

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

RINCON HILL

Registered Landmark #84

by

George Tays

for

State of California, Department of Natural Resources

Division of Parks

Berkeley, 1936

Written under auspices of Works Progress Administration  
District #8, Project #65-3-3218, Symbol #1873

## RINCON HILL

Near the northeastern tip of the San Francisco Peninsula, at the time that the town of Yerba Buena was founded, in 1835, Yerba Buena Cove was a crescent shaped stretch of sandy beach, facing eastward; its northern horn was formed by the southern bluff of Loma Alta and its southern extremity by what was known as Punta del Rincon.

Rincon (nook) Hill, the lowest of all of San Francisco's many hills, rose abruptly from the waters of the bay at the south end of the cove to the height of a little over one hundred feet. It was a more or less rectangular shaped eminence, whose almost square eastern slope started at the water's edge about one hundred feet east of what is now Spear Street and climbed rapidly to its highest point at about the present intersection of Harrison and Front streets. From that spot the hill fell away north, west, and south in gentle, smooth, sandy slopes to descend into the lowlands of Happy Valley just north of Folsom Street, to merge with the rolling sand-dunes of the Mission district, just west of Third Street, and to meet the tide-lands of China Basin about where Bryant Street now runs. The long axis of Rincon Hill ran northeast to southwest, being about five-eighths of a mile in length, and a quarter of a mile in

width, with a total area of a little more than a sixth of a square mile.

The hill was sparsely wooded with scrub live oak and shrubs of various kinds, the open spaces being covered with a rich growth of grass. Up to the time of the settlement of Yerba Buena, it was used as pasture land for the horses and herds from the mission ranch.

In November 1834, Governor Figueroa wrote to Ensign Don Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, at that time acting as military commander of San Francisco, concerning the southern boundary line of the municipal lands of San Francisco. The governor said that the line should start from Rincon Hill on the east, running westward to the top of the Divisadero (Lone Mountain) and from there westward to Point Lobos.<sup>1</sup> This line became known as the Vallejo line, and was later adopted by the United States Board of Land Commissioners as the southern boundary of the pueblo of San Francisco.<sup>2</sup>

The first settler to establish himself at Yerba Buena Cove was Captain William A. Richardson, who was appointed Port Captain by Governor Figueroa in 1835. The second settler was Jacob P. Leese, who built the first permanent house at the cove and established the first store.

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1. Governor J. Figueroa to Ensign M. G. Vallejo, Monterey, November 4, 1834, in Z. S. Eldredge, The Beginnings of San Francisco, II, 501-502.

2. Z. S. Eldredge, The beginnings of San Francisco, II, 502.

Leese finished his house in the summer of 1836 and held the first Fourth of July celebration in San Francisco as a sort of an open house affair. Some of his guests were the Richardsons; Don Joaquín Estudillo, his wife, Juana Martinez Estudillo, and their daughter Concepción; Don Ygnacio Martinez, with his four handsome daughters, Susana, Francisca, Rafaela and Dolores; Don Victor Castro and wife Luisa, who was a daughter of Don Ygnacio Martinez; the sub-prefect Don Francisco Guerrero, and wife Doña Josefa; and Alcalde Don Francisco de Haro, with his beautiful daughters Rosalia and Natividad. Other guests were the officers of several ships in the harbor, officers from the presidio, and the people from the mission. The ship officers present were Captain Bradshaw of the ship Lagoda and Thomas Shaw, its supercargo; Captain Arther of the California and supercargo William G. Gale with his assistant, Alfred Robinson; also Captain John Wilson of the brig Ayacúcho and its supercargo, James Scott.

That Independence Day celebration started on the fourth and lasted until July 6. On July 5, all those assembled went to a picnic on Rincon Hill which turned out to be a grand success. Every year thereafter until the American occupation Leese held a Fourth of July celebration followed by a picnic on Rincon Hill. Those events were attended by as many of the original members of the first celebration as were available and by many new guests. At one of those

picnics Mrs. Jacob P. Leese, who was Rosalia Vallejo, sister to General Mariano G. Vallejo, demonstrated her skill with a rifle by making some extraordinary shots. Her husband had taught her to shoot.<sup>3</sup>

After the American occupation of San Francisco, July 9, 1846, Captain Montgomery converted the top of Rincon Hill from a picnic ground into a government reserve. Thus for a time there was a battery of iron thirty-two pounders on the hill. In 1850, Theodore Shillaber leased the land of Rincon Hill Reserve from the government. When he went to take possession of it, on February 28, 1850, he found the place covered with the shacks of squatters, mostly Sydney convicts and a like class of people. He ordered them to leave or pay rent, but they refused to do either. Since they would not vacate, Shillaber appealed to Captain Keys, then in command of the presidio, to put them out. Captain Keys then detailed twenty soldiers to go to Rincon Hill to drive out the squatters. The people still refused to move. The soldiers then demolished the tents and shanties and drove the squatters away by force. A few weeks after that incident one of the squatters brought suit against Captain Keys for damage of his property, but the courts dismissed the case.<sup>4</sup>

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3. William H. Davis, Seventy-five years in California, 23, 27-30.  
4. H. H. Bancroft, California inter pocula, 403.

On September 30, 1850, Congress passed a bill appropriating \$50,000 for a marine hospital in San Francisco. After investigating, it was decided to build it on the government reserve at Rincon Hill. A site was then selected on a rocky promontory some twenty or thirty feet above sea level, later to become the northeast corner of Spear and Harrison streets. The corner stone for the hospital was laid on April 7, 1853, and the building was completed on December 15, 1853, at a cost of \$231,874.10.<sup>5</sup> It was a large four-story brick building, designed to accommodate 800 patients. It had verandas, on all four stories, which ran around both ends and the front side. This was the oldest hospital of any importance in the city. It was erected for the use of sailors of the United States Navy and the merchant marine. For a number of years after its completion it was one of the finest structures in San Francisco.<sup>6</sup>

In September 1865, the marine hospital was damaged by an earthquake, and on October 21 of the same year another earthquake shook the city and did further damage to the building. It was repaired, and served for three

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5. Library, United States Public Health Service, Report on the physical and administrative equipment at the United States marine hospital, 1914, 1.

6. B. E. Lloyd, Lights and shades in San Francisco, 431-432.

more years. In 1868, a third earthquake led to its abandonment for hospital purposes. Some months afterward Congress passed a resolution allowing the state to use the building as an old sailor's home, with the proviso that it should revert to the government when it ceased to be used for that purpose.

The City of San Francisco took a lease on the building for the sum of \$1.00 a year and continued to use it as a sailors' home until 1915, when the building became too old and unsafe for any use. Then it was returned to the government.<sup>7</sup> After 1915 it continued to serve as a prominent waterfront landmark, the home of countless pigeons and ship rats, and the haunt of ghostly memories that had been. Finally it became such a menace to those who passed by it daily that the government had it demolished in 1919, and another link of the chain which connects with the past was broken.<sup>8</sup>

Turning back to the evening of June 25, 1856, a company of 200 armed men marched from the intersection of Sacramento and Front streets, south on Front Street to Market, and west on Market to Second Street. From there

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7. Library, United States Public Health Service, Report on the physical and administrative equipment at the United States marine hospital, 1914, 1.

8. Aubrey Drury, California: an intimate guide, 246-247.

they turned south along Second Street to its end on the western slope of Rincon Hill. That company was a group of vigilantes. They had been selected to fill sand bags with which to build a fort. It was from Rincon Hill, then, that the sand was taken for the building of the famous Fort Gunnybags.<sup>9</sup>

During June 1856, just after the capture of Judge David S. Terry by the Vigilance Committee, the "Law and Order" party, to which the judge belonged, talked of placing a battery on Rincon Hill with which to shell the building of the Committee on Sacramento Street. The vigilantes, however, kept a group of armed men near the hill in order to prevent the "law and order" group from taking possession of the hill should they attempt it.<sup>10</sup>

It was about 1858, that South Park was laid out at Second between Bryant and Brannan streets on the south side of Rincon Hill. There a new residence district was formed and for several years it was a fashionable center. The park also was the terminus of a bus-line that ran across the town to North Beach.<sup>11</sup>

No sooner was this section populated than an even

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9. Bancroft, Popular Tribunals, II, 105-107.  
 10. T.H. Hittell, History of California, III, 549.  
 11. Anonymous, Up-to-date handbook of San Francisco, 59.



more exclusive sub-division sprang up on the slopes and crest of Rincon Hill. The mansions built there were great palatial residences set off from the streets by well laid out gardens. It was there that the rich and notable people of San Francisco had their homes until about 1870, when the cable car was established on Clay Street, and Nob Hill became the place of imposing residences.

It was on Rincon Hill that General Hallack built his house, at Harrison and Fremont streets, in 1849, and General W. T. Sherman built his directly opposite it in 1856. When Sherman returned East he sold his home to Commodore J. D. Sloat. Others who lived near by were the William Blandings, Louis McLeans, Mrs. Harrison Randolph, Mrs. Vandewater, Mr. Hart, and Colonel J. D. Stevenson. John Parrott, former American consul at Mazatlan and later a banker, lived on Rincon Hill; another resident of the section was George Gordon, an English sugar merchant. Governor Leland Stanford had his mansion there and so did Senator and Mrs. Gwin, with Commodore and Mrs. Watkins as neighbors. Among other Rincon Hill dwellers were Joseph Tilden, Mr. and Mrs. Hooper, Raphael Weill, and Hubert Howe Bancroft, the historian.<sup>12</sup>

During those years, Rincon Hill was the scene of

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12. Amelia R. Neville, The fantastic city, 39-40, 122, 131-135.

many gay parties and grand balls, since most of these distinguished people had come from Virginia, the Carolinas and other southern states and were accustomed to social functions. Among the guests frequently seen at those gatherings were such literary lights as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Prentice Mulford, Joaquin Miller and Ina Coolbrith. In 1857, Gertrude Atherton, the novelist, was born on Rincon Hill.

Soon after 1870, however, some real estate dealer had the idea of opening a factory section south of Rincon Hill and persuaded the city council to grade down Second Street by cutting through the hill, so as to make it easier for traffic. The city government undertook the work and soon an unsightly cut, fifty feet deep, was made across the western half of the hill. The east and west streets had to cross over that gash on ugly wood and iron bridges which disfigured the whole section and ruined the hill as a place for residence. Very soon thereafter the wealthier people began to move to Nob Hill, abandoning their palatial homes on Rincon Hill or selling them "for a song." Thus, by 1875, Rincon Hill had lost much of its former splendor and its lower levels were invaded by warehouses and manufacturing establishments as new streets were cut through it and lots leveled off.<sup>13</sup>

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13. C.W. Stoddard, In the footprints of the padres, 84-93.

Very soon, those beautiful homes which had been abandoned began to disintegrate and fall. It was in one of the crumbling palaces, the Gothic house of a former banker, that Charles Warren Stoddard, the writer, came to live in the late 70's. While Stoddard was living there, in 1879, a lean, lithe stranger called on him. This man with unshorn locks, luminous eyes, pale face, and exquisitely sensitive hands, had the look of a poet; and indeed it was none other than Robert Louis Stevenson. The two became fast friends and Stoddard filled Stevenson with the desire to go to the South Sea Islands, but not before Stevenson had imbibed enough of the spirit of Rincon Hill to give him the setting for his story, The Wrecker. It was this same atmosphere which later gave Gertrude Atherton the inspiration for her novel, The Californians.<sup>14</sup>

From 1880 on, the character of Rincon Hill began to change very rapidly. More and more of the hill slopes were cut and leveled into the bay, and business firms began to build their storehouses on the former sites of beautiful homes. In the sixties, Mrs. Pheobe Apperson Hearst had built and donated the Settlement House on the north side of South Park, midway between Second and Third streets, as a

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14. Stoddard, In the footprints of the padres, 84-93.

social center for that section of the city. It was a three-story brick structure of impressive appearance and dignified architecture. It was furnished throughout with fine old mahogany furniture, and the walls of the parlors and living rooms were hung with rare paintings by William Keith and other distinguished California artists.

During the nineties, old South Park Settlement House became the gathering place for hundreds, even thousands, of people of the Mission District, for whom it was a social center of recreation, athletic sports, and practical education. It was also the headquarters for the leading social organizations of that district. It contained a commodious gymnasium where basket-ball and other games were played and it was the scene of many dances and other social affairs.

For the teaching of practical trades there were turning lathes, printing presses, sewing machines and kitchens where classes were held which attracted large numbers of boys and girls. Also, frequent lectures were given by outstanding university professors.

Between 1905 and April 18, 1906, the Settlement House was operated under the direction of Mrs. Mary Roberts Smith, now Mrs. Dane Coolidge, who was head worker. Mrs. Coolidge had been a professor at Stanford University. At present she is a member of the Mills College faculty. Dane

Coolidge, at that time, was director of the Boys' Club in the House. Mr. Coolidge has since then become famous as a writer.<sup>15</sup>

On April 18, 1906, came the great earthquake and fire. The Rincon Hill district was one of the first to burn, and with it went old South Park Settlement House. All the Rincon Hill mansions went also and the only building left was the old marine hospital, at that time the Old Sailors' Home, which stood alone on its rocky promontory.

After the fire Rincon Hill remained more or less uninhabited except that here and there some squatter built a rude hut or shack in which he and his family might live. For some years after the fire, the foundations and here and there a portal of some of the old palaces were to be seen, grim reminders of a grandeur that had been.

Slowly, year by year, the different streets, Folsom, Harrison, Bryant, First, Fremont, Beale, Front and Spear streets, were cut through and less and less of the old hill was left. Big warehouses and factories once more were built on those lots that had been graded. In 1918, the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce began to agitate the leveling of the whole hill to increase the value of the property for

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15. South of Market journal, VIII, No.9, September, 1933, 4-5, Bancroft Library.

industrial purposes. For this purpose City Engineer O'Shaughnessy made working plans which if carried out would achieve the results in a few years.<sup>16</sup>

In 1919, following the war, the Chamber of Commerce again took up the question of grading down the hill for industrial purposes and proposed a period of ten years in which the property owners could pay off the cost. However, due to many unforeseen delays and problems which came up from time to time, the work did not go forward as rapidly as had been expected.<sup>17</sup>

For many years there had been talk of building a bridge across the bay between San Francisco and Oakland. In each new scheme as it developed, Rincon Hill was always one of the points considered as the site upon which the San Francisco end of a bridge should rest. Those plans came to naught, because the War Department was opposed to having a bridge built across the ship anchorage waters. But as the years rolled on and San Francisco grew into a greater city it became imperative that it should be given swift and ready access to the mainland by way of Oakland. Therefore it became neces-

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16. "Rincon Hill and Islais Creek," Chamber of Commerce activities, V, No.24, Thursday, June 13, 1918. Bancroft Library.

17. "Grading of Rincon Hill," Ibid., VI, No.2, January 9, 1909.

sary to apply pressure in congress so that it would overrule the objections of the War Department and allow a bridge to be built across the bay north of Hunter's Point.

When Herbert C. Hoover was elected president and took office, in 1929, being a Californian he at once lent his powerful influence to bring about the great project. Governor C.C. Young of California did likewise, as did the entire California delegation in congress, so that all working together were able to impress on the congress the necessity for such a bridge. Meanwhile, President Hoover and Governor Young appointed a committee of nine men, laymen and engineers, including civilians, members of the army and navy and of the legislature, to make a thorough investigation of the possibilities for building a bridge across the bay. This commission, composed of Mark L. Requa, chairman; George T. Cameron, Rear Admiral Luther E. Gregory, Rear Admiral William H. Stanley, Brigadier General George B. Pillsbury, Lieutenant-colonel G.B. Daley, Senator Arthur H. Breed, Charles D. Marx, and Charles H. Purcell, met at Sacramento on October 7, 1929, and began their investigations. After about ten months of work they made their report, recommending the Rincon, Yerba Buena Island, east bay site for the bridge.<sup>18</sup> By that time,

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18. Hoover-Young Commission, Report on San Francisco bay bridge, 5-27.

Congress had given its approval to that site. Definite plans for financing and for the design of the bridge were made. Finally, work got under way in 1933. Excavation for the foundations of the abutment and cable anchorages in what was left of Rincon Hill began in July 1933. From then on, the work of building the foundations, clearing away the houses and building the approaches to the bridge head have proceeded so rapidly that at this time (June 1936) they are practically complete.

In June and July of 1934, while the work on the bridge foundations was in full swing at Rincon Hill, there occurred the longshoremen strike on the nearby waterfront and Rincon Hill became one of the principal fields of battle between the strikers and the police. The bloodiest fight took place on July 5, during which several persons were killed and a large number were injured.<sup>19</sup>

Now that the bridge is nearing completion there is little left of old Rincon Hill. Only a few rocky remnants are left; the rest has been dug up and carted away to fill up the marshes in the Mission District. Rincon Hill that was is now only a memory, but over its grave, as a fitting headstone, rise the monumental abutments and towers of the Bay Bridge- a fitting link between the present and the past.

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19. Drury, California: an intimate guide, 246-247.



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