

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Kind Words for a Bad Man

Now that Colton Hall is again suggested as a possible gift to the State to be administered by the Division of Beaches and Parks and its value added to the matching funds to obtain the beaches in Monterey, its history should be doubly interesting.

One of the many historical items in this valuable building are the collections of information on the lives of the men who wrote the State Constitution. The collection is being enriched occasionally by information gleaned by historian Donald Cameron of Oakland from the files of old documents.

The controversial figure of Lansford Hastings about whom Sutter said, "he was a bad man," and who was blamed leading the Donner Party on the Hasting's Cut-Off and into disaster, had kind words said about him in one such excerpt from Mr. Cameron's typewriter. It comes out of the Utah Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 19 entitled "West From Fort Bridger," and quoted from the journal of a German immigrant named Heinrich Leinhard, who said Hastings has been unanimously chosen captain of a company under command of Gen. Fremont.

"Hasting nevertheless preserved the respect and confidence of those who had followed him on his cutoff. He seems to have left the Harlan-Young train as soon as he reached Humboldt. Leinhard reached California and joined Fremont's California Battalion. At San Jose he noted the volunteers included 'the Mr. Hastings who showed us the cutoff that seemed so interminable between Fort Bridger and Mary's River (Humboldt) and as all the emigrants knew and liked him, he was unanimously elected captain of our company.'"

Hastings was a man with a dream of empire, the delegate from the Sacramento district. He was native of Ohio, who headed for the Far West in 1842 when he was 23 year old.

In the spring of the following year he led a small party from Oregon to California, and he is supposed to have had the idea of emulating Sam Houston of Texas and creating a California Republic.

Hastings finally went back to Ohio by way of Mexico and Texas, only to return again in 1845. To encourage overland immigration he wrote and published the

"Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California." He is partly blamed by some historians for the Donner Party disaster as he had encouraged them to try a new route, Hasting's Cutoff, west from Salt Lake.

Eventually Hastings established himself in San Francisco as a lawyer. With the discovery of gold he went to Coloma to establish a store, and was associated with Sutter and McDouglas in an attempt to make Sutterville rather than Sacramento, which had been founded by Sutter's son, the major town serving the Northern California gold fields.

In 1860, Hastings moved to Yuma, Ariz. At the close of the Civil War, in which Hastings was a controversial figure, he promoted the emigration of former Confederates to establish a colony in Brazil, and actually conducted two shiploads of people there. The plan failed and Hastings died in relative obscurity in 1870.