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TELEGRAPH HILL

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TELEGRAPH HILL

In November and December of 1769, the Portolá expedition discovered and explored the San Francisco peninsula. As members of the party wandered across the almost square north end of the land at the mouth of San Francisco Bay, they noticed a high, well-rounded hill occupying the extreme northeast corner of the peninsula. When Colonel Anza, in April, 1776, visited the Bay region on his reconnaissance for a presidio site, he climbed the hill and named it Loma Alta (High Hill). Loma Alta it became and remained until its name was changed to that of Telegraph Hill, seventy-three years later.

During the Spanish and the Mexican eras of California history, nothing happened to disturb Loma Alta's serene dominion over the inner bay. Perhaps only occasionally was its solitude disturbed by a herdsman, who climbed its precipitous sides in search of a stray horse or cow, or of an adventurous goat.

The hill was, in those days, a thing of beauty - in the rainy season covered with rich green grass and the blue and gold of the lupine and poppy, and studded here and there with clumps of shrubs and scrub oak. In the dry season its rich colors turned to tan and brown. It continued unmolested and unchanged until 1835, when settlers arrived to take up their residence at its base.

When the Spaniards came to occupy the peninsula of San Francisco, they established the presidio near the cove at the mouth of the bay, and founded the mission several miles to the south in a little watered valley.

All vessels that entered the San Francisco Bay thereafter, until about 1830, anchored in the cove in front of the presidio or perhaps across the bay at Richardson's Bay, as the whalers did. Captain William A. Richardson provided them with wood, water and vegetables in later years. Little use, if any, was made of the eastern shore of the peninsula for years, notwithstanding the fact that the west wind which blew in through the mouth of the bay proved troublesome to the seamen whose ships anchored at the presidio cove.

During his visit to San Francisco Bay, Captain Frederick W. Beechey anchored his vessel farther in the bay - between Alcatraz Island and the beach east of Point San Jose to be known later as Fort Mason. This cove was afterward named North Beach. Soon thereafter, another sea captain took the next step and anchored his vessel near what was called North Point, in the cove just south of Loma Alta. This was the most satisfactory landing place found thus far, since it had a fine sandy beach, no strong tide currents, and best of all, had ample protection from the strong winds which blew in the vicinity. Thereafter, this cove became

the accepted anchoring place for foreign vessels, although there was no settlement for a time.

In 1835, a decided change took place in the life of the cove and Loma Alta. Late in that year, Captain William A. Richardson, who up to that time had been living in Southern California, found it inconvenient to carry on his trade with the settled country south of San Francisco Bay. He therefore decided to change his residence to a more suitable location. By December of 1835, he had erected a tent at Loma Alta cove, because it was the anchoring place for foreign ships. This was the humble beginning of the village of Yerba Buena, which later was to grow into the City of San Francisco. Richardson's tent was located several hundred yards west of the beach at a spot which became the northeast corner of Dupont and Clay streets. Once a house was built there, others soon followed, so that by 1840 the new village had several houses and stores and a population of about fifty people. With the abandonment of the presidio, about that time, the families of the retired soldiers moved over to the new village, thus giving it a substantial increase in population. By this time, also, the hamlet had been given the name of Yerba Buena, a name previously applied to the cove at North Beach just east of Fort Mason. With the birth of the new Yerba Buena we have the -beginning of the history of the modern Telegraph Hill.

Loma Alta, as seen from a vessel entering the bay, was an oblong elevation of land about three-quarters of a mile long at the base from northwest to southeast; and about three-eighths of a mile wide from southwest to northeast. It rose in steep rounded slopes to almost a sharp point some 300 feet high, 294 feet to be exact, about one-third of the way from its northern limits. On the north and east faces of the hill the slopes were so abrupt as to take on the appearance of cliffs, which descend into the comparatively deep waters of the bay without a beach. To the west and south, the inclines were more gentle and merged into a low saddle, about fifty feet above the sea, which served as the connecting link between Loma Alta Hill and what was known later as Russian Hill directly to the west. Following the southeastern axis, about half way along its length, and perhaps 100 feet lower than the peak, was a broad shoulder which sloped at an angle to the beach forming the northern shore of the new Yerba Buena Cove. Taken at its base, this hill probably covered an area of about three-tenths of a square mile at the extreme northeast corner of the San Francisco Peninsula.

As delimited by the modern streets, this area lay between the following places: At the north end was North Point, marked now by Bay Street, between Stockton and Kearny streets. The hill joined North Beach at the present corner

of Powell and Francisco streets. From North Point, the shoreline ran almost directly southeast, with only a few indentations or projections, diagonally across the present streets and lots to Clark's Point, marked by the intersection of Broadway and Battery Street. From Clark's Point, it ran almost at right angles southwest to the corner of Jackson and Kearny streets. Then it swung almost due northwest from Pine and Kearny streets, across the blocks and over the low saddle, diagonally back to Powell and Francisco streets. That was the area covered by Telegraph Hill up to 1850. From then on the hill began to decrease in area very rapidly under the exigencies of modern economic life, until now, when only a remnant of the former hill is left. Perhaps none of it might now remain had it not been for the efforts of some of the pioneer groups to save this landmark from being entirely removed.

From 1840 to 1846, Loma Alta, as it was still called, took only a slight part in the life of the little hamlet which nestled at its southeastern base. Nothing disturbed its age-long repose, other than some nature-lover in search of a fine view or a picnic party looking for a breezy place. By July, 1846, the town had grown until it had several hundred inhabitants, most of whom were foreigners. Then, on the early morning of July 9, 1846, Loma Alta saw the landing of Captain Montgomery's men on the beach and the

raising of the American flag over the village of Yerba Buena. A new era had begun for the hill.

No sooner were the forces of the United States in control than, on July 15, Captain Montgomery transferred several of the brass cannon from Sonoma and from Fort San Joaquin; and, on July 17, was begun the construction of a battery on the east side of Loma Alta at a point some 500 feet north of Clark's Point, which now lies halfway between Vallejo and Green streets at Battery Street. It was finished by the end of July. Its purpose was to protect the anchorage, so Montgomery told Sloat, and it was from this battery that Battery Street received its name five years later.[1]

Whereas, before July 1846, Yerba Buena had been a sleepy little village with only a handful of people, by the end of July, with the coming of a shipload of Mormons, the population was more than doubled and the town began to thrive. As the number of inhabitants increased, tents and shacks of all sorts began to dot the southern slope of Loma Alta. Early in January 1847, the first newspaper was established at Yerba Buena and the name of the town was officially changed to San Francisco in that same month.[2] During 1847,

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1. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, V, 238-41. Volumnes III and IV, were also used in reconstructing the details given in the preceding page.
2. Ibid., 645-47.

shipping increased a great deal and overland immigrants arrived in large numbers. Many settled in San Francisco, so that by May 1848, there were more than 900 inhabitants and 200 buildings in the town. A number of those buildings were built on the slope of the hill facing the cove. In October 1847, the first steamer arrived, thus creating the necessity for wharves.

Then, in May 1848, came the gold rush to the mines. San Francisco was almost deserted. With the beginning of the rainy season, the mining element returned and the population jumped to several thousand. During the fall of 1848, ten town lots of 100 yards each were sold by the city, at Clark's Point, for $28.62 each. At this time, too, Broadway was opened as a street running east and west from Clark's Point along the south side of Loma Alta to Kearny Street.

Clark's Point being the place where the nearest deep water approached the shore of the cove, it was decided to build a wharf at the foot of Broadway so that steamers might moor there, as the water was some fifteen feet deep. Consequently, in October 1847, the town government appropriated $10,000, out of which the sum of $2,000 was to be used to build Broadway Wharf, 10x105 feet in size. Later it was decided to build the wharf larger, the new dimensions to be 49x547 feet. It was to cost $11,000 and for it $1,000 was appropriated on November 27. The new Broadway Wharf was

begun in December, at which time $2,000 more was appropriated as the structure reached out into the bay; but in January 1848, operations were suspended for lack of money. By this time a number of warehouses and boarding houses or hotels were being constructed along Broadway on the side of the hill. The warehouse at the head of Broadway Wharf belonged to William S. Clark and was located at the point of land named Clark's Point.

West of the shore, in the block bounded by Sansome, Montgomery, Broadway and Vallejo streets, were several lots owned by J. H. Ackerman, Peter Wimmer, Alexander Hatler and Ira T. Stebbins. These were on the southern slope of Loma Alta. The lot at the southeast corner of Sansome and Vallejo streets, just above Clark's Point, was used as a cemetery for the town of San Francisco. Several bodies were buried there during 1846 and 1847, but the property on the hillside soon became so valuable that, late in 1848, the cemetery was moved over to the North Beach slope of the hill.[3] During the next year or two, the hillside around Clark's Point was built up very rapidly. It was one of the chief business districts of the new town for several years. Also north of Broadway, in the block between Sansome and Montgomery,

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3. Bancroft, History of California, V, 685.

were the lots of Pika Paele, Henry Harris, J. D. Hoppe, George Pott, John B. Faust, George M. Evans. The most important building was Couzens' slaughter-house, which was in the middle of the block on the hillside. Owners of other lots on the hillside in the two blocks along Broadway between Montgomery and Dupont, in 1848, were Michael Foley, E. P. Jones, Michael Morey, Augustus Tieroff, F. J. Lippitt, Aquila Glover, Stephen A. Wright, Kale Puaani, Robert Whittaker, James McClary and James Greyson. These people were the first residents of Telegraph Hill.

In May of 1848 came the gold rush. Because most of the inhabitants of San Francisco went to the diggings, no new development took place in town until November, when the winter rains drove the miners back to San Francisco. Building operations were actively resumed then and the new Broadway Wharf was opened to sea-going vessels. Consequently the southern slope of Telegraph Hill was soon dotted with a crude assortment of warehouses and boarding houses.

With the opening of the year 1849, the hill took on greater significance in the life of the town. Late in February the first steamship arrived in San Francisco. Thereafter, vessels of all sorts began to come in, at first one or two, but as the year advanced they arrived in dozens and then in hundreds, so that by mid-November, 1849, more than 600 vessels had entered the port. At one time during the

summer, more than 500 ships were anchored about Yerba Buena Cove.

It became necessary that the merchants and ship owners should have some method of getting advance information concerning the ships about to arrive. Some ingenious person conceived the idea of establishing a lookout for ships which entered the Golden Gate. The information was to be relayed to the interested parties below. A lookout was stationed, therefore, on the hilltop in the summer of 1849, and a tall pole with a system of signal flags was used to convey the desired information to the people in town. In September 1849, an improved signal station was built. This was in the form of a two-story house 25 feet by 18 feet where the observers lived. There was a semaphore tower with arms, like those of a windmill, which were moved from one position to another in giving the signals. As the number and types of vessels entering San Francisco Bay increased, the intricacy of the signal system also increased. A code book giving the meaning of all signals had to be printed and distributed to the people. In that way, people soon became familiar with the signals until even the newsboys could read the information being sent down.

In this connection there is a humorous story told about the signal code. It seems that one evening, shortly after the code book was published, a small newsboy was

sitting in the top gallery of the theater, munching peanuts and criticising the actors. Presently a rather awkward actor rushed onto the stage, with arms extended at right angles to his body, and exclaimed, "What means this, my lord?" The newsboy, who knew the code well, cried out in a loud voice, "Sidewheel steamer!" That remark brought down the house and the actor's arms simultaneously.[4] There was another story about a newly-arrived immigrant from across the plains, who, in applying the signal chart to the interpretation of the signals, mistook a windmill on the side of the hill for the station at the top. On counting the fans on the mill, he concluded that a fleet of clipper ships was arriving and announced it, to the great hilarity of the crowd.[5]

The signal house on High Hill was the first striking landmark to greet the eyes of the immigrants as they came into the Golden Gate. It was likewise the focal point of the eyes of the townspeople all day long, because as the signals were displayed the people received great thrills and their hopes were aroused whenever a mail steamer was announced.

By the end of 1849, however, the lookout on Loma Alta had become inadequate. The tempo of life had quickened

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4. J. S. Hittell, A history of the city of San Francisco, 135.
5. Bancroft, California inter pocula, 269.

in San Francisco. It was necessary to get information, concerning arriving ships, much sooner than the observers on the hill could give it. Therefore, a new lookout station was established at Point Lobos on the south side of the Golden Gate, from which approaching ships could be seen some twenty miles out at sea. That observation station was then connected with the signal tower by a telegraph wire, so that the business men were thus enabled to get the information about incoming ships hours before they docked. It was from this telegraph station that Loma Alta received its new name of Telegraph Hill, which it bears to this day. The change of name was made early in 1850. For the next year or so it continued to dispense information, until the telegraph station was moved into the Merchants Exchange building down in the business section of the town. Here the business men could get the news more conveniently. The signal station on Telegraph Hill fell into disuse and became mainly a resort for visitors.[6]

During 1849, as the number of arriving vessels increased, the need for wharves was felt more and more, so that the construction of moles into the bay was begun, as continuations of most of the streets running east and west. Several of these piers were built out from the side of

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6. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 171.

Telegraph Hill just north of Broadway Wharf. One of these was built at the point where Fort Montgomery, or the Battery, had been built four years before. It was Cunningham Wharf extending out from a point half way between Vallejo and Green Street at Battery Street. It was built in October 1850; was 375 feet long, and 33 feet wide with a right angle extension of 330 feet by 30 feet at a depth of 25 feet. The cost was $75,000. The wharf was built by Joseph Cunningham for whom it was named, and it was here that the storage ship Resoluta was tied up for a long time.

Just to the north of this pier, at the end of Green Street, Buckelew's Wharf extended out into the bay. It was built by B. R. Buckelew and Company, general merchants. Beyond that was the Law or Green Street wharf, which was built, also, in the autumn of 1850, half way between Green and Union streets.

As the town grew in all directions, at that time, a number of changes took place about Clark's Point. Near the foot of Broadway was Tim Burnham's butcher shop, and the office of a merchant, Henry Wetherbee. In the same neighborhood were the offices of William E. Stoughtenburgh, auctioneer; Hutton & M. E. Miller; J. S. Ellis, later sheriff of San Francisco County, and T. Goin; also L. T. Wilson, shipper; J. F. Hutton & Zimmerman, commission merchants, and D. Babcock, druggist. North of Broadway, along Battery

to Vallejo Street, were located the Fremont Hotel of John Sutch, near Vallejo Street and the Bay Hotel of Pet. Guevil. In the same block on either side of the street were the establishments of Edward H. Castle, a merchant; Gardiner, Howard and Company; Haren and Company; Joseph L. Howell; J. H. Morgan and Company; A. E. Kitfield; John Lentell; L. R. Mills; J. H. Morton and Company, the last three of whom were grocers.

Along Broadway, between Battery and Sansome streets, were the offices of C. A. Bertrand, shipper; at the Battery corner of the block were William Clark, merchant; John Elliot, commission merchant; George Farris and Company, (S. C. Northrop and Edwin Thompson) general store. The hotels in that block were the Illinois House of S. Anderson at the Battery corner, Broadway House of William M. Bruner, the rival Broadway Hotel belonging to L. Dederer, the Lovejoy's Hotel of J. H. Brown, the Lafayette Hotel of L. Guirand, and the Albion House of Croxton and Ward.

From the water's edge on Jackson, north to Telegraph Hill, Montgomery was lined on both sides with business buildings and corrugated iron structures. The same was true of Sansome Street. At the west corner of Broadway and Sansome streets was the three-and-a-half-story wooden structure of J. W. Bingham, O. Reynolds, and F. A. Bartlett and W. A. Bartlett, commission merchants. In the same block

were located offices of De Witt and H. A. Harrison, one of the oldest firms in town, later to become Kittle and Company. Case, Heiser, and Company; Mahoney, Ripley & McCullough, who dealt in ammunition, and a number of others were located there. On this section of Telegraph Hill were located A. Muir and E. Green, brokers; Joseph W. Hartman and James Hogan, and the well-known hat shop of C. J. Collins.[7]

Along Montgomery, on the slope of Telegraph Hill, were several dwelling-houses, among them that of Captain P. B. Hewlitt, who took in boarders. However, the higher slopes of the hill on the southeast side, a section now embraced by Sansome and Kearny between Vallejo and Union streets, was given up to people called Sydney men. This section was covered with tents, huts and poorly built houses in which dwelt disreputable persons who had come from Australia and other places in the South Seas. They were mostly of the convict type and their neighborhood was known as "Sydneytown."

Around Telegraph Hill to the west, on the southern slope, was another famous gathering place of other nationalities. This section was bounded by Kearny and Stockton streets, extending north from Broadway to Union Street. This area was also covered with tents, dirty hovels and shacks, inhabited by people from South America, especially from

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7. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 173-175.

Chile. It was consequently named "Little Chile."

In the shabby dens and public houses of the lowest order in "Little Chile" and "Sydneytown" originated most of the crime committed in San Francisco during the first four or five years after the discovery of gold.

Farther to the north, along the western slope of Telegraph Hill, there were only a few house gardens or vegetable patches belonging to the early squatters. Along the North Beach slope, that section which had become known as a lumber depository, where George H. Ensign had a lumberyard, and nearby, at what is now Mason and Francisco streets, Harry Meiggs built a sawmill near a spring. There, also, was located Captain Welsh's hide-house and a small wharf.

In 1848, the cemetery which had been started at Clark's Point was moved to the North Beach section; and it was established in the area bounded by Powell and Dupont streets, between Chestnut and Francisco streets. By 1856 several hundred people had been buried in that plot on the slope of Telegraph Hill. However, as the town spread towards the North Beach area in the early '50s, this cemetery had to be abandoned; and a new site was selected over the hills to the west. The older cemetery remained for a number of years, the graves neglected and forgotten.

The northern and eastern slopes of Telegraph Hill, from North Beach around to the Battery, were so steep that

few people lived there. Soon this part of the hill was used as the source of ballast for outgoing ships and for sand and rock to fill in the bay. The wharves were extended farther and farther into deep water.

As the town began to grow and spread northward, the question of street grading and leveling became very important. As early as 1850, the city authorities adopted a plan for the streets. North of Broadway, however, Telegraph Hill presented an almost insurmountable barrier. All the streets running east and west between Broadway and Bay Street ran into the steep slopes of the hill, as did the north and south streets from Stockton east to Battery. On all of these streets cuts from fifty to two hundred feet deep would have to be made at great expense to the lot owners. This would have rendered numerous lots unavailable. Since the cost was so great, the city left most of the cutting to be done by private enterprise. Such a task was begun in 1849, when Broadway was graded. Then followed the leveling and extension of Battery Street. Sansome Street, also, was being cut through, but that took several years as the cut was quite deep. Most of the sand and rock removed from the slopes of Telegraph Hill went into filling the cove and the shore along the wharves north of Clark's Point. The eastern slope of Telegraph Hill was being taken away for the ships' ballast during the following twenty years, until a cliff almost

straight up and down was left, much as it is today. The cutting through of Montgomery was attempted in the late fifties, but it went no farther than Green Street, where the grade was so steep that no vehicles could go over it.

On the west side, Kearny also stopped against the hill at Green Street, while Dupont went as far as Filbert. Stockton Street was also extended to Filbert, and a few years later it was opened from Chestnut north to the bay.

Of the streets running east and west, Chestnut stopped at Stockton, Lombard went no farther than Powell; Greenwich stopped between Stockton and Powell; Filbert was marked as far as Stockton; while Union was run up to a point opposite Kearny near the crest of the hill. Green ran as far as Kearny; while Vallejo stopped at Montgomery and began again at Sansome on the east side. Thus there was a large area on Telegraph Hill, above the 150-foot level, that was not traversed by streets, and which could only be reached by winding foot-trails. On the north end of the hill, Francisco and Bay streets were cut through in the '60s.[8]

On September 29, 1851, while street grading and excavating was being carried on above Clark's Point on Telegraph Hill, a small gold quartz vein was discovered, which

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8. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 756. See the map of streets for 1856.

set the city wild with excitement. For a few weeks this gave promise of advancing the grading of the hill at private expense, to such an extent as to remove it permanently from giving trouble, further, to the advance of commerce and progress. Unfortunately for the street department of San Francisco, the gold vein was soon exhausted and no more traces of gold could be found.[9] Prospecting came to an abrupt end, and free grading stopped.

Late in the '70s, when Francisco and Bay streets were being graded and cut through from North Beach across the north end of Telegraph, they were run across what had been the cemetery in the '50s. This plot had been neglected and forgotten. Consequently, when the street excavations were made, many of the 800 or 900 graves which were on the hillside were uncovered. After a rain it was not an uncommon sight to see, projecting from the bank on the side of the streets, the end of a coffin that had rotted off, revealing here and there a thighbone or a grinning skull. It is said that not a few gentlemen, who were accustomed to imbibe too freely of the cup that cheers, were converted to sobriety on viewing such gruesome sights as they staggered home along those streets.[10]

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9. C. W. Stoddard, In the footprints of the padres, 106.
10. Ibid.

During the '60s the signal house on top of Telegraph Hill continued to exist but was no longer used. Finally, during a storm in December 1870, it was blown down and destroyed. Smaller lookout stations were built from time to time as the years went by, and were now and then used as weather stations.

Through the years, the last hundred and fifty feet of elevation on Telegraph Hill was left uninhabited, except by a flock of goats which held dominion there for many years. Thus was afforded amusement and exercise for the gangs of young boys who scampered over the steep slopes on Saturdays, Sundays and other holidays. From the early '50s on to very recent years, Telegraph Hill was also a favorite picnic ground for the townsfolk, who found delight in the magnificent view to be had of city and bay from its top. Every Sunday found many people, singly or in groups, eating their lunches and enjoying the view.[11]

During these later years, squatters began to build huts and nest-like cottages on the cliffs on the north and east sides of the hill. There they lived at peace with the world; no one ever molested them or contested their right to be there, for on Telegraph Hill one man's right was as good as that of any other. There the squatter would plant a few

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11. Stoddard, In the footprints of the padres, 55.

flowers or vegetables by the side of his one-roomed cottage in order to give it a homelike touch.

In the '90s, Telegraph Hill began to acquire fame as the site of an artists' colony. Struggling artists, musicians, and writers of all ages and nationalities began to congregate on the southern and eastern slopes of the hill, in the section between Kearny and Montgomery and Greenwich streets. There they either built or rented small cottages or rooms, and lived as in a world apart from the rest of the city - to paint or write or compose, inspired by the marvelous view below them. Many gay parties were held in those tumbledown shacks.

From time to time, since the establishment of San Francisco, the city government considered measures to remove Telegraph Hill as an obstacle to the growth of that section of the city. All those proposals had to be abandoned, however, because of the prohibitive cost. Much of the hill was graded down and removed, though, throughout the years. Then, late in the 1890's, the pioneer societies proposed that, since Telegraph Hill was an historic spot, the top of it should be turned into a park. This suggestion was carried out. By the beginning of the 20th century the top of the hill was cleared, and a small park called Pioneer Park was established. A flagpole and a small signal house were set up. These have been there from that time on to the present.

The park was never a spot of civic pride. There were a few shrubs and flowers and a few wind-tossed eucalyptus trees and acacia, which had to shift for themselves since they received little or no attention. There were two narrow winding roads approaching the park from the west side.

In 1905, it was proposed to enlarge the park at the summit by terracing the hill at the 275 and 250 foot levels. A planning commission was appointed, presided over by Mr. Daniel H. Burnham, and a plan was drawn up and approved. At the lower elevation of the two terraces, a roadway was to encircle the hill, and a monument symbolic of some phase of city life was proposed for the summit.[12]

Early in the morning of April 18, 1906, earthquake and fire occurred. Most of the city of San Francisco was devastated, and the extension of Pioneer Park was never carried out as planned. During the fire, most of the buildings on the lower slopes of the hill were burned, but the artists' huts and cottages higher up were left unharmed. These formed an island in a sea of ruins.

During the reconstruction period following the fire, Telegraph Hill and the plan to beautify it were neglected and forgotten. The little park which had been there was abandoned.

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12. D. H. Burnham, Reports of plans for San Francisco, 131-146.

For years only the flagpole and a few lean, scraggy, undernourished eucalyptus trees adorned the eastern rim of the summit. These sentinels, living reminders of a glory that might have been, battled the strong winds blowing over the hill top.

In later years, the Telegraph Hill Committee of the California Club interested itself in the preservation and beautification of Telegraph Hill. To that purpose, from time to time, it presented resolutions to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, requesting that Telegraph Hill be included in a proposition for its improvement at bond elections. The board received the resolutions, but little or nothing was done.[13]

Several years after the fire, a narrow roadway was built to the summit of the hill. It started from the northeast corner of Washington Square, the intersection of Stockton and Filbert streets, curved around the hill to the north and developed into a small terrace between Grant and Kearny streets overlooking Chestnut Street. The road then ascended along the western slope around the southern shoulder and reached the top on the eastern rim. This road was improved and widened in 1929, so that automobiles could ascend to the top of the hill. The summit was widened and

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13. Year-book of the California Club, 15.

leveled.

After 1906, homes and rooming houses were built on the upper levels of Telegraph Hill and more and more painters and writers went to live there. Telegraph Hill became known the world over as a center of the art colony in San Francisco.

In 1929 an event occurred in San Francisco, which has changed the surroundings, the atmosphere, and perhaps the destiny of Telegraph Hill for all time. This event was the death of Mrs. Lily Hitchcock Coit, one of the early comers to San Francisco.

Many persons, societies and institutions were remembered in Mrs. Coit's will, including the City Art Commission. Contrary to popular impression, however, the money given to the Art Commission was not left to be used for a personal memorial. The will stated that the commission was, "to expend the sum in an appropriate manner for the purpose of adding to the beauty of said city, which I have always loved."

The City Art Commission, having been left free to spend the money as they though best, debated for several months as to what they should do with it. Late in 1929 they finally decided to build a memorial tower to Lily Hitchcock[14]

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14. South of Market Journal, VIII, No. 11, November, 1933, 11.

Coit and place it at the top of Telegraph Hill.

For the remainder of 1929 and well into 1931, a violent controversial storm broke and raged over and around the heads of the Art Commission, after their decision was announced. Practically all the social, civic and business clubs and organizations took part in the discussions at one time or another. The conservative people were opposed to the proposal in general, as well as to any idea of having a public memorial to Mrs. Coit placed in so prominent a site in San Francisco. The more liberal-minded citizens did not object to having some memorial erected to Mrs. Coit, since her estate provided for it; but they believed also that some less conspicuous site might be selected. For some time the problem remained unsettled.

Finally, over all protests, in 1932, the Art Commission decided to go ahead with their original idea and build the memorial tower at the top of Telegraph Hill. They made one slight concession to popular indignation, however, when they consented to drop the word memorial from the title of the tower. Instead of being known as the "Coit Memorial Tower," it was henceforth to be known simply as "Coit Tower."

In 1932, Arthur Brown Jr., who had designed the San Francisco city hall, was engaged to draw up the plans for the tower. His design for the memorial was in the form of a tall lighthouse on a broad simple base. Then another

controversy arose over the lighthouse idea, but again the Art Commission compromised by deciding to leave out the light.

Finally, in early 1933, construction was begun. The crest of the hill was leveled off and widened into a flattened area about 100 feet in diameter. The flagpole was removed and the tower was started on the southeastern side of this area. The completed monument is a fluted tower some 181 feet tall, and about 30 feet in diameter, made of reënforced steel and concrete. There is an observation platform near the top, enclosed in glass, from which a wonderful view of the city and bay district is to be had. The base is simple in line, rectangular in shape, about 50 feet wide and 15 or 20 feet high. This base contains several rooms and halls. At the apex of the tower there will be a gas flame, which is never to be quenched, typifying the spirit of the tower's donnor.

The tower was finished late in November 1933, and dedicatory ceremonies were held in Washington Square on December 3, in conjunction with the unveiling of a memorial monument to Lily Hitchcock Coit there. The ceremony was attended by Mayor Angelo Rossi, William H. Crocker, Leland W. Cutler, chairman, the fire chief and a number of other notables, including the living members of Knickerbocker Company No. 5, of which Mrs. Coit had been an honorary member. Other

services were held on top of the hill.[15]

The Art Commission decided in the summer of 1934 to have the walls of the rooms at the base of the tower decorated with mural paintings. For that purpose the city asked the Federal Government to approve a relief work project under the agency of the Civil Works Administration to give unemployed artists the commission of painting the murals. The funds were allotted and the work was begun. The paintings were to depict the industrial and social life of San Francisco. A group of artists were set to work and the murals drafted in the style of Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican painter.

The murals showed a great number of objects and persons massed together in a confused jumble, in all sorts of distorted perspectives and bright colors. Long before the work was finished the art colony and the various organizations of the city were split into a number of different camps, and another controversy, just as acrimonious as the one over the tower, got under way, and continued. The realistic conservative school of artists and citizens declared the murals were monstrosities, Soviet propaganda, and Communistic, among other names. There were other groups

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15. San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco, December 4, 1933, 3.

who thought them artistic, somewhat different, but inappropriate for that particular place and purpose. There was the modernistic and radical school of artists that believed the work to be great art. In spite of all the storms of protest the work on the murals continued. When the C.W.A. was discontinued in August 1934, the work was continued under the State Emergency Relief Administration. The paintings were finally finished early in 1935, and the tower was open to the public. Also, at the same time that the art work was being carried on inside, the slopes of the hill were beautified. The rocks were dug out, new soil was spread on top and shrubs and flowers were planted on the slopes and along the roadway and terraces, so that at present the top of the hill has the appearance of a well-kept park.

The building of the Coit Tower was not the only change which has recently taken place on Telegraph Hill. Real estate companies have bought some of the property on the sides of the hill, and the old cottages in which artists used to live are being removed. In their places are rising modern apartment buildings to be rented to wealthy tenants who desire a home with a beautiful view near the business center. It would seem that before many more years go by the old Bohemian and artistic atmosphere of Telegraph Hill will be a memory.

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