

The History of St. Helena Hospital Chapter I

William A. Pratt: The Land and its Owner

Have you ever wondered how St. Helena Hospital came to be located in this beautiful setting? This year St. Helena Hospital is celebrating its 125th Anniversary. Ellen G. White, an early Adventist Church leader who was instrumental in St. Helena Hospital's history once wrote, "We have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget how God has led us in the past." So, in honor of our hospital's past, we will be taking a look back at how the organization has grown from a small 13-bed health retreat established in the late 19th century to a 21st century state-of-the-art acute care hospital!

This is the first installment in a series of articles outlining the history of our Hospital and its founders. Originally named the Rural Health Retreat, the facility opened its doors on June 8, 1878. Later known as the St. Helena Sanitarium and the St. Helena Hospital and Health Center, the organization has been providing healthcare to the residents of the Napa Valley and surrounding counties since its inception. In fact, St. Helena Hospital has one of the longest histories of complete medical service in the State of California. It also holds the record as the oldest continuously operating Seventh-day Adventist healthcare facility in the world, providing for the medical needs of the community for the past 125 years.

If you are a history buff, hold on to your hat, because St. Helena's beginning is linked not only to the California Gold Rush and the Kellogg breakfast cereal industry; it also played an integral part in sheltering refugees from the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 and opened one of the first nursing schools on the west coast. But we are getting ahead of ourselves! Those are topics for future articles . . .

The Rural Health Retreat was built on 10 acres of land which was donated by Mr. William A. Pratt. Pratt's family immigrated to America from Normandy, France and settled in New England in the 1700s. During William's early years the Pratts lived next door to Louisa May Alcott (author of *Little Women*) and her family. After Louisa's parents died, William and his brothers often carried wood to the Alcott home.

In 1849, when William was 19 years of age, news of the gold rush in California reached the New England States. Gold fever struck William and brothers Robert and George. They, along with about 90 other young men from their community, formed a company to outfit a ship and headed for Panama. Upon reaching the east coast of the Isthmus of Panama, they discovered crossing overland to Panama City was going to be much more difficult than they had imagined. They loaded their belongings into canoes and traveled upriver about twenty miles to Gorgona. They then proceeded on foot, walking a narrow path for approximately 30 miles along side the mules they had hired to carry their luggage.

When they reached Panama City, they found about 500 Americans waiting for passage to San Francisco. They soon secured passage on a ship bound for San Francisco. In a letter written to his father, Simeon Pratt of Freeport Maine on March 16, 1849, William notes that he obtained a job of brick work on the vessel. His brother George signed on as ship's carpenter.

Once they arrived in San Francisco, they bought a mule, picks, shovels, a tent and provisions and walked to Sutter's Fort in Sacramento. From there they headed up into the hills and worked the gold fields in Hang Town, German Town, and the American River and Oroville districts. They camped along the rivers and built slough boxes to wash out the gold. The Mother Lode was good to them, and they managed to bag a fair amount of gold. In one letter home, William wrote his father that he was sending him fifteen ounces of gold with a member of their company who was returning to Maine. William asked his father take the gold and turn it into money to invest for him.

A few years later the brothers bought land west of the Sacramento River and started a ferry service. But the area was infested with cholera and plagued by floods. William sold his interests in Sacramento and traveled to Napa, where he rented a place on Dry Creek. At a little white church midway between Calistoga and St. Helena he met and later married Mary Ellen Finley.

William and his brother Robert, who had become the superintendent of the Central Pacific Railroad, purchased 3500 acres of land near St. Helena today known as the area along Pratt Street and the picturesque Pratt Valley. William built a white, two-story victorian home for his bride and when his family moved west from Maine, he built a two-story wood frame home for them at the North end of Pratt Street near the Napa River. Pratt's neighbor, A.B. Atwood, was one of the carpenters. Both Pratt and Atwood were charter members of the new Seventh-day Adventist Church in St. Helena and were later key players in the planning and construction of the Rural Health Retreat.

William Pratt made his living in the Napa Valley as a brick manufacturer. Bricks were made on the Pratt farm using soil from a small knoll of red dirt. The bricks were made by

chopping straw, mixing with dirt and water, and putting into forms to dry in the sun. Chinese laborers had been brought in by his brother Robert to help work on the railroad projects he supervised. Some of them were brought to the farm on Pratt Street in St. Helena. They lived in a small cottage and worked for William making bricks. The small red blocks were used to construct many of the shops in downtown St. Helena and were also shipped by railroad to Napa where a number of brick buildings were constructed.

William wanted to plant trees on his property, so he enlisted the help of Santa Rosa resident Luther Burbank, who came and spent a week planting apple and prune trees on Pratt's property. Perhaps some of the old walnut trees we see today growing along Pratt Street in St. Helena were planted by Burbank!

In 1874 J.N. Loughborough, the president of the California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, visited St. Helena looking for a building site for a new church. Loughborough had been involved in establishing the first Adventist healthcare facility Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan and hoped to start a similar facility in Northern California. He came across an attractive piece of property on a hillside overlooking the Napa Valley. It was blessed with a lovely spring of pure, clear water and he thought it was an ideal location for a sanitarium. The property belonged to William Pratt, who had by then retired from his bricklaying business.

However, no action was taken by Loughborough at that time to contact Pratt or begin plans to build a health facility. It would take a meeting with A.B. Atwood and a new physician in the valley, Dr. Merritt G. Kellogg, several years later, before discussion would begin in regard to establishing a healthcare facility in St. Helena. Atwood contacted his old friend, William A. Pratt, and the three of them formed an alliance that would result in the establishment of the Rural Health Retreat.

To be Continued

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