

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

John Marsh's Stone House

In December 1837 John Marsh bought Los Meganos, a rancho north of Robert Livermore's Rancho Las Positas, from its original grantee, José Noriega, for \$500. Alta California's Mexican Governor José Castro had granted the four-league (about 20,846 acres) rancho to Noriega in 1835. Marsh's rancho included part of the *Arroyo de los Poblados* (now Marsh Creek) watershed, and Marsh could not take possession of his land until late April 1838 because of heavy winter rains. At that time, Robert Livermore was his closest neighbor. The modern city of Brentwood lies at the northeastern edge of the rancho and Antioch to the north.

John Marsh was born in Danvers, Massachusetts in 1800; he graduated from Harvard in 1823. When he came overland to Los Angeles in 1836, some scholars say that he misrepresented his Harvard diploma as a medical degree. He had taken a course in anatomy and worked as a Boston doctor's assistant in his senior year. He also studied for two years with an army surgeon in Wisconsin. In many states such experiences in those times would have qualified him to practice medicine. The Los Angeles city council had the diploma's Latin translated to their satisfaction by the Franciscan brothers at Mission San Gabriel and granted Dr. John Marsh a license to practice medicine. According to Irving Stone's *Men to Match My Mountains*, Marsh weighed

218 pounds, stood six feet two, and was bronzed and powerfully built.

Marsh was now the only medical doctor in California. His biographer, George Lyman, suggested that he use a deserted adobe on the Los Angeles Plaza for his office. He worked hard and was paid with cowhides, each worth about two dollars, tallow, or furs. He had a supply of quinine and thus could treat malaria. He vaccinated against smallpox, and he helped with difficult childbirths. Soon he complained that his adobe looked more like a warehouse than the office of a physician. Eventually, he sold his earnings to a Boston trading ship and headed north.

In San Jose he met José Noriega, who wanted to sell his rancho. After baptism at the mission, a requirement for Alta California land ownership, Marsh bought Los Meganos. In order to furnish cattle for his rancho, Marsh charged high prices for his work: twenty-five cows for a professional visit and fifty cows for an overnight stay. One angry customer, after washing two of Marsh's shirts, deducted twenty-five cows for doing the laundry from Dr. Marsh's original bill for 150 cows. Soon, Marsh had a



thriving herd that grazed on his unfenced property.

He was still the only doctor around; Antonio Suñol sent a rider with a letter for Marsh: "My wife is very ill. ... Come to San Jose and take horses, as the case is quite urgent." The U.S. Consul at Monterey sent for Marsh when his daughter came down with smallpox. Dr. Marsh traveled by horseback many miles to tend the ill.

Marsh wrote letters to friends and newspapers back east, persuading people to come to California. He was involved with the political shenanigans that eventually resulted in California state-

hood. When gold was discovered in California, Marsh traveled to Park's Bar, north of Marysville, where he struck it rich. He had also brought goods with him to trade for gold from other miners. In only a few months, he had accumulated \$40,000. After returning to Los Meganos, he grew richer by supplying the gold camps with wheat, fruit, beef, and pork. In 1851 his grape crop alone brought in \$4,000.

At Los Meganos near the creek, with the help of local Indians, Marsh built an adobe with four rooms plus an attic, not far from a large Miwok Indian village. The floor was dirt; the roof was thatched. One room had a fireplace—not for warmth, but so that the doctor could read at night. In June 1851 he married Abby Tuck, a schoolteacher, and she came to live with him in the adobe. She was delighted with the nearby vineyard, orchard, and gardens. A daughter, Alice, was born the following April.

Marsh decided to build a house worthy of his happy little family. The site, selected by Abby, was near the old adobe. The house is three stories, built of brick and ornamented on the exterior with pinkish-brown sandstone quarried on the rancho.

A tower added a fourth floor. The building has 7,000 square feet. There was a veranda on three sides of the first floor, and the veranda's roof was accessible from the second floor. When Alice was four years old, Abby died of tuberculosis in August 1855. In early September 1856 Marsh moved his belongings into the new house. Two weeks later, Marsh was stabbed to death by three vaqueros who stopped his buggy and robbed him when he was on his way to Martinez.

If you travel north on Lone Tree Way from Marsh Creek Road, you can see the Marsh house to the west.

The Trust for Public Land raised \$13 million to buy 4,000 acres, including the house, and turned the property over to the state park system. Indian artifacts dating back 9,000 years have been found on the property. The house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. For many years, local fans have fought to preserve the building. In 2006 the area was chosen for a state park. However, little actual restoration has been accomplished on the old building. With the recent cut-backs in state spending, that progress will probably slow down even more.

For current information, see the web site www.johnmarsh-house.com.

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