

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

OLD TOWN of SHASTA

Registered Landmark #77

by

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for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1937

Written under auspices of Works Progress Administration
District #8, Project #165-03-7307, Symbol #165027

OLD TOWN OF SHASTA

Old Shasta, 1,169 feet up in the foothills of the Sacramento Valley, seven miles northwest of Redding, is the oldest town of Northern California. Originally known as Reading's Springs, it was founded in 1849 by the pioneer Major Pierson B. Reading. As the supply base of the northern mining camps, during the gold rush it became one of the largest inland towns of California. Wagon navigation ended at Shasta City. From that point, mules transported supplies over the steep timbered mountain trails of the Trinities and Siskiyou. The many creeks and gulches of the vicinity, rich in gold, drew hordes of miners.

After the fifties, the population dwindled to a few hundred as the mines were worked less. Some who came for gold stayed to cultivate the land, plant orchards, and graze stock on the fertile bench lands and foothills. In 1890, the Central Pacific Railroad was routed through Redding, seven miles away, and drew from Shasta City what little trade remained after the gold rush ended. Today, old Shasta, its buildings gradually crumbling, is a picturesque landmark of the gold rush period.

Major Pierson B. Reading was one of the earliest pioneer settlers of Northern California and Shasta County.

He came west with the Chiles-Walker party in 1843. Associated with Captain Sutter, he made extensive explorations in California. In 1844, he obtained the Spanish land grant of Rancho San Buenaventura consisting of 26,632 acres in Shasta County. During the American war of occupation, he aided the Americans, serving in the California Battalion as paymaster with the rank of major. Following his discharge, he settled on his northern rancho which was made the county seat when Shasta County was created in 1850.¹

In the spring of 1849, gold was discovered in Shasta County by prospectors who had spent the previous year mining on the American and Feather rivers. Major Reading, aided by Indians and other men, worked successfully in diggings near the site of Reading's Springs, or Reading's Dry Diggings as their camp was called. The luxuriant forests and many springs, which furnished a plentiful supply of lumber, wood and water, made the place an excellent camp site. Located in the heart of the richest mining district of the county, Reading's Springs became the favorite settlement in the vicinity of Reading's Ranch on the county's southern border.²

1. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, V, 689.

2. Ibid., VI, 492-493.

Following the gold discovery there was a great influx of miners into the district. Most of the first prospectors were Oregonians who came down the old Oregon and Sacramento River immigrant trail in search of California gold. Before the end of 1849, gold was discovered on Cottonwood, Clear Creek, Whiskey Creek and French Gulch. Reading's Springs became a lively center of trade and great activity. Dr. Benjamin Shurtleff, pioneer physician, who lived at Reading's Springs for twenty-five years, describes the mining town as it was on his arrival there October 21, 1849:³

Five or six hundred people were there, but it being on Sunday more than half of the people were miners, who in those times went to the trading post on that day to purchase supplies, get the news, and perhaps letters from their friends at home. It was a village of tents, but quite a number of log cabins were being built. When the rainy season began, which was early on the second of November, Milton Magee was the only man who had a log house completely finished. All admired it, and wished they had one like it.

Most of the houses were built on Shurtleff Hill overlooking the flat land where the present business district of the town is located. Many new immigrants from the northwestern states who came west with ox teams over the northern

3. B. Shurtleff, "Shasta," Overland monthly, XXXVI, No. 212, August 1900, 153-154.

route crossed the Sacramento River at Tehama and Moon's ranch, went north along the Sacramento River and located at Reading's Springs or nearby.

During the winter of 1849, heavy rains flooded the Shasta mining camps. Many of the newcomers became terror stricken and fled, selling their goods and belongings at very low prices. Dr. Shurtleff recounts:⁴

In the fall, freight and supplies hauled from Sacramento on wagons to Reading's Springs cost from forty to fifty cents a pound. But soon after the rains began the water commenced to flood the country, a panic seized the people, and many hurried away down the Sacramento Valley to San Francisco and other places in the central part of the State. Those who had goods and were determined to leave, sold them at a ruinously low price. Flour that had cost fifty cents a pound to haul from Sacramento to the Springs, to say nothing of the price paid for it at Sacramento, was sold for twenty or twenty-five cents a pound, and other supplies were sacrificed in the same proportion. R. J. Walsh, a shrewd merchant, who came overland from St. Louis, purchased freely at the forced sales, particularly flour. Walsh had money. On his way across the plains he stopped at Green River, across which he established a ferry that proved very lucrative, and then after running it for a short time he sold out at a high price and completed his journey to California. When the water rose so high in

4. Shurtleff, "Shasta," Overland monthly, XXXVI, No. 212, August, 1900, 154.

the Sacramento Valley that freight teams could no longer ford Sycamore Slough below Colusa, the fortunate trader sold the goods he had in store at enormous prices. Flour that he had bought less than a month before at twenty or twenty-five cents a pound, readily brought him \$2.25 a pound, and at the rate of \$4.50 a barrel. The flour had been imported from Chile in hundred pound sacks, and was nearly all sold by the sack. When it was sold in less quantities than a whole sack, the cost was \$2.50 a pound. Another article among many that brought a fabulous price, was tacks. Walsh had all of them, which he readily sold to the miners for use in half-soleing their heavy cowhide boots at a bit a nail and at the rate of \$1.50 a dozen.

On June 8, 1850, the name of the little mining town was changed from Reading's Springs to Shasta City after the giant snow-covered mountain to the north, which originally was within the boundaries⁵ of Shasta County. On that occasion the townspeople held a public meeting in front of

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5. The origin of the name Shasta is uncertain although there are several explanations concerning it. Some authorities say the name comes from 'Shastika,' a tribe of Indians who lived at the base of Mt. Shasta. Another version is that it originates from the Russian "tcheste" meaning (white, pure, clear) and was given to the mountain by a party of Russians who were among the first people to visit Mt. Shasta. Dr. A. L. Kroeber of the University of California says: "The origin of the word must be regarded as still undetermined, although almost certainly Indian." Anonymous: "Shasta, the county of diversity and its principal city," in the Grizzly Bear magazine, XLIII, No. 253, May 1928, 12. Bancroft, History of California, VII, 440, says: "Shasta is a corruption of the French chaste, pronounced shas-t, and was first applied to the mountain of that name, spelled Chesta or Chasta, by early American travelers."

R. J. Walsh's store, on Main Street, which stood just south of where the Masonic temple now stands.

Shasta County, created February 18, 1850, was one of the original twenty-seven counties of California. After the gold discovery, the great increase in population necessitated the division of Shasta County and the formation of several new ones - Tehama, Siskiyou and later Lassen and Modoc. New county seats were established, and that of Shasta County was transferred, on February 10, 1851, from Reading's Ranch to Shasta City, which was more centrally located in the mining district and after 1851 was the most important and prosperous town of the county.⁶ The first courthouse was a log building. It was removed, later, to a more substantial, fireproof brick store which was fitted up for the purpose.

Prosperity and trade came to Shasta City in the 1850's. Its population ranged between 2,500 and 3,000 in those busy years. In proportion to its size it was one of the richest inland towns in California. Hotels, stores, blacksmith shops, saloons, churches, schools, and a local newspaper came into being to accommodate the pioneers and miners who thronged into the town daily. Two of the hotels, the St. Charles and the Trinity House, erected in the spring

6. Bancroft, History of California, VI, 492.

of 1850, were the first frame buildings in the town. Gold in the diggings continued to be plentiful, constantly bringing more hordes of prospectors to try their luck. Hardy, healthy men who could endure the hardships made a great deal of money. Many others died, victims of scurvy and disease due to a lack of proper food, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.⁷

On July 4, 1850, Shasta was one of the few California towns to celebrate Independence day. It was also the first town in Northern California to observe the day. An account of the celebration in 1850 says:⁸

A man named Johnson, who, with his family came overland in 1849, kept boarders in a log cabin, made preparations and had a successful celebration on the fourth of July. With poles and brush he made an arbor adjoining his log cabin and made temporary tables and seats out of borrowed lumber. The table was supplied with roast beef, boiled ham, light bread and pies made of dry Chili peaches. The butter had made a long voyage through the torrid zone and a trip up the Sacramento valley, it had doubtless one day been good. Secured from the topmost branch of a sturdy oak near by the American flag did honor to the occasion. Maine in the far north and the newly acquired state of Texas were represented. Citizens from

7. "Old town of Shasta," Archives of the State Park Commission of California, 14, December 6, 1932.

8. Ibid.

the northwestern states, Illinois and Missouri leading in numbers were there as were some Europeans all dressed in the same garb. The power of regulating styles was vested in Grizzly Gulch, Mad Mule Canyon and Salt Pork Ridge. The stately beaver hat, fancy necktie and 'biled' shirt had not yet received permission to come into camp.

Shasta became an important distributing center and wholesale town. Bull, Baker and Company, which was the largest wholesale firm in Northern California, and R. J. Walsh were its pioneer merchants. Indicative of the large business done in Shasta City during the early fifties is an article in the Alta California of October 25, 1852:⁹

Business for the last few weeks has been steadily on the increase and many of our merchants are making very large sales. The amount of goods hauled into town for a month or two past is immense. The steady stream of this year's immigration that has poured into this section, of course contributes much to this pleasing state of affairs. Great numbers of miners from other portions of the state have also come into our mines with a view of locating claims for the winter's operations. In this way they have acted wisely. Shasta County, at the present time, embraces within her limits a greater extent of surface diggings that will pay in the rainy season when water is abundant and convenient, more than any other town in the State. Around Olney, One Horse Town and Jackass Flat alone, there are thousands upon thousands of acres of

9. Alta California, October 25, 1852.

dirt that will yield fair wages, with a sufficiency of water, from the surface down to the bedrock, even with an old fashioned rocker. Indeed it is the opinion of many with whom we have conversed, that the Shasta mines are not fully prospected yet! Therefore we say to those in search of a location for the winter, come up North. With moderate industry you have every probability of realizing good wages all winter, either in the Shasta, Trinity and Siskiyou mines.

Shasta's greatest period of prosperity was between 1850-1857. There were no wagon roads north of Shasta City to the northern mines. Supplies were hauled by horse and mule teams to Shasta and from there were packed by mules over the steep mountain trails. The wholesale firm of Bull, Baker and Company sold great quantities of goods which were sometimes packed on mules as far north as southern Oregon. One of the first correspondents of the Shasta Courier, "Madeline," has called Shasta City the head of "whoa navigation."¹⁰ Often there were a hundred freight teams in Shasta City at one time. A writer in an early issue of Hutchings' California Magazine says:¹¹

This is a town of considerable importance not only on account of the extensive diggings around it, but also from its being situated, at the end of

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10. Shurtleff, "Shasta," Overland monthly, XXXVI, No. 212, August 1900, 153-154.
 11. Anonymous, "Shasta," Hutchings' California magazine, II, No. 2, August 1857, 61.

'wagon navigation' near the head of the Sacramento valley; the high and rugged mountain chains and spurs having shut out the mining localities north of Shasta from the benefit of transportation by teams; consequently as that populous district derived their principal supplies by this route it became necessary to pack them on mules, and in the summer of 1854 there were no less than two thousand mules employed in the packing trade of this place and, 'as each mule would average not less than two hundred pounds of freight, and as the most remote point to which goods are taken will not occupy more than two weeks - and in many instances three or four days less, it is a very moderate calculation to average the trips of the entire two thousand mules at two weeks each, which will give a result of one hundred tons per week as the aggregate amount of freight packed from Shasta; which, at the low figure of five cents per pound would give the sum of twenty thousand dollars per trip to the packers.'

During the early 1850's, Indian attacks and raids in Shasta and the vicinity were frequent occurrences. While prospecting, many miners were wounded or killed by the arrows of warlike tribes. The mining camps were also looted in Indian depredations. Men who slept in tents or out in the open often awoke to find that their blankets had been stolen while they slept. It is said that during the 1850's it was a common thing to see "bands of Indian warriors, in paint and feathers executing a war dance down the main street of Shasta." The old Sacramento River trail had to be abandoned from 1853

to 1855 because of the Indian attacks on pack trains.¹²

An item in the Shasta Courier of March 26, 1853, says:¹³

It is unsafe to travel over any exposed portion of the country unarmed; the Pit river tribe of Indians, the most warlike in California, are infesting the Sacramento river trail in such numbers and with such determined fierceness as to render almost certain death to pass over that road.

The Courier of October 1854, says, concerning the Indians on the Pit and McCloud rivers:¹⁴

Those tribes living on Pit river and McCloud river, had killed more than fifty white men and they number not less than 3,000.

In the cemeteries of the various social organizations and religious denominations - Protestant, Catholic, Masonic, Odd Fellows, Hebrew, Indian and Chinese - which are located on the hillsides of Shasta City, many of the pioneer settlers are buried. The inscription on certain headstones in those graveyards are:¹⁵

"Killed by the Indians."

Like most mining towns, Shasta City was ravaged by

12. "Old town of Shasta," Archives of the State Park Commission of California, 14, December 6, 1932.

13. Shasta Courier, March 26, 1853.

14. "Old town of Shasta," Archives of the State Park Commission of California, 14, December 6, 1932.

15. Ibid.

fire. On June 14, 1853, flames swept the business district and the loss was estimated at five hundred thousand dollars. Dr. Shurtleff tells of the disaster:¹⁶

The buildings were built with yellow pine lumber lined with cotton cloth, and were reduced to ashes in thirty-three minutes; there was no insurance. The people were young, energetic and hopeful. While the ruins were yet smoldering, men were at work removing the debris, and lumber was ordered for rebuilding. Several large fire-proof buildings were erected, and many more were built within the next four years.

During the gold rush days, justice was administered in Shasta County by an alcalde elected by the people. Dr. Shurtleff, the town's most prominent physician, was elected to the office, which he held for many years. The alcalde's records and those of the court proceedings were destroyed by the fire of 1853. Shasta had her share of criminals and desperadoes in those early years. The first jail was in the log building which was the town's first courthouse. A brick building was erected and used as the courthouse after the fire of 1853. It still stands, with roof caved in and walls crumbled, revealing the steel cells where such notorious criminals as Shorty Hayes, Sheet Iron Jack and many others were

16. Shurtleff, "Shasta," Overland monthly, XXXVI, No. 212, August 1900, 156.

incarcerated. An item in the Shasta Courier of November 10, 1855, tells of justice being done:¹⁷

The largest crowd ever assembled in Shasta filled the streets to witness the hanging of E. A. Higgins, who killed his partner with an ax near Horsetown, for robbery, and threw the body in an old prospect hole and covered it with ashes.

About 1857, the excellent business and trade which Shasta City had enjoyed during the height of the gold rush began to decrease when a system of graded mountain roads to the northern mines was begun. A good wagon road was built across the Whiskey Creek Divide and Trinity Mountain to Weaverville, an important mining center, the county seat of Trinity County. Afterward, roads were completed to other points in the northern mining district. One of these was built over Trinity Mountain, across Trinity Valley and Scott Mountain to Yreka. Another road to Yreka began on the eastern side of the Sacramento River, crossed to the west side below Dog Creek, and continued along the Sacramento canyon through Shasta Valley.¹⁸

After 1857, when the roads to the northern mines were completed and the gold rush was on the wane, Shasta

17. Shasta Courier, November 10, 1855.

18. Shurtleff, "Shasta," Overland monthly, XXXVI, No. 212, August 1900, 154-156.

City began to recede in importance. Gold, which had been the reason for the town's beginning and rapid growth, was found in the surrounding diggings, for a number of years, in small quantities. A few miners remained, but most of them returned to their original occupations or drifted off to other parts. Some of the old pioneers who realized the county's agricultural possibilities remained to cultivate the fertile land.

Shasta City remained the county seat about thirty years after the gold rush was over. Then the Central Pacific Railroad line was routed through Redding seven miles west, taking away the trade which remained after the mining days. Redding, the new center of importance, was made the county seat in 1899. Old Shasta, offside in the foothills, is little changed from the mining town of the 1850's. Modernity has scarcely touched it. On either side of Main Street, now the Eureka Highway, old brick buildings still stand. They were built well, to withstand fire and Indian raids. Some of the roofs have fallen in and many of the walls are crumbled.

The best preserved of the brick buildings is Masonic Hall, where Western Star Lodge No. 2 holds meetings. It has been in use since 1853. Peter Lassen brought the lodge's charter to California in 1848, and, after the decline of Benton City, the lodge was moved to Shasta in 1851.

Preserved in a new vault, built in 1928, are many relics of early California masonry.¹⁹

The only other brick building in use in the old town is the store of Charles Litsch, the postmaster of Shasta. The building is one of those erected in 1853. The present owner has preserved there a number of interesting relics of the gold days. On the west side of Main Street, eight brick buildings are roofless, with gradually crumbling walls. One of them was occupied by the pioneer firm of Bull, Baker and Company. The name is still plain on the front of the old store. These are all that remain of a long row of brick buildings which lined both sides of Main Street in the days when it was crowded with hard working miners, shopkeepers, teamsters, horses, mules and pack trains. Brick buildings were constructed after the fire of 1853. The material for the bricks came from the vicinity of Shasta. They are of odd sizes and frequently contain good sized pieces of quartz and traces of gold.

On a hillside, the home of Dr. Benjamin Shurtleff is still in good condition. The oldest building in Shasta, it is a two-story frame house built in 1851. Some of the lumber used in its construction was brought around Cape Horn.

19. A. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 375.

Other old residences built in the 1850's are scattered about the town, half hidden by fine old trees and shrubbery. To-day the population of Shasta numbers less than one hundred.²⁰

A bronze tablet was placed on a quartz boulder on one side of Main Street by Mrs. A. C. Boggs of San Francisco, in 1931. It is dedicated to the memory of her uncle, W. L. Smith, division agent of the California and Oregon Stage Company, and 150 pioneer stage drivers whose names are engraved on the tablet.

Old Town of Shasta, although gradually crumbling into ruins, is still one of the best preserved of California's mining towns. Many camps have completely disappeared. Unlike most other old pioneer towns which still exist, Shasta has been left intact as it was built by the "Forty-niners." Untouched by modernity, it is, indeed, a valuable and historic landmark of the gold rush.

20. Anonymous, "Old town of Shasta," Archives of the State Park Commission of California, 4-5, 14, December 6, 1932.

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19. Southern, May. Old town of Shasta. Archives of the State Park Commission of California. San Francisco, 1932.