

Preserving a Piece of County History: The East Brothers Light Station Needs Your Help

Donald Bastin



East Brother Light Station from the hills of Point San Pablo. Behind East Brother is, naturally enough, West Brother. At the upper left we see Mount Tamalpais. Across the bay, to the right, are the Marin Islands, now a native bird sanctuary. Photo by author.

On April 1, 2021, the electrical cable that provides power to the East Brother Island failed. Already shuttered by the pandemic, the almost 150 year-old light house, salvaged and re-purposed as a unique getaway destination, faced an uncertain future. The Coast Guard, which owns the island, had repaired the cable in the past, but no longer had the funds or the inclination to do so again; their concern was the navigation light, which was already powered by solar panels and was not affected by the cable break. Repairs were estimated to be in the range of several hundred thousand to a million dollars, and the nonprofit that ran the bed and breakfast operation simply did not have that kind of money. The decades-long fight to save the old structure seemed to be coming to an end. To appreciate the importance of the light station to Contra Costa County history, a little history is in order.

In 1871, Congress appropriated money for the erection of a lighthouse and fog station at the entrance to San Pablo Bay, a strait formed by Point San Pablo on the east side of the bay and Point San Pedro on the west. The original intent was to site the navigation aids at Point San Pablo itself, but problems with the civilian owners over the price led to the move to the Brothers Islands, lying just off the point, and which were already owned by the government. It is interesting to note that the islands were held by the government for military reasons, as they would provide, with placement of coastal guns, protection from the incursion of enemy vessels. The Mare Island Naval Shipyard was just a few miles distant, and considered to be vulnerable to such attack.



This image and subsequent photos in this article courtesy of Richmond Museum of History and Culture

toward Point San Pablo. In 1904, the wharf was moved to the east side of the island, where it remains to this day.

The oil lamp for the light was first lit on March 1, 1874. The fog horn was powered up two months later. In order to keep everything operating, the keeper, or keepers, would have to live on the island and be on duty round the clock. While the island has seen many keepers come and go, by far the most well-known is John Stenmark. John served for 20 years, from 1894 until 1914, along with his wife, Breta. During his stay, the couple added four children to the island's residents, daughters Annie and Ruby and sons Phillip and Folke.

During the early years of their residence on the island, the Stenmark family was quite isolated, as development on the nearby mainland did not begin until the turn of the century. In 1901, the Standard Oil Company built docks for its ships on the tip of Point San Pablo, just opposite the East Brother Island. This facility was, in fact, Richmond's



Port facility at Point San Pablo, early 1900s. East Brother Island in the background. Note wharf now located on east side of island.

2013, when Western Drive, the coastal road to Point San Pablo, was officially renamed Stenmark Drive.

Construction of the light station was begun in early 1873, with the blasting away of the top of the island. A three-story tower was erected on top of which the light was placed. Attached to the tower was a two-story Victorian-style home, for the keepers. In addition, a fog signal building was added, as well as a large cistern to catch rain water. A wharf was added on the north side of the island. In the picture at the left, probably taken from West Brother, we see the island sometime in the late 1800s, looking east



Ruby (left) and Annie Stenmark, early 1900s. Apparently, the family also had a pet dog. They may even have had a push lawn mower (right of image).

first port. Around 1907, the California Wine Association built a huge winery just south of the Point, and Richmond's western waterfront began to become a lively place. With the coming of something approaching society, actual dating became possible, and in 1914 Annie married one of the workers at the Standard Oil docks, who had carried on his suit by rowing back and forth to the island. The memory of the Stenmark family was honored by the city of Richmond in

In 1934 an electric cable was laid in the channel between East Brother and Point San Pablo, supplying electricity to the island for the first time; the light was now powered by an electric bulb. The fog signal, which had been steam-powered, was also switched to electric power.

In 1939, the U.S. Coast Guard took responsibility for the operation of the nation's lighthouses. In the 1960s, as a cost-cutting measure, it was decided to automate the light station on East Brother. The living quarters, no longer needed, were to be demolished, along with the light tower, which would be replaced by a pole with a light on top. News of the pending destruction of the historic buildings spurred local citizens into action. The first thing to be done was to get the site placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which was done in 1971. This served to protect the buildings from immediate demolition. But a long-range plan had to be created and implemented to preserve the site for the future.

In 1979 a nonprofit, East Brother Light Station, Inc., was formed to save and renovate the historic site and its structures, which were in serious need of restoration. Current Richmond Mayor Tom Butt helped to form this organization and now serves as Board President. Through private donations, grants, and thousands of hours of donated labor, the old buildings were lovingly brought back to life, and now generate needed income by offering a unique bed and breakfast opportunity to visitors seeking something a little different. Five distinctly different rooms are available, with breakfast and dinner part of the deal. And now that power has been restored, plans are to open the site to overnight stay as of September 1 of this year. And if you and your partner are interested, and at least one of you possesses the appropriate Coast Guard license, you can be the next keepers of the East Brother Light Station. Details can be found at <https://www.ebls.org>. There, you will also find a link to a GoFundMe project which has been set up to help with site maintenance but, more importantly, to secure a permanent solution to the power problem. Though the electrical cable is now working, as stated above, the fix is not permanent. Either a new cable must be installed, or an alternative energy package must be installed. Either solution will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Please consider making a donation to this worthy cause.



Breta Stenmark on East Brother Island, c. 1900. View looking east toward Pt. San Pablo.



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Judge Absolom Francis Bray *Editor*



The CCCHS turns 70 this year, and in this issue we are highlighting our first president, and founder, Judge A.F. Bray, who served for almost 30 years, far longer than anybody else. Judge Bray was appointed to Department 2 of the Contra Costa County Superior

Court in 1935 (the number of judges would increase to 3 only in 1945). He served until 1947. He then served as a Justice with the California Court of Appeals.

Judge Bray was long interested in the legal history of the County. From 1936 until 1940, he broadcast short historical essays over radio station KLX in Oakland. They are available on our website, at cocohistory.org. Judge Bray's grandson, Oliver Bray, now serves on the CCCHS Board of Directors.

The following are samples of the broadcasts made by the Judge, which covered a very wide range of legal topics. At least two of the broadcasts addressed the treatment of Native Americans in the County. The first is dated February 15, 1937, and is titled: "Indian Exploitation in Contra Costa."

While on the subject of grand jury presentments there are two more interesting ones, likewise dug up by Mr. McHugh from the archives of Contra Costa County. These refer to the treatment given the Indians by the whites. The first is dated October 7th, 1851 and reads as follows.

"The Grand Jury for the county of Contra Costa at the October term of the Court of Sessions beg leave to recommend to the attention of the Court to see that the laws for the government and protection of Indians are duly observed.

John Marsh, foreman"

It will be noticed that John Marsh was foreman. He was one of the early California pioneers, the man who built the famous stone house, still standing on Marsh Creek on the slopes of Mt. Diablo, and the man who was probably the foremost Californian of his day and did more than any other man



*John Marsh, c. 1852.
CCCHS photo.*

to ensure California becoming a territory of the United States, rather than of England, Spain or Russia, all of which countries were looking upon it with a greedy eye.

Apparently the aforesaid presentment did not get results for in the following term and on the 6th day of April, 1852 a new presentment was made reading as follows.

"Presentment filed 6th of April, 1852: The Grand Jury of Contra Costa County in the Court of Sessions of this county at the April term present that a great evil and nuisance has been inflicted on our community by the unlawful introduction of large numbers of Indians from other counties and countries, there being strong circumstantial evidence that they have been forced from their homes by Juan Jesus Berryessa, Suto [Soto?] Berryessa and Whon (?) [Juan?] Barry and others; and since then have been harshly treated and neglectfully by those who have brought them here.

Many of them are unclad and in a suffering condition for food and from that cause or a natural propensity for pilfering they are a great annoyance to the inhabitants. Horses are stolen and houses broken open in absence of owners, clothing, bedding [bedding] and provisions stolen much to the injury and annoyance of the inhabitants. That this injury should be remedied by the magistrates who have the entire jurisdiction of the protection of these people, the statute law requiring of them a careful supervision of all Indians within their districts, that these persons that have brought them to this country be required to remand them to their homes at his or their own expense, and this jury holds that a neglect on the part of a magistrate to require such removal will be a dereliction of duty and highly censurable on their part."

Website Editor's Note: California law permitted the indenturing of Indians and the seizure of "orphaned" Indian children from their tribe for incorporation into Anglo and Mexican households as servants or worse. These laws permitted a form of human slavery that was illegal when applied to Black Americans in California. These laws were not repealed until after the Civil War.

Judge Bray followed this broadcast with another, just over a year later, titled "Indian Slavery in Contra Costa County."

Kidnapping is not altogether a modern development. In the early days in California they had their kidnapping problems, but they were limited to the question of kidnapping Indians, not for rewards to be paid, as now, for their delivery, but to make slaves of them. Tom McHugh, the Martinez correspondent of the Oakland Tribune has called my attention to certain indictments or presentments of the Grand Jury found by him among the archives of Contra Costa County. The presentment was made to the District Court on December 13, 1852 and is a general commentary on conditions.

It read as follows, "*The grand jury having terminated their labors, before retiring, believe it to be their duty to call attention to the present condition of the county jail.*" (Incidentally this jail was at Martinez and was the only jail within the confines of the area now embraced by both Alameda and Contra Costa County. Prisoners taken in the territory of Livermore, Oakland and Encinal, now known as Alameda, had to be brought all the way to Martinez for imprisonment and tried). "*We consider the jail entirely deficient for the legitimate purposes of a jail. We find it insecure, uncleanly and that the necessary bed clothing is not furnished prisoners.*"

"*We find also that a regular system of kidnapping Indians is carried on, and that the present law in many cases are inadequate to the emergencies and fail to afford relief.*" Following this general charge of kidnapping we find that the Grand Jury in December 1852, presented a specific indictment against one Ramon Briones for kidnapping an Indian, name unknown, in the County of Napa and bringing him to Contra Costa County.

Briones was arrested and bail was set at \$1,000. He was tried and found "not guilty." Evidently the trial jurors did not believe that kidnapping Indians was a particularly serious offense. This, in spite of the fact that among the Grand Jury's notes appear a notation to the effect that Ramon Briones sold two Indians to Wm. Castro for \$300.

Shortly thereafter another indictment was filed which reads as follows, "*The People of the State of California against Ramon Mesa in the Court of Sessions of the County of Contra Costa December Term, 1852. Ramon Mesa is accused by the Grand Jury of the County of Contra Costa, by this indictment of the crime of kidnapping committed as follows; the said Ramon Mesa on the 1st*

day of Sept. A. D., 1852 did forcibly steal, take and arrest one, an Indian whose name is unknown, in the County of Napa in the said State of California and forcibly did bring said Indian whose name is unknown into the said County of Contra Costa, against the statute in such cases made and provided and against the peace and dignity of the State of California".

It will be noted that the Indians kidnapped were stolen in Napa County and brought to Contra Costa County. This is because the Indians in Napa were a more or less timid tribe and not very good at fighting, and hence easy to capture and secondly, once they were taken across Carquinez Straits, their captors were fairly safe from pursuit, as in those days crossing the Straits was quite an undertaking. Rowboats were the only means of transportation and there were very few of those, and what few there were not accessible to Indians. In fact the waters of the Straits constituted a natural barrier between the Indian tribes of Napa County and those who inhabited the territory on this side of the water.

Bulletin Editor's note: The names "Briones," "Berryessa," and "Castro," noted in these documents, are easily recognized by local residents, attached as they are to local sites, roads, and even bodies of water. It should not come as a surprise that members of these families were engaged in activities designed to use Native labor for their own ends and which can be described as slavery. There is a tendency to view the Rancho period in our County through rose-tinted glasses, while the reality was often brutal. The records of this period are available to all in the archive of the Contra Costa County Historical Society.

Included in the essays are references to courts that no longer exist, but are historically interesting. The "Court of Sessions" consisted of the County Judge (there was only one) and two Justices of the Peace. It handled most criminal cases and appeals from the Justice's Court, as well as acting as a Board of Supervisors.

The District Court had jurisdiction over several counties and heard serious criminal cases (including murder) and civil cases involving large sums of money. The CCCHS archives are rich with the records of cases overseen by these courts.

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Please consider CCCHS in your estate planning. It is simple, and any gift is tax deductible. We have a Schwab account that makes it easier for members and others to donate shares of stock to the Society, a good way to make a year-end or other contribution.

Want to get more involved?

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is looking for a few good men or women to join our Board of Directors, or to join our band of dedicated volunteers. We are particularly in need of someone with technical computer skills to help us out with our computer network and website. Other than the monthly board meeting, the time you donate is pretty much up to you. So if you love local history and want



to be a creative member of the largest historical archive in the County, give us a call, at 925-229-1042, or email our Executive Director, Michael McCarron, at: [<director@cocohistory.org>](mailto:director@cocohistory.org)

Huge Membership Drive!

Since you received this newsletter, you are probably already a member of our society, but if not, you are in luck! All new members can join at half price (\$20) for a full year. If you are not satisfied at the end of the year, well, you know. But if you love history, we have the largest historical archive in the county, including:

- Court Documents: We have court documents going back to 1848; we are the official repository of superior court records up to and including 1911
 - Library: We have an extensive library of books, journals, magazines, pamphlets and studies, relating to the history of our County and California.
 - Maps: We have over 1100 maps of all sizes and types, dating from 1775 to the 1990s.
 - Naturalization Cases: The archive holds a collection of 99 volumes containing 12,646 separate records.
 - Newspapers: Our newspaper collection is huge and diverse, over 160 publications being represented. Some have been digitized and are searchable.
 - Photographs: At present, we have around 20,000 images that have been scanned and are available as digital files. This number represents perhaps one-fifth of our total collection of prints, negatives, and slides, which date from the mid-nineteenth century.
 - Veale Collection: Richard R. Veale was sheriff of Contra Costa County from 1895 to 1935. He served with distinction, becoming one of the best-known and respected peace officers in California. An entire room in the History Center houses this Collection.
 - Special Collections: A catchall grouping of highly varied documents from the 19th and 20th centuries.
- Interested? Contact info is at the top of this page.

From the Executive Director:



We're back, we're open, and we're making plans for the future!

I am happy to report that the History Center has returned to its pre-pandemic regular scheduled hours of Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., as well as the first and third Saturdays of every month between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Please stop by and say "hi!"

The Contra Costa County Historical Society has about 500 surplus books that need to find new homes. As a result, the CCCHS plans to have a booth at the Martinez Downtown Makers Market on August 21, 2021 between 10:00 and 5:00 p.m.

Finally, the Contra Costa County Historical Landmarks Advisory Committee is looking to fill an existing vacancy. To apply, candidates must reside or work in Contra Costa County and file an initial application for appointment to the Committee with the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors. For more details, interested applicants should contact Ms. Dominique Vogelpohl at 925-655-2880 or by email at dominique.vogelpohl@dcd.cccounty.us.

From the President:

I am writing this on July 4th in New England. I didn't plan it that way, but what a way to write a message about local history!



I think I speak for the entire board when I say we are thrilled that the History Center is fully open once again. We were able to accommodate research requests on a limited basis during the pandemic, but our level of service is so much better now. Please come in and tour our archive if you have never stopped by.

We continue to search for ways to increase our storage space. Here in coastal Maine, you would likely

hear a local refer to our situation as "loaded to the gunwales" (gunnels). It's hard for us to turn material away that is valuable and needs a home, so we have to get more and more creative with our storage hardware and floor layout. County Staff are looking for surplus space that we can use, so we will have to wait and see what they come up with. But it is entirely possible that the results of their search will turn up empty. If you know of any free or low cost storage space, please give us a call and we will see if we can make it work.

Very soon you will be hearing from us about the summer appeal. This is your opportunity to lend us some special support for some of our special needs. In the past, numerous society members have, collectively, provided us significant financial support toward meeting some of our critical needs. Stay tuned!

We Are Open!

As our executive director and president have both stated, we are now **fully open**. If you are involved with a research project of any kind, be it school-related, job-related, or are investigating family history, this is the place to start your search.



We are again open three days a week, pretty much all day. If weekdays don't work for you, then please drop by on either the 1st or 3rd Saturday of the month, when we are open between 10 am and 2 pm. We are conveniently located downtown, just off Main Street, very near the court buildings. See you soon. *Editor*

