

HAPPY BIRTHDAY - NOB HILL TREASURE HUNTINGTON PARK

Huntington Park and the Origins of Nob Hill

By Hudson Bell

As 2015 will mark the centennial year of Huntington Park there couldn't be a better time to reflect on the block's history and the origins of the Nob Hill community. For while the park will be 100-years-old, the earlier history of the block it sits upon goes back to the beginning of the neighborhood, when in the early-1850s the area became a primitive, post-gold rush suburb called Fern Hill, sitting up at the western edge of the city.

Located where Huntington Park is today, at the SE corner of Sacramento and Taylor, was the first substantial dwelling of the area. Built in 1851 by 31-year-old Benjamin S. Brooks, a native of Bridgeport, Conn., it was a two-story, twelve-room New England farmhouse, and cost \$2,500 to build. Having sailed to San Francisco from New York City aboard the ship *Balance* during the gold rush in 1849, Brooks quickly established himself as a prominent San Francisco attorney.

In 1852, Thomas S. Eastman of Concord, N. H. arrived aboard the clipper ship *Flying Cloud* with a prefabricated house. He assembled the home in Fern Hill about where the west steps of the park are located today, later listed as 1010 Taylor St. Initially working as a carpenter, in the 1860s Eastman became a downtown dealer of Abbot-Downing Concord carriages, the premier passenger vehicles of their time.

In 1853, on the north side of the block, fronting on Sacramento near where the northern stairs are was the "small but comfortable" cottage of Peter W. Cassey, a 22-year-old black man from Philadelphia, Pa. The son of prominent abolitionist Joseph Cassey, Peter worked as a barber and operated a successful "shaving saloon" in the basement of the Union Hotel at Merchant and Kearny streets, across from Portsmouth Square. Cassey and his wife Annie lived in this cottage until 1859 when they relocated to San Jose where they later founded the Phoenixian Institute, which was the first black secondary school on the west coast.



Thomas S. Eastman

While the Clay Street Hill-era started at the end of 1853 with Clay Street graded and planked to Taylor, the park block remained primitive throughout the decade, with the streets surrounding it ungraded, rutted, dirt paths. On Dec. 24, 1856, the *Sacramento Union* reported: "A few days since, a boy was shooting birds, at the corner of California and Taylor streets, San Francisco, with a horse pistol, and accidentally killed a horse. The same bullet came very near striking a laboring man." This laboring man may have been William Hart, native of County Leitrim, Ireland, who in 1855 built the first home to front on Cushman Street, later listed as 1 Cushman, located around where the eastern entrance to the park is today. On Nov. 11, 1857, the *Daily Alta* reported the "altitude of California and Taylor streets" as being "where the city abruptly terminates."



Peter W. Cassey

In 1860 improvements reached the block. The crossing of California and Taylor was graded, macadamized, and sidewalked, and Taylor Street was graded between California and Sacramento. Despite these street improvements, the lots facing California Street on the south side of the park block remained vacant however, and because of the still difficult topography, the city graded the crossing of California and Taylor again circa 1865. Likewise, it was to this vacant crossing that during the Civil War men would climb to blast off 100 gun salutes over the city in celebration of Union victories, both military and political.

By 1870, the north side of the park block was packed with residences facing on Taylor, Sacramento, and Cushman streets, and it was a smorgasbord of architecture. For instance, close examination of Cushman Street in Eadweard Muybridge's photographs from 1877 and 1878 shows a Saltbox Colonial, a Federal box house, Cape Cod cottages, a New England farmhouse-style duplex, and Italianate row houses.

In 1872, 41-year-old attorney and capitalist David D. Colton, a native of Monson, Me., who'd been living in the old D. J. Oliver house at the SE corner of Pine and Mason streets, purchased the south side of the park block and built a mansion on it for \$75,000 (it appears the old Eastman lot, the Hart lot, as well as a home just south of Eastman's was purchased by Colton for

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development as well). It was considered the most important residence built in 1872, and was one of the first next-level mansions on what would that decade become known as “Nob Hill.”

Praised for its architectural beauty and taste, the Colton mansion was a magnificent Neoclassical Italianate palace of wood, resembling marble, and was considered by many the handsomest mansion ever built on Nob Hill. At the time of David Colton’s untimely death in 1878, he was vice president of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, financial director of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, and president of the O. and O. Steamship Company. So much was Colton’s influence in the development of California, that a few years previous a town east of Los Angeles called Colton had been named in his honor.

While Colton’s family remained in the mansion throughout the 1870-80s, and eventually came to own the entire block, in 1892 the mansion and block was sold to 71-year-old president of the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, Collis P. Huntington, for \$250,000. While Collis, a native of Connecticut, spent most of his time on the east coast, the mansion became his western home throughout the rest of the 1890s.

Following Collis’s death in 1900, his widow, Arabella declared the mansion would no longer be inhabited as a private residence, and would possibly become a hospital. However, in 1906 the Colton/Huntington mansion was destroyed by the fires that followed in the wake of the earthquake of April 18.

In 1913, Arabella was remarried to Collis’s nephew, Henry E. Huntington, an industrialist and railroad magnate like his uncle. Henry’s influence in Southern California was such that in the early-1900s, a streetcar town south of Los Angeles called Huntington Park was named after him. Soon after, while reflecting on Collis’s life in February 1915, Arabella D. Huntington wrote a letter to the mayor of San Francisco and attached a deed for the property she still owned bounded by California, Taylor, Sacramento, and Cushman streets. She asked that from that day forward the block would be known as Collis P. Huntington Park, and that it would be used “for the pleasure of the women and children of San Francisco.”

Hudson Bell resides in Nob Hill with his wife and son. He is currently working on a history of San Francisco titled, Fern Hill: The Lost History of San Francisco’s Nob Hill. Hudson is also the founder and main guide for San Francisco’s Fern Hill Walking Tours (fernhilltours.com).

NOTABLE NOELS

WHAT TO DO ON THE HILL THIS HOLIDAY SEASON IF YOU WILL BE ENTERTAINING CHILDREN

Gingerbread House Opens at the Fairmont ~ November 29, 10am *Free*

Fairmont’s Gingerbread Holiday Tea ~ November 29 - December 31

Tree Lighting in Huntington Park ~ December 1 at 6:00pm *Free*

Tree Lighting with Santa at the Ritz ~ December 4 ~ 5:30-7:30 *Free*

Magical Holiday Tea Mark Hopkins

See InterContinental Mark Hopkins events for dates featuring
Perry the Magician and Pixie the Face Painter, Santa visits
and Fire Engine display

The Bishop’s Christmas Pageant for Children ~ December 24, 11am *Free*

Christmas Day – Santa visits the Fairmont’s Crown Room
during Christmas brunch 9:30-2:30

