

THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN HILL

by

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Full 31 page history available by request.**

Although I believe the city block bounded by Hyde, Lombard, Chestnut and Leavenworth Streets is worthy of designation as a historic site, my main purpose in writing this history is not to argue for preservation, but to present a concise, factual and therefore persuasive account of the block's historical significance.

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### III. The Gold Rush

From the fall of Mexico in 1846 to the discovery of gold, Yerba Buena experienced the Americanization that laid the foundation for the arrival of the 49ers. The name Yerba Buena was dropped and the village became known officially as San Francisco. In the early 50's the city's growth was unprecedented. Water lots were sold rapidly as the shallow bay waters were diked and filled. A monstrous grid pattern of roads and streets crisscrossed even the steepest hills. The view from Russian Hill moved an observer to comment:

Over all these square miles of contemplated thoroughfare, there seems no provision made by the projectors for a public park--the true "lungs" of a large city. The existing plaza at Portsmouth Square, and other two or three diminutive squares delineated on the plan, seem the only breathing holes intended for the future population of hundreds of thousands. This is a strange mistake, and can only be attributed to the jealous avarice of the city projectors in turning every square vara of a site to an available building lot. Indeed the eye is wearied and the imagination quite stupefied, in looking over the numberless square-all square--building blocks, and mathematically straight lines of streets, miles long, and every one crossing a host of others at right angles, stretching over sandy hill, chasm and plain, without the least regard to the natural inequalities of the ground. Not only is there no public park or garden, but there is not even a circus, oval, open terrace, broad avenue, or any ornamental line of street or building, or verdant space of any kind, other than

the three or four small squares alluded to; and which every resident knows are by no means verdant, except in patches where stagnant water collects and ditch weeds grow.<sup>8</sup>

During the Gold Rush, George Hyde, a prominent politician and realtor, was <sup>^</sup>alcalde <sup>^</sup>of San Francisco. The street bisecting Russian Hill bears his name today. On a lower slope of the hill, another street is named for Thaddeus Leavenworth, an Episcopal clergyman and prominent citizen of Gold Rush days.

In 1852, thousands were directed to Russian Hill to witness the hanging of a murderer, Jose Forni, and from that year on it was officially known by that name. Many hangings occurred on the hill and it continued to be popular as a "cemetery" since Mission Dolores was filled quickly and would not accept non-Catholic faiths. Yerba Buena cemetery, once on the site of the main library, also filled rapidly and helped establish Russian Hill as a burial ground.

That same year, the first house on Russian Hill was built at the northeast corner of Chestnut and Hyde by William Penn Humphries, an Indian fighter who first sailed to San Francisco in 1840 aboard the brig Columbia.

#### IV. The Sixties

From the sixties until the time of the great fire, San Francisco experienced its golden age. Those who had made fortunes mining gold were soon surpassed by the silver barons and railroad magnates. It was a city of contrasts, boisterous and lawless, yet tempered by tolerance, civilization and style.

Russian Hill first became a tourist attraction in the 1860's when Captain David Dobson erected an observatory platform on the site of the old Metcalf estate at Lombard and Hyde and charged 25¢ for a look at the magnificent view of the Bay and hills. It is believed that during the Civil War, Czar Alexander II sent a squadron of the Russian fleet to San Francisco as a gesture of good will to President Lincoln. Alexander admired the President because he saw a parallel between the two rulers: Lincoln had freed the slaves and he had freed the serfs. Since conditions had improved little since Count Rezánof's visit fifty years before, many Russian sailors perished and were brought to Russian Hill for burial.

Ship after ship sailed through the Golden Gate bringing hordes of argonauts hoping to strike it rich in California. Mining magnate George Hearst returned with his bride Phoebe aboard a steamer in 1862. They had travelled over Panama and

the long voyage proved trying to young Mrs. Hearst. She never forgot sailing through the Golden Gate, while her husband pointed out the hills of San Francisco. Having an intuitive sense of beauty, Phoebe decided that Russian Hill was where she wanted to live.<sup>9</sup> The Hearsts first resided at the Lick House, the finest hotel in San Francisco. Later they moved to the Stevenson Hotel on California and Montgomery Streets, where William Randolph Hearst was born on April 29, 1863. The next Hearst home was a large, comfortable house on Rincon Hill, but Mrs. Hearst never abandoned her original dream of living on Russian Hill: "Why hide away from beauty by living on Rincon Hill because fashion decreed it as the quarter of San Francisco where one must live?"<sup>10</sup> On the southeast corner of Chestnut and Hyde, Phoebe Hearst found her dream house. The story is told by intimate friends, the Fremont Olders:

Here was what San Francisco called "the country." When she drove with her son and his nurse along the old Toll Road toward the Presidio, she looked at the scattering houses on the hillside of Chestnut Street. High on the right of the hill lived the French Consul Le Breton in a spacious dwelling that had been brought around Cape Horn and erected in 1852. Lower on the left was a rambling one-story house in a tangled garden belonging to Senator Frank Soulé. Nearer the foot of the hill was a double chalet built by a Frenchman and furnished with French furniture. This house nestled in a semi-tropical cup of sunshine.

Once Phoebe Hearst left her carriage and climbed the stairs leading like an S to this place. Since coming to San Francisco she had longed to dwell here. George Hearst never said "No" to his wife, and soon Phoebe Hearst was the possessor of this hillside and happy as a bird mothering one birdling in a sunny tree-top nest.

William Randolph Hearst's first home memory is of this house--the steps leading up to it, the library, the living-room, the carved rosewood furniture. He remembers the English holly tree and the English ivy on the bank concealing the scar where the hill had been cut into for leveling. He recalls the fragrant boxwood, the lilies of the valley, the geraniums, the hollyhocks, the oranges, the lemon verbenà, and the intoxicating senoras de la noche strayed from old Spain. From this high hanging garden the boy drank in beauty--still ships sleeping on the great blue diamond of a bay with its Island of the Angels, Yerba Buena, grim Alcatraz and beyond, the Contra Costa hills. To the westward at sunset burning clouds hung over the Golden Gate. To the north Mount Tamalpais sat like the Indian Chief Tamalpais in purple robes enthroned.<sup>11</sup>

There were other boys in the Chestnut Street neighborhood: Walter Carey, son of Judge James Carey; John Spring, son of Francis S. Spring; and Frederick S. Moody, later father-in-law of Helen Wills Moody, the tennis champion. John Spring's brother was drowned in the Bay and it was rumored that his and other ghosts haunted Chestnut Street. Most of the time the boys played unconcernedly in the beautiful Hearst gardens. The tropical conservatory had passion vines and blue solanum, and one of the first large pale-pink roses of the La France variety ever to be introduced in California grew in the arbors of the Hearst gardens.

Senator Frank Soulé owned the rambling one-story house adjacent to the beautiful gardens. Soulé was a 49er, a poet and founder of the original "Chronicle," suppressed in 1856 for criticizing the then powerful Vigilantes. His daughter, Katherine, was William Randolph Hearst's first sweetheart.

Phoebe Hearst eventually decided to build a stable and

increase the size of her garden. Her husband bought the Soulé house and the Soulés moved to another part of town. A yellow barn and a stable were then built where Montclair Terrace meets Chestnut Street. The spring water in the hill and the raw manure from the stables continued to nourish the gardens. Part of the barn was a studio for Frank Carrol Giffen, a celebrated tenor and voice instructor who taught William Randolph Hearst the clog dance. Giffen's living quarters were in the deceased William Penn Humphries' home, the first house built on Russian Hill.

When young Hearst and his mother returned from a European trip in 1874, George Hearst was in dire straits. One mine had folded and another had failed to prove profitable, so the house, the gardens and the stables were sold. William Randolph and Phoebe boarded with friends while George returned to the Comstock. Although the Hearsts were gone, their mark--the extensive, lush gardens--remained on Russian Hill.

The top of the hill was still a popular place to build large Victorian houses with elaborate landscaped gardens sheltered by cypress trees. John Spring's family owned the house at 944 Chestnut for fifty years. Originally it was surrounded by a moat to protect it from seeping natural springs. For a time it was the home of Bruce Porter, the noted landscape architect. His wife was the daughter of philosopher William James and niece of Henry James, and for many years the Porters made Spring House a salon for the city's intellectuals. Today it is the residence



of ski master Hannes Schroll.<sup>12</sup>

But Russian Hill was also becoming something else. Nearby the flourishing Hearst and other open gardens, small cottages of artists and writers appeared. Russian Hill became the Bohemia of the swelling metropolis of San Francisco. There a despondent poet George Sterling stalked the lanes and gardens and there he died one day by his own hand. A small bench in the single tiny park left on the hill is a memorial to him and a reminder of the hill that was. A small plot of land at Vallejo and Taylor is dedicated to Ina Coolbrith, yet another Bohemian poet. There, too, an ailing Robert Louis Stevenson wandered, the sunshine and flowers perhaps making him dream of the South Seas where he would be buried. After Stevenson's death, his wife returned to live on Russian Hill in a house built by Willis Polk at the northwest corner of Lombard and Hyde. She was a true Bohemian and was often seen wandering about the gardens in a long, flowing Samoan gown. This was the Russian Hill of the nineties: gardened, Bohemian and dedicated to the pursuit of living.

Russian Hill was still a neighborhood of contrasts. Just across the street from the Bohemian Mrs. Stevenson lived a surveyor and his proper wife, the John Bensons. Their home was a "substantial" two story wood frame house purchased from people of Spanish descent, Luisa and Frank Silva.

V. 1906

On the morning of April 18, 1906, William Randolph Hearst was awakened by a phone call to his home in New York:

An anxious voice said, "There has been an earthquake in San Francisco."

"Don't overplay it," replied Hearst. "They have earthquakes often in California." Then he went back to bed.

First came the exaggeration--the city was wiped out--swept into the sea--everyone dead--Hearst thought of his mother.

Finally the truth seeped through. At 5:13 the inhabitants of San Francisco had been shaken out of their beds by a prolonged temblor. The privately owned, ill-cared for water mains of the city were broken. San Francisco, joyous, Bohemian San Francisco, was being scourged by flames.

For three days the fire raged. Two-thirds of the city were charred smoldering ruins. Even the waterfront was destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

On the third day the fire reached Russian Hill. Dynamite halted the spreading flames and the northern slope and the historic block in question were spared. Mrs. Stevenson realized the impending disaster and formed members of the Bohemian Club into a bucket brigade which saved her house from destruction. Grace V. Benson's house burned, but the trees survived. Now a widow, Mrs. Benson continued to live on the site in a portable refugee house, which still stands, now the oldest building on the block.