

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

Edited by Vernon Aubrey Neasham

READING ADOBE

Registered Landmark #10

by

Lois Ann Woodward

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

READING ADOBE

The Reading adobe, home of Pierson B. Reading, early California pioneer, is located four miles east of Cottonwood, at the junction of the Sacramento River and Cottonwood Creek. The oldest building in California north of Sutter's Fort, it was erected in 1847 by Major Reading on his large ranch, Buena Ventura, which was granted to him by the Mexican governor Micheltoarena in 1844. Reading took possession of the grant in 1845, built a ranch house, buildings and corrals, stocked the land with cattle and left a Frenchman, Julian, in charge. Reading did not settle on his property until a few years later. Hostile Indians raided the rancho, set fire to and destroyed the house and other building in the spring of 1846. Major Reading went to Buena Ventura to live in 1847 and built the adobe, which still stands. Although much of its former elegance has crumbled away, it remains a beloved landmark of Northern California.

Pierson Barton Reading, member of a prominent old New Jersey family, was born in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, November 26, 1816. He was the son of Pierson and Charity Guild Reading and a great grandson of Governor John Reading of New Jersey. When he was fourteen years old, the family being in financial straits, he was forced to make his own way. He went to Mississippi, where he was employed by

relatives in business at Vicksburg.

Nothing eventful occurred in these early years until 1843 when he emigrated to California with the Chiles-Walker party. At Fort Boise, thirteen of the men, including Pierson B. Reading, went ahead over an unexplored route entering the Sacramento Valley from the north in the vicinity of Shasta. On their journey they experienced considerable hardship and had several bitter encounters with hostile Indians. They arrived safely at Fort Sutter on November 10, 1843. Captain Sutter found places of employment for most of the new arrivals. Pierson B. Reading became his ¹ bookkeeper.

Through his friendship and association with Captain Sutter, who had influence with Governor Micheltoena, Reading obtained the grant of the Buena Ventura Rancho, consisting of 26,000 acres, in Shasta County. Reading's rancho was the northernmost land grant in California made by the Mexican government. Samuel J. Hensley, friend of Reading and member of the group with which he came to California, recommended the location to him. While he was on a trip rafting logs down the Sacramento River, Hensley was greatly impressed with the beauty and fertility of the countryside. He described as most desirable the land extending down the Sacramento from Salt Creek to the mouth of Cottonwood Creek

1. E. Gudde, Sutter's own story, 95-96.

at the head of Bloody Island. The island received its name because of a fight Hensley had there with Indians.²

The Buena Ventura Rancho was deeded to Reading by Micheltoarena in December, 1844, and he took possession in August, 1845. Reading and Hensley spent about two weeks selecting sites for a house and ranch buildings and locations for fields. Hensley tells of going over the ranch with Mr. Reading.³

In August, 1845 I spent 10 days on the place (grant) with him (R) looking out suitable locations for fields and building spots. He decided on a place, and left a Frenchman, Julian, to build a house and take possession (sic). He placed horses on the place at that time, and soon after this time he placed a quantity of cattle on this said land. The Frenchman went on and built a house on the site selected,...

After he had left the rancho in charge of the Frenchman, Julian, Reading returned to Sutter's Fort, where he continued in Sutter's employ. In 1845, he spent some time trapping and exploring in Northern California, Southern Oregon and Western Nevada. In Sutter's absence during the Micheltoarena war, Reading was in charge of Fort Sutter. He conducted, successfully, several expeditions against the hostile Indians of Northern California.

-
2. Anonymous, "Pierson B. Reading; a brief biography," in Society of California Pioneers, Quarterly, VII, No. 7, 135.
 3. California land claims, United States vs. Reading, XIX, 54.

The Frenchman, Julian, continued to live at Buena Ventura. In the spring of 1846, however, raiding Indians burned the small house, killed the caretaker and drove off the stock. The unsettled conditions which prevailed in Northern California, due to the Indian outrages and the outbreak of the war between the United States and Mexico at that time, prevented further settlement or improvements on the rancho until 1847.⁴

Reading took an active part in the Mexican war in California, enlisting in the California Battalion under Fremont. He received the rank of major and in the early part of 1847 Fremont appointed him paymaster for the United States troops in California. In June, 1847, after hostilities had ended, Major Reading went to reside on his northern rancho. He built another house on the same site, restocked his lands and from that time made his home there cultivating his fields and raising stock. He planted orchards with various kinds of fruit. He is credited with having grown the first olive trees and grape vines in Northern California and the first cotton in the state.⁵

After the discovery of gold at Sutter's millrace

-
4. California land claims, United States vs. Reading, XIX, 50.
 5. "Pierson B. Reading, a brief biography," in Society of California Pioneers, Quarterly, VII, No. 7, 136.

at Coloma in 1848, Major Reading was among the first to prospect in Northern California. He was convinced that the many mountain streams and gulches were also rich in gold. In July, 1848, he headed an expedition composed of two or three other white men and a number of Indian helpers to the Trinity River. They prospected at a place which became known as Reading's Bar, mined there for six weeks and took out 80,000 dollars in gold dust. Near the end of that time a group of prospectors from Oregon, journeying southward, passed by the miners' camp. Due to bitter Indian wars, the Oregonians protested vigorously Major Reading's use of Indian labor. To avoid trouble, Reading abandoned his claim and returned to his rancho.

During the next few years, the major did considerable prospecting in Shasta County. With the aid of his Indian laborers he washed out gold in many of the creeks and gulches of Shasta. In 1849, he started the mining camp, Reading's Springs, which, afterwards, as Shasta City, became one of the busiest mining towns of California.⁶

When Shasta County was organized, Reading's Rancho was made county seat. February 10, 1851, the seat of county government was removed to Shasta City, more centrally located.

6. "Pierson B. Reading; a brief biography," in Society of California Pioneers, Quarterly, VII, No. 7, 137.

After the 1850's, as the largest and busiest mining camp in the county, Shasta City overshadowed Reading's ranch in importance.

Major Reading had a leading part in many of the important events in California's early history. Although he was nominated for several political offices, he was not very successful in elections, partly because he himself did not seek the office. He narrowly missed election to the governorship in 1851. He refused the nomination in 1855 and 1861, and later the nomination for United States senator.

In 1852, President Fillmore appointed Reading United States special Indian agent. Reading served in that capacity for many years with no remuneration. He was fair and generous in dealings with the Indians, who called him shactu, White Chief. His work was satisfactory to the government. He employed Indians on his rancho and considered himself personally responsible for their welfare. Some of the settlers of Shasta County, outraged by Indian depredations, sought revenge and demanded that Reading turn his peaceful Indian settlers over to them. The major refused and his Indians were not molested.⁷

Reading was especially interested in agriculture and was very progressive in his methods. He was the pioneer

7. R. Giles, "Pierson Barton Reading," in Overland monthly, July, 1926, LXXXIV, No. 7, 218-219.

agriculturalist of Shasta County and his ranch became famous in Northern California for its orchards, vineyards and fine livestock. In 1852, he had more than two hundred acres under cultivation, in grain, fruit trees and grapes. George McKinstry, an old friend of Mexican war days, in a letter to a mutual friend, Lieutenant Kern, wrote of Major Reading:

Pierson B. Reading is on his farm raising wheat and pumpkins in abundance. I camped on his rancho some six weeks last summer. He was the Whig candidate for governor, but could not make it. It was said his friendship with Captain Sutter cost him the Squatter votes. He has been wounded twice in Bear Hunts since you left - shot in the hand two years ago and broke his leg badly two months ago. Next time it will be his head if he doesn't quit. He plans to go to Philadelphia on the 1st of April next and marry....

In 1855, Major Reading went to Washington to have the title of his grant confirmed. While in the East he married Fannie Wallace Washington. After Major Reading and his bride returned to California, the adobe on the Shasta rancho was enlarged and many improvements were made. It became more than ever a center of social activities and hospitality. A description of the place, in the Red Bluff Beacon of August 25, 1858, says:

The mansion house is a massive adobe, plastered and white washed

8. J. Dana, Sutter of California, a biography, 373.
9. The Red Bluff Beacon, August 25, 1858.

on the outside, and hard finished within. It is built on an eminence overlooking not only the Sacramento River that meanders away among the oaks and cottonwoods that skirt its banks as far as the eye can reach, but the broad valley stretching out in all directions for a distance of several leagues, and crossed at right angles by two dark lines of timber (along the other creeks and river) that resemble the arms of a mighty mill wheel. Circumscribing one's vision then to a range of a few miles north and south, to the land immediately bordering on the river, one beholds the cultivated fields and pastures that belong to the rancho. Around and within are many hundreds of cattle of all descriptions industriously grazing as though they were aware that every pound they added to their own weight added as many cents as that pound was worth to the pockets of their owner the Major.

Gardens and orchards lie adjacent to and help beautify the residence. Here are fruits and vegetables in rich abundance. Rows of China trees, reminding one of Baton Rouge or Natchez, completely surround the house making a dense shade most refreshing after riding several hours across the plains in the hot sunshine. So it is that Buena Ventura is regarded as an oasis in the desert.

As one approaches the Rancho it appears like a small village with its ten white buildings - smoke house, woodshed, chicken sheds, wagon shed, machine shops, granary, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, barns and corrals, hog sheds and vaquero house.

The ranch house, consisting of four large rooms, was built with thick adobe walls and high windows for protection against Indian arrows. The floors were also of adobe. Three large fireplaces created a comfortable

atmosphere. It was a favorite gathering place for early pioneer leaders who often met there to discuss the news of the day and the problems of the new State. Fremont, Lassen, Sutter, Bidwell and Joaquin Miller were among famous early Californians who enjoyed the adobe's hospitality.

Major Reading was always friendly with the various Indian tribes, who were made as welcome at the rancho as the white settlers. He is said to have allowed them to go into his bands of cattle at any time and kill and eat as many as they wanted. On a visit of Captain Jack's tribe Joaquin Miller did the lassoing. Dr. Shurtleff, pioneer physician of Shasta County and lifelong friend of the major, who was present on the occasion, recounts:

10

Once I arrived here just in time to see Joaquin Miller, then but a stripling, mounted on a spirited horse; his long auburn hair waving like cornsilk in the wind, and his right arm dexterously swinging a riata, which a moment later had fastened its coils around the horns of a bellowing young bullock. I never saw Sam Neal do a neater piece of lassoing. The animal was the pick of the herd, and promised by the major as a feast to the Indians who accompanied the poet.

Buena Ventura many times offered its hospitality to immigrants who came over the Oregon trail or travellers and prospectors who found a temporary shelter at the

10. N. Eames, "To Shasta's feet," in Overland monthly, December, 1887, X, No. 60, 562-563.

comfortable old ranch house. Newcomers to California and settlers from all parts of Northern California sought Major Reading's advice and often received his assistance in many ways.

Major Reading died at his beloved rancho May 29, 1868, at the age of fifty two. He was survived by his widow and five children. The grave of the pioneer, marked by a simple granite slab bearing a bronze memorial tablet, is located on a knoll near the adobe overlooking the Sacramento River, Cottonwood Creek, and the acres of his beloved ranch.

Major Reading was one of the important early pioneers who had an influential part in the upbuilding of California. He was well liked and respected by all who knew him. Bancroft says of him:

Major Reading was a man of well-balanced mind; honorable, energetic and courteous, one whose California record seems never to have furnished material for adverse criticism.

The Society of California Pioneers, of which he was an active member during his residence in California, eulogized him:

...possessed of the most courteous manners, of enlarged views and of a

11. Bancroft, History of California, V, 639.

12. A. Reading, "Pierson Barton Reading pioneer of 1843," in Grizzly Bear magazine, May, 1928, XLIII, No. 253, 4-5.

highly cultivated mind, united with probity of character and the most dauntless bravery, he deserves that upon the tomb containing his ashes be inscribed the words that typify his life: 'Reading - pioneer.'

The Buena Ventura rancho has been cut up into numerous small farms and orchards. The old adobe is the only one of the buildings on the rancho which remains. Almost in ruins, the oldest building north of Fort Sutter stands on the seven remaining acres of the old rancho. Nearby, still bearing excellent fruit, a number of the pear trees planted by the major have grown twisted and gnarled, with giant sized trunks measuring three feet in diameter. The adobe home of the earliest settler of Shasta County, around whose hearth once gathered the pioneer builders of California, is a cherished landmark of Northern California.

AUTHORITIES

I. Bibliographical Aids:

1. Cowan, Robert Ernest, and Cowan, Robert Granniss. A bibliography of the history of California, 1510-1930. 3v. San Francisco, 1933.

II. Documents:

2. California land claims. U. S. vs. Reading, XIX.

III. Periodical Literature:

3. Alta California. San Francisco, 1849-1891.
4. California Historical Society. Quarterly. San Francisco, 1922-.
5. Grizzly Bear, a monthly magazine for all California. Los Angeles, 1907-.
6. Hutchings' illustrated California magazine. San Francisco, 1856-1861.
7. Overland monthly and Outwest magazine. San Francisco, 1883-.
8. Red Bluff Beacon. August 25, 1858.
9. Society of California Pioneers. Quarterly. San Francisco, 1924-.

IV. General Works:

10. Bancroft, Hubert Howe. History of California. San Francisco, 1884-1890.
11. Cox, Isaac. Annals of Trinity County. San Francisco, 1858.
12. Dana, Julian. Sutter of California; a biography. New York, 1934.
13. Drury, Aubrey. California: an intimate guide. New York and London, 1935.

14. Eldredge, Zoeth Skinner, History of California.
5v. New York, 1915.
15. Glasscock, Carl Burgess. A golden highway.
Indianapolis, 1934.
16. Gudde, Erwin Gustav. Sutter's own story. New
York, 1936.
17. Hittell, Theodore Henry. History of California.
4v. San Francisco, 1835-1897.
18. Hunt, Rockwell Dennis, and Sanchez, Nellie Van
de Grift. A short history of California.
New York, 1929.
19. Rensch, Hero Eugene, and Rensch, Ethel Grace,
and Heever, Mildred Brooke. Historic spots
in California; valley and Sierra counties.
Stanford University, California, 1933.