

He created landmarks and a legacy

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Among the sights we all love about Vacaville are the historic buildings downtown, such as the Carnegie Library (which today houses the Chamber of Commerce) and the Victorian mansions along Buck Avenue.

Many of these landmarks are the work of building contractor George Hutton Sharpe.

Sharpe was born in England around 1861. The family came to the United States when he was 9 years old. They settled in Kansas, where young George and his brothers and sisters grew up. Here he met and married Angie Parker. Their two eldest children were born in Kansas.

While many of Sharpe's siblings remained in farming, he became a builder and contractor, apparently without much formal training.

In 1888, the Sharpe family arrived in Solano County. His wife had an uncle in Elmira who operated a livery stable. For a couple of years, the family lived in Elmira, before settling down in Vacaville, where they raised their three surviving children, Millard, Maude and Esther. This move seems to coincide with the first buildings on the newly established Buck Avenue.

Sharpe immediately set to work as a contractor. Among his first jobs were the Buck Mansion and the William Buck house, both built in 1890. Other buildings on Buck Avenue and Mason Street followed.

His granddaughter, Mary Eldredge, recalled: "They (the Sharpe family) always lived ... in town because he built a lot of the houses on Buck Avenue ... on speculation really. He would build them and live in them until someone came along and wanted to buy them, and then he would sell it to them and then he would build another house for himself and his family. So, that went on for about five or six houses on Buck Avenue and a few that have been torn down over on Mason."

Over the years, Sharpe would build most of the civic buildings in Vacaville. He constructed both the grammar school and, in 1898, the high school, a much-beloved building that was torn down in 1950. In 1891, he was awarded a bid of \$ 4,975 to construct the Christian Church, which he built in 90 days. Other public buildings included the Masonic Hall and the Carnegie Library on Main Street.

The women of the Saturday Club had been instrumental in raising the funds for a Carnegie Library. When town officials called for bids, Sharpe resigned his town trusteeship in order to bid on the project. Though his bid of \$11,815 was \$388 higher than that of his closest rival, the trustees awarded him the contract. Sharpe finished the reinforced concrete building with its typical Carnegie library facade in 1915.

George Sharpe was renowned for the quality of his work. The Vacaville Reporter wrote in his obituary on March 25, 1938: "He was extremely conscientious in his building contracts; always using the best material obtainable. He subscribed to publications devoted to his craft and was ever ready to adopt new methods when shown to be better."

He also was a creative builder, ever willing to fulfill his client's wishes and design ideas. Often he would include a surprise free upgrade. Such was the case when he built Harbison House for his friend Luther Harbison. Luther and his wife wanted Sharpe to install a large window on the staircase landing to be able to admire the view across their orchards. Instead, to their dismay, Sharpe surprised them with a lovely stained glass window.

Sharpe did not just create a legacy in Vacaville through his buildings. He also served as a town trustee and council member and was Vacaville's mayor from 1916 to 1918.

His death at age 77 was widely noted. The Vacaville Reporter wrote in its obituary: "George H. Sharpe passed away at his home here Sunday after an illness extending over a period of four months. A heart attack which he sustained in November was the cause of death."

In a graveside tribute, the Reverend Arthur F. Fruhling said: "The extreme modesty of George Sharpe and respect for his last wishes forbid any lengthy eulogy on this occasion, but on the other hand, the life that he lived, the work that he performed and the services that he rendered forbid absolute silence; and so, on behalf of the community in which he lived for so many years and on behalf of the lodges in which he was a faithful member for so long I feel compelled to try and express what ought to be said.

"Brother Sharpe was an operative Mason as well as a speculative one. He so handled the tools of his craft as to become the master builder of Vacaville. Public buildings and private homes of long standing and recent construction are monuments to his faithful work well done. They stand as a lasting tribute to his skill as a workman, but more, they bespeak of honesty and integrity in all his dealings.

"Likewise in the realm of speculative Masonry Brother Sharpe was indeed a Master

Mason. He built better than he himself realized. He was a consistently self-controlled personality, always being the same man in the community, in business, in the lodges and among friends and strangers as he was in his own home.”

Sharpe’s good friend Willis Linn Jepson added in his own eulogy: “The measure of the man was such that just to know him was something; to have his acquaintance was an honor; to have his friendship, a beneficence.”

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