

Exploring a mansion's storied past

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Driving along Suisun Valley Road, I am always intrigued by Stonedene, the Gothic revival mansion situated opposite Solano Community College. The history of this particular location reaches back into the time before the first white settlers arrived.

The land on which Stonedene stands once housed a settlement of local Patwin Indians, as grinding stones attest. A small spring provided fresh water.

Spanish soldiers destroyed this settlement in 1810. From 1818 until 1835, the Santa Eulalia mission farm occupied the site.

The area became part of the Suisun Rancho, which General Vallejo granted to Chief Solano. In his deposition, Vallejo wrote: "In 1837, I gave Solano a provisional grant of Suisun Rancho, in which year he built three or four adobe houses, one for dwelling and the others for barns and storehouses ..."

On May 10, 1842, Solano sold his property back to General Vallejo for \$1,000. Vallejo operated the Rancho with the aid of an Indian ranch manager, Jesus Molino.

In 1850, Samuel Martin, his wife Jemima Hillis Martin and their four children, Mary, Robert, Henry, and William arrived in Solano County after a year spent in Oroville, along the Feather River.

Samuel Martin was born around 1813 in Pennsylvania, spent his childhood in Indiana and Kentucky, and moved to Missouri as a young man, where he ran a flat boat on the Missouri River. Jemima Hillis was born sometime around 1814 in Kentucky. Like the Martin family, her family had been slowly moving westward.

Initially, Samuel Martin purchased land adjoining the land Jesus Molino managed, where he cut and sold hay and wild oats.

On Aug. 26, 1850, Vallejo sold Suisun Rancho to Captain Waterman and A. A. Ritchie for \$50,000. Three years later, Samuel Martin was able to purchase 200 acres adjoining his own property from Ritchie, purportedly for \$3,000. His is the first recorded legal land sale by a white settler.

The Martin family moved into Chief Solano's adobe hacienda. A small number of

Patwin Indian descendants still lived in the area, and some may have worked for Samuel Martin. Samuel's great-grandson, William Smith tells the story of the day little Henry was ill with croup. His mother prepared a mustard bath and put him into it. When she took the toddler out, his skin had turned yellow. The sight frightened the visiting Patwin Indians and they rushed out of the house.

Around 1860, Samuel Martin returned to St. Joseph, Missouri to purchase a herd of 660 cattle, which he drove back to Suisun Valley via the mining country. At the time, cattle were still rare and worth substantial sums of money. Samuel sold some of the animals to the miners.

In 1861, Samuel Martin decided to build a new family home. Instead of constructing another adobe building, he opted for stone, namely the local Tufa.

Large volcanic Tufa beds were located in the area. Tufa is composed of "cemented, volcanic earth, light and porous, containing a large percentage of magnesia, giving the rock a light gray color, which hardens by exposure, is a perfect firestone, and of sufficient durability for building purposes ..."

Working in stone required specialized knowledge. Samuel Martin was able to contract with a local German architect and German stonecutters, trading their work for some of his cattle. Huge blocks, a foot in height and depth were hand-carved and used to build the house. Chinese workers helped to erect the building and the surrounding stone wall.

The same stonecutters also built another five homes, the Baldwin barn and Rockville Chapel in the area.

The house was built in the Gothic Revival style then popular, complete with a steep gable and intricate gingerbread decoration. Besides the cattle, it cost an additional \$1,000.

Samuel continued to farm, investing mostly in grain and, in later years, in some fruit. He continued to purchase land until he owned nearly 300 acres.

From the beginning, he also was active in the community. In 1858, he was elected to represent Green Valley Township in the convention to elect a County Seat of Solano County.

He also was elected and served as a township officer in 1850, 1861, and again in 1871, and served as the first Justice of the Peace elected on a Democratic ticket.

His endeavors in general proved successful. In particular, a partnership with his son-in-law G. W. Hall, husband to daughter Mary, where the partners held an interest in 1,200 acres, became the cornerstone of Samuel's fortune. On his death in 1885 he was able to provide each of his four surviving children with a farm of his or her own. (Sources are conflicting on the total number of children, either five or six.)

His wife Jemima died a few years later, in 1890.

Samuel's and Jemima's fourth child, Henry, he of the mustard bath, inherited the home farm. Henry had been born in Atchinson County, Missouri, on Jan. 24, 1848. He was educated in the schools of Solano County and at the Pacific Methodist College in Vacaville.

Besides grain and some fruit, Henry Martin developed an interest in grapes and planted a large vineyard, which he operated until 1901.

On Nov. 15, 1882, he married Carrie Pittman of Cordelia, the daughter of Charles and Louisa Pittman. The Solano Republican published a curt notice on Nov. 17: "Martin-Pittman - At Cordelia, Nov. 15, 1882, at the residence of the bride's mother, by Rev. Mitchell of St. Helena ..." In the typical fashion of the day, the paper also noted in a different section: "Peter Wyer, of San Francisco, was in town on Wednesday. He came to attend the Martin-Pittman nuptial ceremony at Cordelia."

The couple had two children, May (after Carrie's mother, Louisa May Pittman) and Samuel.

According to her grandson, William Smith, it was Carrie who named their home "Stonedene," the Scottish words meaning "House of Stone."

After Louisa Pittman's death in 1889, Carrie and Henry continued to manage the Cordelia Hotel, which continued to be a successful operation. Henry also acted as one of the executors of Louisa's estate.

Like his father before him, Henry believed in serving his community. J. M. Guinn related in 1904 in his "History of the State of California" that "Mr. Martin has been a familiar figure in local politics for some years, serving as deputy sheriff and also as constable on different occasions. He is a charter member of Suisun Lodge No. 111, K. P., and is well known in both private and business circles, where he commands the highest respect."

I would like to thank William Smith for sharing information about his family. I will continue the story of Stonedene and the Martin family in my next column.

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