

# Man responsible for Donner Party disaster lived in Solano

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Solano County has a direct connection to that event through the person of Lansford W. Hastings, who many consider the villain and cause of the deaths of 40 people.

Hastings built a three-room adobe home on a knoll overlooking the confluence of the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers, about mile and a quarter east of Collinsville. The building is slowly melting back to earth, of which it was constructed.

Hastings was a 23-year-old lawyer from Ohio. He decided in 1842 to journey to Oregon with the Elijah White wagon train. Two years later, he returned east, where he gave speeches and published the dangerously misleading "Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California."

Hastings dreamed of leading hoards of Americans to the western paradise, and hoped their gratitude would make him a new Sam Houston, president of the Pacific republic or governor of a new American state.

Returning to California in 1845, Hastings, along with a young Lt. William Tecumseh Sherman, surveyed the town of Sutterville for Captain Sutter. The following year he returned east, determined to lay out a new and shorter route to California, which would avoid going north to Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail.

His "Hastings' Cutoff," part of which he established by backtracking Fremont's 1845 route south of Salt Lake, was used by a number of immigrants in 1846, but proved too difficult for wagons. The worse-than-worthless advice of Hastings was a cause of dangerous delays for many of them, and led the Donner party into the worst disaster in the history of the California Trail.

Upon Hastings' return trip to California, in 1846, he was working as an agent for the Mormons. He searched for a site to establish a colony and built the adobe. In anticipation of a Mexican land grant, Hastings laid out a plan for the Mormon community and named it Montezuma City, but these plans were interrupted by the Bear Flag Revolt and the war with Mexico. During the months of the war, Captain Hastings commanded F Company of Fremont's California Battalion.

The war ended with victory for America in 1848, just a few months before the gold discovery at Sutter's mill at Coloma was made public. The rush of 1849, literally a diaspora of epic proportions, hastened the call for statehood. This statehood movement put an end to any further development of Montezuma City.

Hastings continued to live in the adobe for another three years after the Mormons had lost interest in the colony. He ran a ferry service across the river to the Contra Costa side. He finally abandoned the site and moved to Monterey to participate in the convention to draft a constitution for the new state of California. In 1850 Hastings became the attorney for the northern district of the new state of California.

The abandoned adobe suffered considerable damage from vandals and travelers seeking temporary shelter. The structure was in deplorable condition when, in 1853, Lindsay Powell Marshall, a cattle rancher and land speculator, arrived with two of his sons and a herd of cattle.

Learning of the vacant Montezuma House from Dr. Robert "Long Bob" Semple in Benicia, they went there and took possession. They repaired the dilapidated haven and eventually acquired Hastings' squatter's claim to the premises.

Marshall discovered that at some point in time, while the adobe was abandoned, counterfeiters had apparently occupied the building. He found crucibles, dies and raw copper for coin making.

In 1854 Hastings returned and attempted to reclaim the property, even though he had no legal right to it. The Marshalls, not wanting any trouble, gave him some of their livestock as compensation.

In the meantime, before 1857, Marshall brought his wife and six children from Missouri to the much-improved ranch. They raised stock and gradually expanded their operations by systematically acquiring additional acreage.

Between 1866 and 1873, Marshall and his family added more than 1,000 acres to their original holdings through a combination of cash entry patents, patents of swamp and overflow lands, and a homestead claim.

Over time, Marshall divested himself of all but 400 acres. After his death, the property passed to his wife, and in 1897, to his eldest son, Linday P. Marshall Jr.

Around the turn of the century, the old adobe passed into the hands of the Stratton family. The Strattons constructed a wooden shell over the original structure, added a living room and continued to use the adobe for sleeping rooms and a kitchen.

No effort was made to modernize the original historic old rooms with their rough, heavy timbers, thick wooden doors and hand-hewn woodwork. Even though other additions and modifications were made over the years, the Strattons maintained the majority of the original adobe in its original configuration.

The Strattons sold the property to PG&E in 1964. The power company planned on constructing a nuclear energy plant on the site. After the Strattons left, considerable damage was caused by souvenir hunters.

In 1872 the adobe was placed on the National Register of Historic Places through the efforts of local historian Wood Young and the Solano County Historic Society. Repairs were made and the roof of the wooden enclosure surrounding the adobe was repaired.

Unfortunately, once again, the structure fell into disrepair. Because of its remote location, lack of funds, and community disinterest, major roof leaks are increasingly destroying the original adobe within its once protective shell.

Hastings went on to practice law and became a judge. He speculated in real estate and fleeced the 49ers with various dubious schemes. He married in 1848, lived in Yuma, Ariz., from 1850 to 1862, and returned to California after the death of his wife.

During the Civil War, he unsuccessfully tried to convince the Confederate government to seize and annex Arizona. From 1867 to 1870, Hastings promoted and led a movement to settle uprooted Confederate soldiers and their families in Brazil. During his second voyage to Brazil, in 1870, he died of unknown causes. He was 51.

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