was so busy that superintendent Charles Turner had to employ 25 additional men to complete the job.

In 1936, the Stockton Fire Brick Company purchased the plant to supplement the output of its main plant in Stockton. During the war years, furnaces of industrial plants and boilers of Naval and Merchant vessels were being lined with the product of this company.

In 1943, Gladding, McBean and Company acquired the plant and continued the production of fine fire brick. Clay was shipped from its mine in Placer County and placed directly into the storage sheds. The raw clay was fed through a grinding machine, screened, mixed with water, and extruded as three narrow ribbons of stiff mud. An automatic wire-cutting machine simultaneously cut each ribbon into four brick units. The units were sent to the stamping machines, which imprinted the company name and brick type on each brick. Some of the names were "Livermore", "Star", and "Premier". The brick was hand-trammed to the drying tunnels, which were equipped with two sets of narrow-gauge tracks to accommodate the cars. There were 10 drying tunnels, each about 70 feet in length, and lined parallel to each other. After drying, the bricks were put in the kilns for firing. There were six round 10-burner, gas-fired, down-draft kilns about 26 feet in diameter, serviced by two rectangular stacks about 50 feet high.

The fire bricks were shipped by railroad throughout the State. The Gladding, McBean and Company closed the plant in 1949, thus ending the brick making industry in the Livermore Valley.

February, 1983

