

Retro Ramblings

by: Douglas Love, Grand 3rd Vice-president

On the southern side of Pacheco Boulevard between downtown Martinez and Pacheco sits California Registered Historic Landmark plaque #722. Its inscription is brief and to the point. It reads:

Dr. John Marsh
California Pioneer
Murdered Here
September 24, 1856

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California Registered
Historical Landmark No. 722
Plaque Placed by The California State Parks Commission
In Cooperation with the Martinez Horsemen's Association, February 22, 1960.

That's all. No narrative, no context, just that Dr. John Marsh, who was a California pioneer, was murdered on this spot by the side of the road. So, who was John Marsh? What were the circumstances that led to his demise? Why was his murder so important that its location is now a state historic landmark?

John Marsh was born in Danvers, Massachusetts in 1799 to John Marsh Sr. and his wife Polly. He graduated from Phillips Academy in Andover and entered Harvard in 1819. He was dismissed from Harvard for taking part in a student rebellion but was readmitted in 1821 and received a Bachelor's Degree in 1823. He studied medicine under a Boston doctor. Like many ambitious young men of his era, Marsh went west to seek his fortune. He first settled in the Michigan Territory at Fort St. Anthony, now Fort Snelling, where he started and taught at the first school in what is now Minnesota. He also studied medicine under the fort's surgeon who passed away before Marsh could complete his training. By 1826 Marsh had fathered a son by his mistress, Marguerite Deconteaux, who was of French and Sioux descent. It was at this time Marsh completed his Sioux vocabulary. He was also appointed an assistant Indian Agent to the Sioux and a Justice of the Peace.

Marsh then relocated to Prairie du Chien and became entangled in the Black Hawk War. Marsh was blamed for a Sioux massacre of the Fox and Sauk. He then left and went to New Salem, Illinois where he allegedly became acquainted with a not yet nationally famous Abraham Lincoln. He then went back to Prairie du Chien and Marguerite, who tired to walk from New Salem to join him, died.

With the death of Marguerite and leaving his son with friends in Illinois, in 1833 Marsh left for Independence, Missouri and became a merchant. By 1835, his business had failed and Marsh found himself in Santa Fe in the employ of John Jacob Astor and the American Fur Company. Soon Marsh was on the move again and in 1836 travelled via the Santa Fe Trail to the village of Los Angeles. It was in Los Angeles that Marsh presented his Harvard Diploma as proof of his medical education to the government of Alta California and was granted permission to practice medicine. Thus, John Marsh, teacher, Indian Agent, ethno-linguist, Justice of the Peace and failed businessman, became "Doctor" John Marsh. With this bit of legerdemain, he became the first European to practice medicine in California. On February 10, 1836, Marsh, using the Spanish version of his given name, petitioned the Government of Alta California for residency, which was granted on the 18th and "Doctor" John Marsh became Doctor Juan Marsh, resident of California.

With his residency secured, Marsh began his medical practice in Los Angeles. He was successful, being the only “trained” doctor in California. As he was the first and only person to practice western medicine in the territory, his rates were rather high. He was known to charge as much as one head of cattle to deliver a baby. He wrote to his brother that he finally had travelled far enough west and intended to settle in California. Since he wanted to purchase land, Marsh converted to Catholicism.

In 1838, he purchased Rancho Los Meganos from Jose Noriega for \$500. The large rancho stretched from the San Joaquin River to the Old River and included the present day sites of Antioch, Brentwood, Knightsen, and Oakley. With his purchase, Marsh became one of the largest land owners and the first non-Hispanic settler in what would become Contra Costa County. As he settled into becoming a gentleman rancher, Marsh became one of the first people to practice “scientific” cattle breeding and one of the first to cultivate orchards in the area. He also began to urge other Americans to come to California along with John Sutter and other early settlers. His suggested overland route, then known as “Marsh’s Route”, later became the California Trail. In 1841, the Bidwell-Bartleson Party became the first group of emigrants to travel overland to California following Marsh’s Route. The party stayed at Marsh’s ranch at his invitation but Bidwell and Marsh got into a dispute over a slaughtered ox or the cost of food and Bidwell later said that Marsh was “the meanest man he ever met”. Marsh also tended some of the survivors of the Donner Party. Marsh participated in the Mexican-American War and in 1851 married Abby Tuck, a teacher from New England, after a short courtship. He and Abby had a daughter, named Alice, and Marsh began construction of a large stone house to replace the adobe in which the family lived. Abby died in 1855 before the house was finished and John and Alice moved into the unfinished house.

Of course, Marsh was murdered on September 24, 1856 while going to San Francisco by three of his employees, vaqueros who were angry about the low wages they were being paid. So, why is the place where he was killed a state historic landmark? Well, John Marsh was:

The first “doctor” in California,
The first non-Hispanic settler in Contra-Costa County,
An early promoter of the American settlement of California,
A pioneer livestock breeder, and
An early orchardist.
And none of this includes his life before coming to California.

GETTING THERE: California Historical Landmark #722 is located across the street from 4575 Pacheco Blvd in Martinez, CA. **From 414 Mason St:** Get on I-80 East. Follow I-80E to Exit 8B. Take exit 8B onto I-580E. From I-580E take exit 19B onto CA-24E. Stay on CA24E until it merges with I-680N. Stay on I-680 to Exit 54. Follow Pacheco Boulevard to the destination. The marker is on the right hand side of the road.