

History of the Union Hotel

Phoenix of Benicia

History of the Union Hotel *

Lidia Woytak

Days of our lives were passing by as quickly as the waves that would barely touch the beaches of the Monterey Peninsula before receding into the ocean forever. Focusing on raising our four children neither I nor my husband, Richard, noticed that passing days turned into weeks, weeks into months, months into years. All that passed time stretched into a patterned ribbon of household chores, grocery shopping, driving to school, and attending various functions. Our efforts to help our children grow and appreciate all the intricacies of this world made the passage of time only accidentally noticeable to me and my husband, Richard.

As high school graduation deadlines appeared on our 2000 calendar, our children, Lily and John, started searching for a college that would suit their interests. They searched for colleges in California and beyond. Finally California Maritime Academy of Vallejo sparked their interest and they decided to attend an Open House of the Academy. Thus on a sunny Spring Saturday we found ourselves in our sweaty navy blue 1980 Isuzu Trooper Two driving to Vallejo.

While approaching Vallejo, we noticed on Highway 780 a sign that read, "Benicia State Capital of California". Intrigued, we took a downtown exit. We parked our car and walked down the First Street towards the bay. As we walked, my husband, Richard, who taught California history at a local college, shared with us some interesting anecdotes about births of small towns in California.

For years Richard shared his knowledge of American, including California, as well as European history, not only with his family but also with hundreds of his students. They all loved his classes because he was able to turn history, typically viewed by many as a boring subject saturated with dates, into a personal experience for each one of them. One of his students remarked to me, "I used to hate taking history classes but being in Richard's class gave me a totally different feeling. He turned history into a chain of related stories, full of exciting characters, and of conflicting forces. Most important he kept us engaged in of the events of the past and their impact." His California History Classes that he taught for years in local junior colleges, in particular, was an expression of his love for California's nature, her people, and her past.

As we drove down the First Street of Benicia, we felt transcending into the 19th century. We found ourselves amidst several 19th century buildings and antic shops, boutiques, and repair shops. I glimpsed with curiosity at an old white wooden church, an old temple, and an impressive building with columns in front of it. The trees planted on spacious sidewalks of the First Street gave me a feeling of being back in an old European town.

As we drove two blocks down towards the bay, we came across a wooden white three-story building at the intersection of First and D Streets. There was a dark green canopy at the entrance to the building. A sign over it read, *The Union Hotel*.

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We have noticed beautiful stained glass windows on both sides of the entry. On one of them there was a sign that read, "Union for Ever". Through a half open door we could see our images in a fancy gilded gold mirror set against a dark background of a painted bookcase. We felt an aura of mystery emanating from the hotel. Richard, a lover of antics and old buildings, peeked with curiosity into the hotel. He confessed he always dreamed of owning a hotel one day.

We felt an external force that drew us to this hotel. What was the force that drew us to the hotel? Was it memories of gold dust suspended in the air? Was it drama of fortunes made and lost to the tunes of music? Or maybe was it the town's past built on dreams of its founders?

The Beginning of the Benicia

At the time of the first references to the hotel, Benicia was a young, only several years old pioneer town. The idea of a town on Carquinez Straights was conceived by Dr. Robert Baylor Semple (1806-1854) from Kentucky. Semple, who was a brother of an Illinois Congressman, had political and military ambitions. To fulfill his ambitions, he decided to go to California.

Eventually, in 1845, Semple, a widower, left his son behind and headed West. In Independence, Missouri, he joined the Lansford Hasting's party that was also going west. This party was the last one to reach California through the Sierra Mountains before a rough winter.

Robert Semple was easy to distinguish in a crowd. He was described as "lean, lank, and good natured." Native Americans nicknamed him "oso bueno". He was six feet eight inches tall and was wearing deerskin and a coonskin cap with a tail in front. As such he was a bud of many practical jokes.

Semple was instrumental in organizing a controversial raid of United States rebels on General Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo's "Casa Grande" estate in Sonoma. The General (1807-1890) was a Californio military commander, politician, and rancher. Vallejo believed that the United States could provide the best possibilities for the economic and industrial future of Alta California.

Thus Vallejo did not oppose this paramilitary intrusion on his estate on June 14, 1846. Following this relatively peaceful raid, Semple came to know Vallejo's family, friends and servants first hand and developed good feelings towards these native and adopted Californians. The "rebels." were graciously hosted by Vallejo's wife, Dona Francisca Benicia Corillo Vallejo.

The rebels, to document their takeover, searched for a piece of fabric at the Sonoma Mission and upon finding one, turned it into a flag. One of them painted a bear on it in the mission's court to symbolize their toughness. Afterwards they adopted a name "Bear Flag". Afterwards, their intrusion on Casa Grande became known as Bear Flag Revolution and the bear became a symbol of California.

A couple of days later, despite these good relations with the Vallejo Family, Bear Flag rebels took Vallejo a prisoner and subsequently escorted him to John C. Fremont's camp in Central Valley near Sacramento. Walking through the hills and valleys for days towards the camp, Semple and Vallejo had a chance to talk for many hours. They shared many idealistic views about the future of California. Semple was attempting

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to get Vallejo involved in the development of his future dream town. Vallejo, on the other hand, was mostly interested in securing means of education for the dream town. As a result of all these discussions, a friendship between the two visionaries, the Prisoner and the Captor, was developed.

Semple told Vallejo of his vision of setting up a town on Carquinez Straights using Vallejo's land, the future "Emporium of the Pacific". Vallejo, the owner of the 5000-acre Suscol Grant, promised to deed five acres from the grant to set up the new town for the symbolic price of one dollar for the grant. Vallejo requested that some revenues were to be set aside on a regular basis for education. Semple who also was an idealist easily accepted this provision. They both envisioned that this new town was going to be a site of the first academy for boys and girls.

Despite their big plans, both Semple and Vallejo were short on cash, they needed someone who could finance their ambitious plans. Consequently, Semple turned to his friend, Mr. Thomas Larkin, the American Counsel of Monterey and the richest merchant in California for help. He asked Larkin to participate in the founding of a new metropolis. Mr. Larkin, with his considerable merchant experience and legal knowledge, was indispensable in development of this new American city. Larkin agreed and the three of them started talking and drawing plans.

In 1847, they hired a map-maker from San Francisco, Mr. Vaspar O'Farrell, to draw the town. According to the design, the town was going to consist of streets named according to the letters of the alphabet and to the ordinal numbers. It was the first town to be incorporated under California's Constitution.

The founders originally named the town "Francesca" in honor of Vallejo's wife, Dona Francesca Benicia Carillo. They discussed this choice with Yerba Buena settlers who at the same time were changing the name of "Yerba Buena" to "San Francisco". Representatives of both towns wanted to avoid confusion due to the similarity of "Francisco" and "Francesca" names. Finally, the founders of Benicia gave up the first choice of "Francesca" to pacify Yerba Buena folks and chose the third name of Vallejo's wife, "Benicia". Shortly thereafter, Benicia appeared on the map.

Robert Semple not only created and founded Benicia but also was one of the main organizers of the First Constitutional Convention of California in Monterey and eventually became its President in 1849. He published information pertaining to the constitution in *The Californian*, the first California newspaper. Semple was editing and publishing *The Californian* along with Rev. Colton of Monterey on an old press. Both Semple and Colton had previous publishing experience. Prior to their arrival in Monterey, Colton published the *American Spectator* and *Washington City Chronicle* in Washington, DC, while Semple learned printing trade with the *Western Argus* in Frankfort, Kentucky.

Despite this avoidance of struggle on the part of Benicia, San Francisco folks continually strove for dominance in the area. According to Mr. Storer's report of 19 January 1857 in a stampless letter to Honorable James W. Denver, they were trying to gain exclusive port rights on the Pacific Coast and thus to eliminate Benicia from competition. Storer informed Denver that *San Francisco Herald* recommended abolishing "all points of entry except San Francisco."

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Illustration 1. The etching “View of Benicia from the West.”

The earliest settlers of Benicia William Tustin and William Russell, built small adobes or frame houses: Tustin built the first adobe , Russell, the second. Subsequently, most of the buildings were erected along the First Street and below H Street. Due to scarcity of wood, some houses were built of prefabricated frames. Robert Semple complained that if Benicia had more lumber, more houses would be built. Nevertheless by 1850 Benicia had already approximately 100 houses.

In the early fifties, the Honorable Council to Mexico, Thomas Larkin (1802-1852), actively participated in the development of Benicia. In 1850 Larkin signed a contract for a development of two story- buildings for \$10,000 each, an enormous amount of money for the times. Due to his legal background many real estate inquiries were directed to him. Several developers contacted him regarding building hotels in Benicia. One of them was Thibault who wanted to purchase a lot to build a hotel.(Larkin, Letters)

It is notable that in the early 50s moving houses from one location to another was a relatively simple task because it was cheaper and faster to move one than to construct a new one in a desired location. In those days, houses were built on sandstone, not cemented to the ground, and also they had no wiring .

The town’s founders, especially Dr. Semple, tried hard to lure people to settle in this sleepy new town. They even paid the settlers for moving permanently to Benicia. Some less than honest settlers took the money for settling down and a few years later left the town. Others, however, who truly intended to settle in Benicia complained that the prices on lots were set too high.

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Sleepiness of Benicia was interrupted by three factors that came into play almost simultaneously. They were: the discovery of gold in the nearby mountains in 1848, the establishment of the first military post on the West Coast also in 1848, followed by selection of Benicia as Capitol of California in 1853-1854.

It is noteworthy that the news of gold discovery spread out in Benicia first. Namely, in May 1848, a newcomer, a Mr. Charles Bennett, sitting in Von Pfister store located at First and C Streets over a pitcher of beer pulled out a piece of gold from his pocket that he discovered in the mountains.

Following the news of discovery of gold hundreds of people, mostly men headed for California. Ferries transported them from Port Costa and Martinez to Benicia. Thus Benicia became an important junction point for many newcomers. There they looked for a place to sleep and eat. They also looked for places that would offer supplies needed for "diggings." The locals responded by building more homes and businesses.

The next wave of development came in 1848 when Benicia, thanks to diplomatic efforts of Dr. Semple, was chosen for a military post. Due to his belief that Benicia had no match on the West Coast, Semple recommended his dream town for a military post to a representative from the War Department. Subsequently, the latter selected Benicia for the post in favor of Yerba Buena. This decision created an instant demand for carpenters and other skilled workers. Subsequently, many people found jobs constructing barracks and officers' quarters, and the new Benicia Arsenal. One of them was a Carpenter William Bennett, the future owner of the Union Hotel

Finally in 1853, Benicia became the capital of California. Selecting Benicia as the Capital of California further improved local economy and brought more people, mostly politicians and legislators, into California.

Regardless whether these newcomers were the gold seekers, the politicians, or the carpenters -- they all needed room, board, and supplies. Consequently, many businesses popped up overnight during early fifties to meet their needs. Thus, Benicia changed from a sleepy pioneer town into a boomtown that had to house and feed hundreds of people arriving daily.

In summary, Benicia became a stopover for gold seekers on their way into the mountains and for visiting politicians working on legislature at the Capital State Building, as well as a destination point for military personnel employed at Benicia Barracks and the Arsenal.

Visiting politicians arriving in Benicia, the new Capitol of California, were most vocal in demanding quality accommodations. These were the same politicians who a couple of months earlier rejected Vallejo as a California Capital due to its poor accommodations. In response, Benicians built additional accommodations. Thus the small town of Benicia became a town of numerous hotels.

Hotels in Benicia

Early visitors to Benicia had to search for a haystack or the floors of a friendly saloon for a cover for the night. One of such friendly places was a 25 by 40 feet adobe built in 1846 by Benjamin McDonald. This

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centrally located adobe along the First Street in an alley of the C Bloc was a third house built in Benicia. It functioned as a general store and a gathering place by day and a hotel by night. It was owned by Captain Edward H. von Pfister.

The first hotel in Solano County, the *California House*, was completed in December of 1847. This two-story adobe was located on West H Street near First Street. The hotel was owned and operated by Major Cooper. Immediately following completion of the hotel, the first wedding in California took place there. Dr. Semple, a widower, was marrying Miss Frances Cooper, the daughter of Major Cooper. The Major sold the Hotel in 1855 to John Reuger. The latter, following the sale, turned it into brewery. The building burn down in 1945 during remodeling.

Apart from *California House*, many other hotels existed in Benicia in early 1850s. The local newspapers such as **California Gazette**, **Sentinel**, **Daily Alta**, **Solano Herald**, **New Era** advertized *The American Hotel*, *Vallejo House*, *The City Hotel*, *Williard*, *Saint Charles Hotel*, the *Solano House*, and the *Bella Union Hotel*. Through these advertisements, the hotels boasted their services that offered, in addition to lodging and accommodations, stables and stage-coach rides from the wharf to nearby cities of Napa, Suisun, and Vacaville. The advertisements also emphasized their close location to the steamboat landing. According to the advertisements, *The Willard's Hotel* was the closest one to the steamboat landing of all local hotels. *The American House*, up the street from *Willard's*, was also close to the landing.

The American Hotel was owned by C.M. Davis and it was also operated occasionally by E. von Pfister. Mr. Davis advertised amenities of the *American House* in the **California Gazette** as follows, "This house is built in the most modern style, with plastered walls throughout and everything adapted for the comfort of the travelers or pleasure parties. A carriage is always in attendance, upon arrival of the boats to carry people to and from free. Napa, Sonoma, and Suisun Stages start from this house every morning. Connected with the house is a 'livery Stable' furnished with all kinds of vehicles and good saddle horses, with large and roomy stable for staling stock." Many politicians stayed at the American Hotel during the 1853-1854 meetings of the legislature.

Another hotel close to the steamboat landing was the *City Hotel* at First and B Streets. J.C. Pitcher advertised it in the **California Gazette** in 1851. It is noteworthy that the *City Hotel* was moved up the First Street in the early 20th century. It was chopped up in half to facilitate the move and placed right next to the *Union Hotel*. Today it is called the *Golden Horse Shoe Hotel* and functions as an antique store. It was operated for years by Marge and Jack R. Mccoun and now by their son, Jack McCoun, Jr.

Other hotels appearing in **California Gazette** in 1851 were *Saint Charles* and the *Bella Union* Hotels. Both were located at First and C Streets. Up the street from these two hotels, was another gold rush hotel, the *Vallejo House*. *The House* was also frequently advertised in the **California Gazette** in 1851. It was operated by Storer and Goodyear. Storer was in correspondence with Honorable James W. Denver of Washington, DC. Woytak Family has donated in 2014 Storer's stamp-less letter to Denver dated January 25, 1856, to the Historical Museum of Benicia.

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Today the *Washington House* stands at D and First Streets opposite the *Union Hotel*. Its name has been changed a number of times. It appeared on the insurance map as the *Fairview Hotel* in 1886, the *Revere Hotel* in 1891 and, finally, as the *Washington House* in 1897. Over the decades, the building had been used as a hotel, restaurant, and speakeasy.

The *Solano House*, built in 1851, was another prominent hotel located on West E and First Street. It was built in the early fifties. This elegant hotel offered free of charge a four-mile stage rides to and from the hotel to the guests. The stage was operated by Mizner and Nurse who dropped off and picked up guests.

According to newspaper accounts, the *Solano House* was a preferred hotel of the establishment of the day. Its guest list, available at the Archives of the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, included General U.S. Grant and General William T. Sherman. The *Solano House* existed for almost hundred years. Unfortunately, it was struck by fire in 1945 during remodeling of the hotel.

Another elegant hotel operating on First Street during the Gold Rush Era was damaged by Fire in 1856. Following the fire, the building was purchased by Fischer Family, then moved up the street next door to the Capitol Building, and turned into a residence. Today it functions as Fischer-Hanlon Museum.

Due to the tremendous need for accommodations many residences were turned into boarding houses. They became known as *Sawyer House*, *Mrs. E.H. Frisbee Boarding House*, *Gate's Select Boarding House*, and *Bengel House*. These boarding houses were advertised in the local newspapers as well. They all offered room and board to renters and travelers. Mrs. Frisbee described her boarding house in 1853 in the following manner: "The subscriber having fitted up her house in the most comfortable manner is prepared to accommodate travelers and regular boarders with well furnished rooms on liberal terms. Her table will be supplied with the best market can afford. Napa, Sonoma, and Suisun stages start from this house every morning" (*California Gazette*)

The *Bengel House*, managed by Luke Bond, was located opposite Mrs. *Frisbee's Boarding House* and the *American Hotel*. In the same vane as many other boarding houses, in addition to room and board, these establishments offered a variety of merchandise for sale. Thus the *Bengel House* offered "the best in liquors and cigars".

Sawyer House, owned by V.H. von Pfister, was also near the steamboat landing. Pfister advertised its "outstanding liquors" available at the House.

Lodging was also offered by M. Burkart's establishment at First and D. In addition to lodging, it also functioned as a restaurant, and a bakery. Mr. Burkart, a confectioner from Germany, was famous for his cakes, including wedding cakes, and ice cream.

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Many generations of Benicians have been fascinated by the mysterious past of the Union Hotel. Robert Bruegman, an architectural expert on Benicia noted in his book, "the Union Hotel is the oldest, largest,

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and least documented building of Benicia.” An old time Benician, Peggy Martin, Member of the Benicia Historical Society, researched and documented the records of the Union Hotel. **Note**

One day during the celebration of Historical Days of Benicia, I met Peggy Martin in front of the hotel. She handed me her documentation listing the owners and the managers of the Union Hotel and the land on which it stands. In addition to the names, Martin also documented the transfers of the property. According to Peggy Martin, Robert Semple originally held the title to the site on which the *Union Hotel* stands today. In 1847 Semple sold the title to the site to Admiral C.W. Wooster. Subsequently in 1849-1850, Wooster sold the title to the property to Charles W. Heyden who, in turn, sold it in 1851 to J. W. Sandborn.

Originally, the *Union Hotel* was built in early 1850s downtown at First and C Streets, the hub of all commercial and entertainment activities. Over the years, the hotel has been referred to as the *Bella Union Hotel*, *The Old Union*, *The Newport Hotel*, and the *Union Hotel*. “Union” as well as “Bella Union” were very popular names of hotels. It was an expression of patriotic feelings in the struggle of upholding the Union in the middle of the 19th century. *The Bella Union Hotel* existed not only in Benicia, but also in Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

This two-story hotel with a 50-foot frontage was constructed of redwood. Typically for the period, it had a sidewalk canopy on East and West sides and a corner entry. As such the Hotel appears in an 1856 pen-and-ink drawing of the First Street looking North.



Illustration 2. The 1856 Pen-and-ink drawing of the *First Street Looking North* by Bernice Herger

The Bella Union Hotel was famous for its Saloon run by Maria Montague for many years. The Saloon offered girls, music, and drinks to customers who could pay for it. Its customers frequently observed pokes of gold shoved across the bar.

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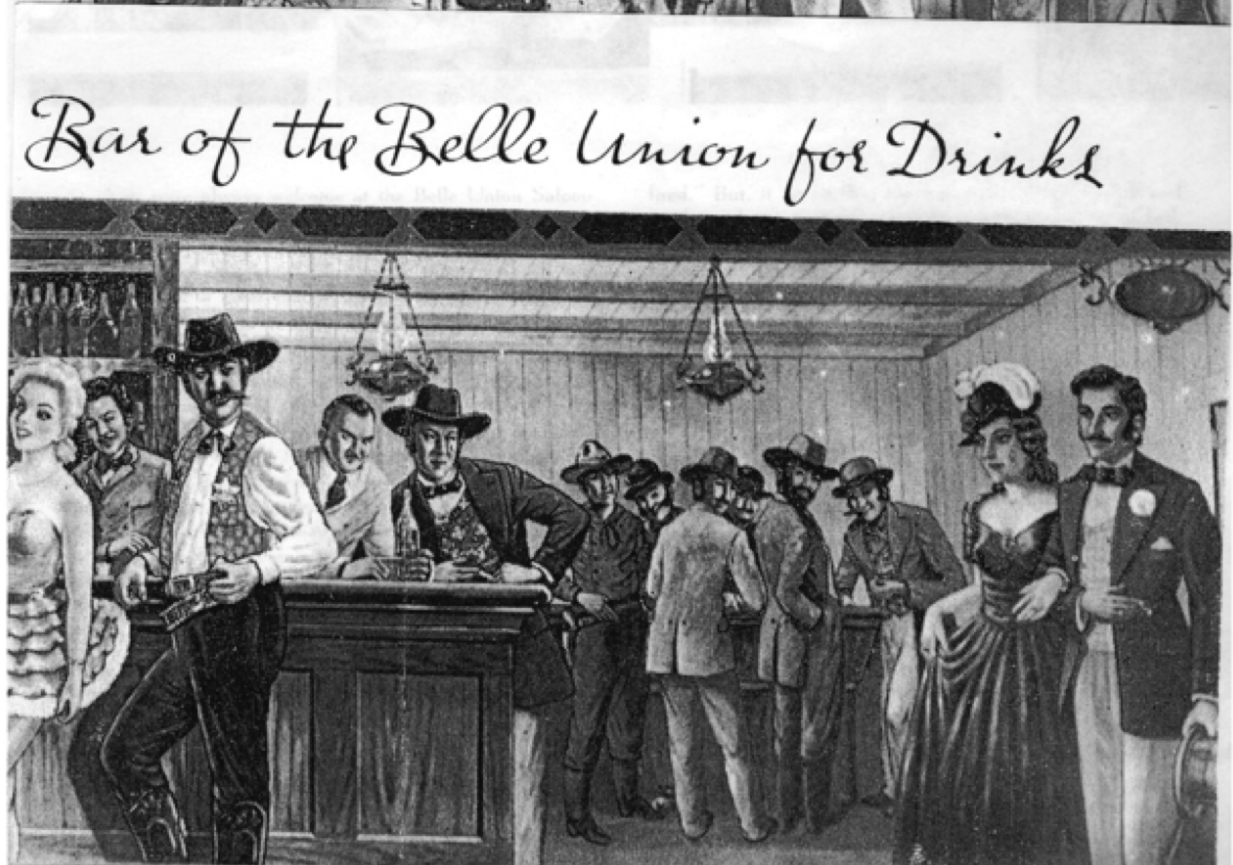


Illustration 3. Drawings The Bella Union Saloon of the 1850s. From *The Old Timers' Fiesta*, September

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20-22, 1946.

There were many stories circulating about drama at the Bella Union Saloon. An author for the “Old Timers’ Firsts” of September 20,21, 22, 1946, writes about “a miner who worked for years in the hills out East way and came to town loaded with gold dust. He got drunk and spread his money around. Then, one of the girls, whose job it was to take the money in for the house, took a liking to the miner. She resented the others trying to take his money and finally both of them found themselves on the street.

“Well, Sir,” the old timers tell us, “next day, next day mind you, the two of them appears at the judge’s office and says, “We’re agoin’ to get married and we think this is the right place.” And they did get married—right there and then—and did gun me if they didn’t live together until they both died about ten or fifteen years back. Raised a right smart family too. Nope, they didn’t stay in Benicia—moved away from here that very night and no one heard tell of them until a drummer came through here about fifteen years later and told about seeing “em up north.”

During the 1850s, there have been numerous references to the hotel in **California Gazette**. One of the frequent guests at the Union Hotel was Governor John Bigler who, according to one of his descendants, used to stay there during his governorship in California which commenced in 1852. As evidenced by the advertisements, the *Bella Union Hotel* was in the hub of all commercial activities. According to the 1851 add, the *Bella Union Hotel* was located right next door to the *Jewelry Store of William B. Nurse*. The fact that Mr. Nurse advertised his Jewelry Store “right next to the *Bella Union Hotel*” implies that the hotel played a significant role in Benicia. Mr. Asa Bradley, the City and County Surveyor of 1851, also advertised the location of his business as follows, “right next door east of the *Bella Union Hotel*.”

Further up, at the corner of First and D Streets, customers could buy beef, pork, lard, hams, hides tallow, game, and vegetables in a butcher shop operated by D.N. Hastings at First and D Streets. Mr. Hastings was operating his business in the early 1850s. Subsequently, in 1852 he was removed by Marshall for unpaid taxes. Mr. Hastings returned back to his business in November of 1855. It is noteworthy that his business prospered greatly. In addition to providing processed meat for Benicians ,, he processed meat from San Francisco for its inhabitants. During that time most of the meat was transported for processing from San Francisco to Benicia.

In the middle of the First and D blocs one could buy ice cream and order cakes in a bakery from Max Burkhardt, a confectioner from Germany. He also offered lodging and restaurant in his building. Lodging accommodations were also offered nearby by Asa Porter. In a nearby shop, stoves and tin ware were available from L.D. Sanborn in his shop as well as his services in copper, tin, and sheet metal. One could buy fresh bread, cakes and pies in the nearby *United States Bakery* owned by John McKenna.

Needless to point out that politicians who stayed in Benicia needed government offices. Thus State Controller’s Office appeared at First and D Streets. Also the Telegraph and Post Office Building and photo gallery were in a building owned by J. W. Hatch Company.

In the latter part of the fifties, the following businesses were situated along the First and D Streets: “The Cheap Store” in the brick building of Solomon Armarak, A. Mathiel Boot Making Store in the W.N.

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Building, *Restaurant and Bar* in Max Burkhardt's brick building, Dwelling and Bar-Room of Mrs. Asa Porter,

An economic slowdown came upon Benicia following the move of the capital to Sacramento and the end of the gold rush. In 1867 a big fire engulfed and partially destroyed many buildings between C, D and E blocs on First Street. For a detailed description see Michael Hayes article "A city in flames." (Hayes)

Hastings

Following the fire, in 1868, D.N. Hastings, the same merchant who in the 1850's operated the butcher's shop at the corner of First and D Streets, purchased the property at that location from J.W. Sandborn. Hastings intended to move a two-story commercial building to the site of First and D Streets. Subsequently to this purchase, the Union Hotel appears at this site in the 1876 map drawn by West. In 1877 Hastings sold the hotel to William F. Bennett.

Life at that time for the locals and their hotel guests was hard. According to **San Francisco Alta** of April 9, 1977, "Pavements are yet to be made, but when, no one knows. The sidewalks consist of a twelve-inch board, and pedestrians must follow the leader or sink in the mud, which must be of unfathomable depths during a wet Winter."

Bennett

William Bennett, was born in Birmingham, England, in 1822. As a 14-year old boy he immigrated to Australia and subsequently worked as a carpenter in Sydney from 1829 till August 1849. The same year, he sailed to San Francisco arriving shortly afterwards in Benicia. Mr. Bennett worked as a carpenter in Benicia Arsenal and Barracks on and off from 1849 till 1874. The same year, he travelled to Europe to marry Mary Ann Boornes, a native of Scotland. Shortly afterwards, he left for Australia. Three years later he returned to Benicia and became naturalized in Solano County in 1882.

Mr. Bennett worked on renovation of the hotel between 1880 and 1881. He extended the fronting of the hotel from 50 to 75 feet. The bar, parlor, and restaurant remained on the ground floor. He added a third floor. He constructed 10 rooms and one bathroom on each floor. During that period, the Hotel was the only three-story structure in Benicia.

Bennett officially reopened the hotel in 1882 and named it *The Newport House*. **The New Era** announced the opening of the *Newport House* at First and D Streets. The hotel offered "fine furnished rooms, board, and lodging" at \$5 per room. Under his ownership, the value of the property increased from \$500 to \$1500. By comparison, the *Solano House* was valued at \$1200 and the *Vallejo House* at \$500.

William Bennett passed on in 1882 leaving the hotel to his wife, Mary Ann Bennett. In 1890, Mary Ann Bennett sold the hotel to John Ryan.

At the turn of the century, the *Union Hotel* changed several times owners and operators. John Ryan, who purchased the hotel from Mary Ann Bennett in 1882, owned the hotel till 1887. During the years of 1882-1888, Sullivan operated the hotel.

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Illustration 4. Photograph of the Union Hotel in 1898

Subsequently, from 1888 to 1903, Christianson and Silva operated the hotel. During that time they reverted the name of the hotel to the old name of “The Union Hotel”. They were offering, “fine furnished rooms, board and lodging” for \$5 per room. You can see the image of the hotel published by Benicia Herald. It portrays a three-story building with a sidewalk canopy on east and south sides. Next to it was the Old Town Club, a man’s bar.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the hotel changed several times owners and operators. During that period, the area suffered from small pox. In August 1907, 40 guests from the Union Hotel had to be quarantined there.

Two businesses, the *Pravo’s Restaurant and Fred Sternberg Bar*. were added to the *Union Hotel* See the *1914 Photograph of the Union Hotel* published by **Benicia Herald** i

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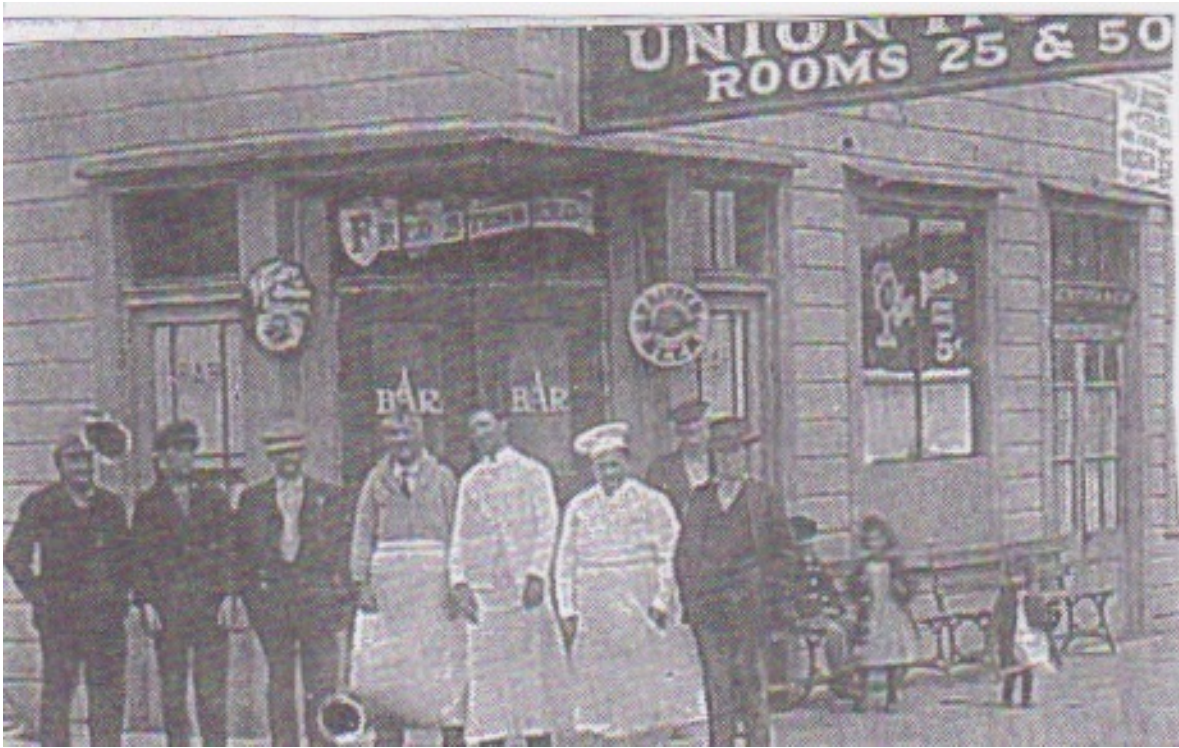


Illustration 5. Photograph of The Union Hotel in 1914

Afterwards, in 1920s the hotel as well as the entire town of Benicia, again fell on hard times. Over the years, guests at the hotel have been for years enjoying watching holiday parades including 4th of July parade. An archival photo portrays Indians in holiday outfits on horse led wagons approaching the Union Hotel. U.S. flags and portraits of politicians were a part of the décor

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Illustration 6.. Photograph of the 4th of July Parade Approaching the Union Hotel. From William McCoun Collection

After World War 2

Another economic slowdown took over Benicia after the 2nd World War. Many business owners boarded up their businesses due to a lack of clientele. During that time, Ray Arguilla owned the *Union Hotel* followed by A.W. Schwimpa. The latter sold it to Darrell Wilson in 1964.

During the 1950s, the hotel had very few legitimate guests. The going joke was that the rooms at the *Union Hotel* came already filled with an occupant. Consequently, the hotel became a place of bad repute and was closed many times by the town's police for illicit activities. Two former employees of the Union Hotel, Ms. Lynda Powers and Mrs. Zoe Varner, stated that they both were told that the hotel operated as a "house of ill repute". Mrs. Powers, whose family lived in Benicia for over 100 years, wrote that her "father was a Police Chief who closed the *Union Hotel* down repeatedly for prostitution during his *watch* of 23 years." To illustrate her point Mrs. Metz stated that, "I once took an elderly woman on a tour of the hotel. She told me that in her youth, her father forbade her to travel to Benicia because of the Union Hotel and other 'unsavory' businesses."

Even during these hard times, the *Union Hotel* attracted a number of famous personalities. One of them was the famous movie actor, Humphrey Bogart. Bogart kept his boat at Benicia wharf. He was a frequent

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guest at the *Union Hotel*. He usually stayed on the second-floor room that is called today “Seaside Daisy” and offers a full view of the Carquinez Bridge. While staying at the hotel, he also would dine and drink at the *Restaurant and Bar* situated directly below his room.

Finally, in the 1960s, the hotel ceased to operate and closed its doors for the next fifteen years. During

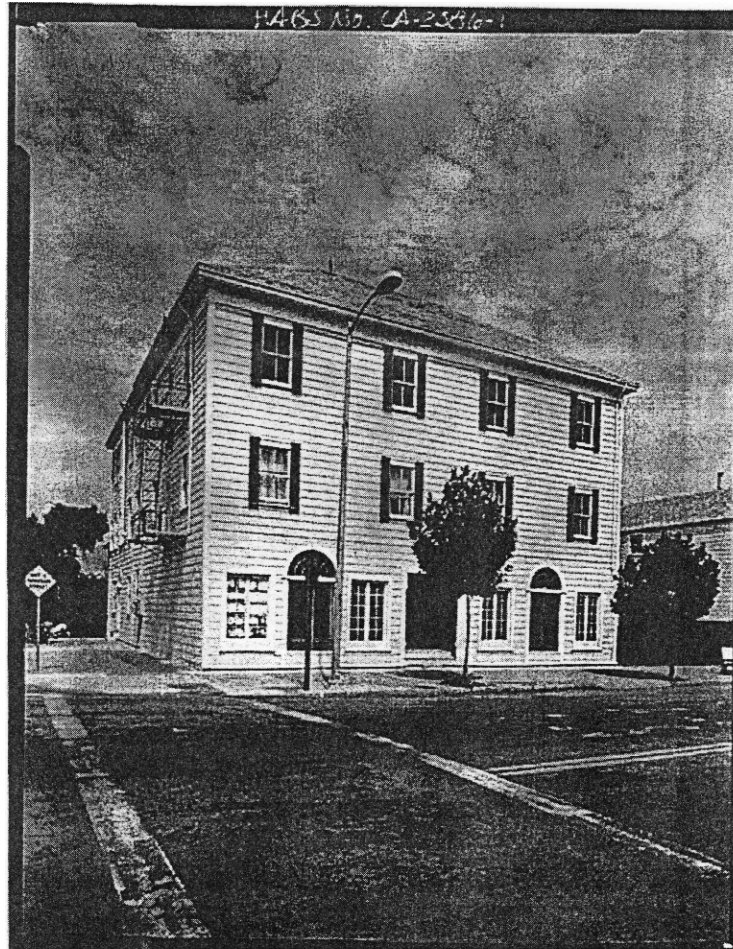


Illustration 7. The Photograph of Union Hotel in 1960s.

that time, the ground level was used for woodworking shop and a garage. To add injury to the wound, in the 1970s the hotel was condemned by the City and placed on the infamous list of buildings to be demolished. It is noteworthy that the list included St Catherine Academy and other historical buildings.

During that time, Sally Woodbridge, a noted Architect, reviewed the Union Hotel in the *Historical American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress*. The Survey provides the architectural description of the hotel online. Woodbridge noted that the hotel’s cantilever was used to support porch roof. See her photographs of the hotel from 1960s.

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Illustration 8. Cantilever of the Union Hotel

Merritts

To prevent the City from destroying the hotel, some locals got involved in attempting to save the hotel. Carlton and Alice Merritt rescued the *Union Hotel* from destruction by purchasing it in the 1970s.

Carlton Merritt, with his own hands and help of others, replaced the disintegrating 1850s sandstone foundation with a new one. He also updated the interior, constructed a new roof, and altered the facades. Merritts removed several windows, entries, and verandas on the ground floor. Except for the

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main entry and the back door, they walled off the entire ground floor. For more details see Vallejo Archives. Vallejo archives. Merritts sold the *Union Hotel* in 1980 to Steve Segal of Lucky Lanes.

Segal of Lucky Lanes

Steve Segal of Lucky Lanes purchased the Union Hotel in 1980 from the Merritts. Segal modernized the hotel. He constructed a new drainage system for the hotel. He replaced the wooden staircase with an elevator so the guests could get a lift to the second and third floors. Further he constructed the new walls featuring large bay windows in the back of the hotel.

Segal enlarged the rooms on each floor by reducing their number from 20 to 12. He removed two old bathrooms, one per 10 rooms on each floor, and replaced them with individual spacious bathrooms, one for each room.

Next he elegantly furnished the rooms with period antiques. The names for the rooms were carefully selected to evoke the nature of each one. They were "Summer Skies", "Cumberland Country", "Massachusetts Bay", "Louis Le Mad", "The Ritz", "Four Poster", and "George the III".

Along with the help of the operator of the hotel, Gerald Gunderson, Segal purchased 1886 Eastlake Bar and a six by eight stained glass for the hotel at the *10th Annual Architectural Auction* in Los Angeles. The bar, originally carved in Africa, came from the Senate Hotel in Princeton, New Jersey. The stained glass placed in the ceiling of the restaurant originated from the Elks Lodge in Dubuque, Iowa.

Further, Steve Segal commissioned six stained-glass windows at Max and Moritz Stained-Glass Studio of Oakland. The windows were designed to commemorate Benicia as a State Capital. These windows replaced the French windows on the ground floor.

Steve Segal officially opened the doors of the newly renovated *Union Hotel* on Valentine's Day of February 18, 1981. Under his ownership, the *Union Hotel* became famous not only for its elegant accommodations but also for its outstanding restaurant and bar.

During that time, the restaurant of the *Union Hotel* earned four-stars. The management offered to get any wine within 2 hours of order. The restaurant had been featured in **Gourmet**, **Bon Appetite**, and the **Motorland**. Judy Rodgers, a graduate of Chez Panine of Berkeley, became the chef of the restaurant. Rodgers designed a California Cuisine menu. She was famous for using the best and the freshest ingredients. According to the locals, many people wished they could get some scrapes from her prep table. Amore Prevot, who followed Judy Rodgers in this position, moved towards Transitional French Cuisine. The hotel developed its own recipe of Union Hotel Scones.

President Ronald Reagan, a two-term Governor of California, used to stop at the *Union Hotel* on his way from Sacramento to have a drink at the Bar. One of the former employees of the *Union Hotel* told me that one time his security assistants left their telephones at the bar and had to rush back to pick them up. Finally, after eight years of ownership, Steve Segal sold *the Union Hotel* to run a coffee shop on the East Coast.

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Steven Lipworth of Bay Area Holdings

Steven Lipworth acquired the Union Hotel in the 1980s. He put a lot of effort into promotion of the hotel. He also offered lunches and dinners at the restaurant on Wednesday through Saturday. Jazz concerts were given on Sundays. Lipworth had an office accross the street and was seen frequently running from his office to the hotel and back. Ms. Abby Helbig wrote "He concentrated on filling the rooms and having good food and entertainment."

Occasionally, he organized dinner events during which Napa winemakers would reveal techniques of winemaking. Under Lipworth's ownership, the *Union Hotel* became a social hub. Lipworth coined the concept of the hotel in the following manner: "...a special place, superb food and fine wine."

Lipworth liked to share numerous anecdotes about the hotel. One time, he said, a middle-aged couple came to the hotel and after checking in, they set on a bed and all of a sudden were pinned down by a huge armoire. Unfortunately, they remained pinned down till the next morning when one of the housekeepers discovered them frightened under the armoire. Even Herb Cahen reported anecdotes from the Union Hotel in **San Francisco Chronicle**, see his column dated January 16, 1991,

Elegant Hotels

Subsequently, Steve Lipworth sold the hotel to the "Elegant Hotels", an investment group of Indorato and Mathieson. According to **Benicia Herald**, "...the new owners have overseen an overhaul of the *Union* historic dining room, restored the lounge." They designed the rooms according to various themes and named them accordingly. Thus there was an art deco room named "1932", a glitzy 19th-century room named "Ritz".

Richard's Dream Inns

Subsequently the *Union Hotel* of Benicia was put up for sale by Union Bank in 2001. We remembered the hotel from our family trip to Benicia and Vallejo in 1997, the *Union Hotel of Benicia* wThat year we happened to look for .an investment in Solano County because two of my children were at the California Maritime Academy. We thought the hotel would be a challenging undertaking. and consequently we decided to drive to Benicia to see the hotel again.

As we slowly drove down the First Street to the hotel on a sunny Saturday morning, we picked up my son, John, at the corner of First and F Streets, who wanted to join us in our search. Together we stopped right in front of the hotel and gazed around. We noticed that the Union Hotel was surrounded by two other old hotels *The Golden Shoe Hotel* and *The Washington House Hotel*. These hotels seemed to have similar elements of design. Later I found out that they were built in the 1850s. All three hotels represented Gothic revival and, unlike many other buildings that were imported to Benicia, they were built locally. They were constructed of heavy timber redwood with horizontal siding,

We peeked inside: We saw our reflection in fancy mirror and an old black bookcase against the other wall. Both the restaurant and hotel seemed to be idle. Addy Helbig, a local realtor, invited us inside. We

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sat at the restaurant at the big round oak table. It was very stuffy. Except for the entrance there were no doors or windows that one could open. Addy, who suffered from asthma, had to step out to get some fresh air. Afterwards we all walked together through the hotel. We glanced at the rooms. It would be an understatement to say that all the rooms needed a facelift.

Despite many unknowns, I and my children decided to purchase the hotel in my husband's memory. I refinanced my home to purchase the hotel. Thus "Richard's Dream Inns" was created of which the *Union Hotel* became an integral part.

While finalizing the purchase of the hotel, I and my oldest daughter, Adele, drove one afternoon to the hotel that now was entirely empty. As we walked towards the hotel, we noticed a uniformed guard who watched the hotel for the Union Bank. He kept pacing evenly along the First Street from the corner of D Street to the alley. We walked into the hotel and selected a room on the second floor called "Victoriana" for an overnight stay. We got a strange feeling as we looked furnished with 19th-century antics and two colored photographic portraits of a man and a woman starring directly at us. A strange feeling of fear overcame us. It was not eased by some screechy sounds coming from above.

"Did you hear this noise?" I asked my daughter.

"I did. I'm scared." Replied my daughter.

"Let's call the police." Replied my daughter.

We called the police and shortly thereafter someone knockd on our door.

"Who is it?"

"It's police." Still scared, we opened up the door and let in a police woman.

"I checked the hotel from top to bottom. There's no one inside."

"So no one is wondering around. Absolutely no one," I was wondering aloud thinking not only about people but some wondering spirits.

"No need to be afraid," she explained, "These are hotel room locks, no one can enter from the outside.. Besides, you have a guard watching the hotel.

Her explanations calmed us down and we fell asleep.

We brainstormed pros and cons of different ways of renovating the hotel and listened to city's and county's concerns and requests regarding operations of the hotel. There were endless maintenance issues. We no longer had even time to think about ghosts. Their power, once overwhelming, had to give in to the power of brush, screwdriver, and nail.

My oldest daughter took off a year from college to work on renovation of the hotel along with her husband who was an experienced construction worker. We started renovation on the third floor

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redesigning every room and every bathroom. For several rooms we selected historically accurate Bradbury and Bradbury Wallpaper. We purchased 19th century wood from an old tobacco company to replace worn rugs in the hallways and rooms. We also built new wooden stairs between the second and the third floors.

Simultaneously, we remodeled several bathrooms. My oldest daughter, Adele, also renamed the rooms after the names of the local flowers. Thus today the rooms are Coast Lotus, Sea Lavender, Wild Peony, Beach Primrose, Arrowgrass, Fawn Lily Marigold, Seaside Daisy, and Lupine. Only Victoriana, due to its décor, retained the old name.

At the time of the purchase of the hotel, a contemporary extended cement entry led to the entrance door. We decided to replace this unfitting entry with the original recessed one as portrayed in the old photos. As I watched the removal of the cement, I noticed old redwood appearing from underneath. I experienced a warm feeling of connection with the past.

We noticed that the ground of the hotel was extremely stuffy. There were no doors or windows along the First Street or alley walls of the hotel on the ground floor except for the front door. The result was that the lobby was so stuffy that the realtor, Ms Helbig, was unable to sit in the lobby more than three minutes due to lack of fresh air. Benicia Firemen also considered the lack of exits in the restaurant and the lobby to be a fire trap.

To provide an air flow and thus make the hotel safer, we rehabilitated the old entries on the ground floor of the hotel. Thus we rebuilt the entry on the alley side and rehabilitated the one at the corner to the restaurant as pictured in the 1898 and 1914 photos of the hotel. During reconstruction, we discovered the old redwood beam supporting the old corner entry. As the original entry was flanked by two windows, we placed two stained glass windows, one on each side. During construction, we uncovered the original redwood beams at the top of the entry.

These new entries were welcomed by the Benicia Fire Department but were criticized by several Benicians who arrived in the Benicia in the 60s and wanted to keep the hotel the way the Merritts altered it. A controversy developed over a historical window placed in the wall. Several neighbors even signed a petition supporting our effort. Eventually the City declared that the placement of the window along the D Street wall was consistent with the Preservation Guidelines of the Secretary of State. (Preservation Guidelines)

At a great expense, we removed portable exterior stairs and built new wooden external entry to the hotel. During the construction of the stairs, we discovered the old original ones made of redwood. Additionally, we replaced most of the aluminum windows with the wooden ones, and installed a new alarm system. To make the hotel more beautiful, we commissioned three new stained glass windows on the ground floor in the lobby of the hotel. A local stained glass artist designed and built these windows with images of baskets full of flowers.

During the remodeling process, we talked to many locals. Many of them had their own family stories involving the Union Hotel. One of the electricians checking the old alarm system reminisced, "Oh, yahh,

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my grandparents spent at the Union Hotel their wedding night.” Another person called me and told me that he was in possession of a huge collection of the Civil War Art that used to hang in the Restaurant of the Union Hotel.

We reopened the hotel in 2002. We slowly were getting into the business beat, when September 11 happened. I was at the hotel lobby that morning serving breakfast. As I was refilling cups with coffee for our guests, I overheard them whispering to each other about their flight cancellations in San Francisco.

Needless to say, occupancy went down after 9/11. Trying to save the hotel, I applied to SBA for assistance. They were advertising assistance to small businesses impacted by 9/11. Following a review, the SBA denied our application because they did not believe that the Union Hotel could survive as a business.

Benicia Herald posted an article about the renovations at the Union Hotel. The writer noted that the owners welcome information about the hotel. Several people came forward and provided a testimony about the hotel.

Ghosts

The Union Hotel has always had a reputation of a haunted hotel. Sensing ghosts at the hotel has been reported by former and current employees of the hotel, some guests, and sensing experts.

Several former employees of the hotel have shared with me their own experiences at the hotel., Terese, a concierge and a manager of the Union Hotel from 1984 to 1988 told me in 2001, “During the evenings many employees would discuss the ghost that supposedly frequented the guest room we referred to as “Mrs. Miniver”. I never saw the ghost, but I was always nervous working the graveyard shift occasionally.” John, a former employee of the hotel, stated that on several occasions he heard loud noises of music and conversations coming from the restaurant downstairs. To his surprise, however, upon his check on the restaurant, he found it completely empty and quiet. Another former employee, Lillian, also experienced strange noises and vibes at the hotel. She and others also noted appearance of a tall man wearing a black suit was appearing upstairs in the evening hours.

Paulette also responded to my 2002 call for recollections of their experience at the Union Hotel. She stated that she enjoyed working at the hotel from 1982 to 1992. She and her coworker, Jeannie, frequently fell something in Victoriana, a room on the second floor facing the First Street. The room has pictures on the wall of an elderly gentleman and a woman, both dressed in Victorian attire. Additionally she said that Jeanie, herself, and other employees reported seeing a glimpse a disappearing individuals. Specifically, they noted in the corner of the restaurant appearances of a woman in a wedding dress. Next Paulette said that she and others noted a chef cook with a big white hat was persistently appearing in the mornings at the entrance to the kitchen accompanied by a waitress talking and laughing in the back of the kitchen.

Current staff of the hotel also reported haunted feelings at the hotel. The housekeeper, Marisa, said that she experienced feelings of someone else’s presence despite the fact that she felt hotel was empty.

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Additionally, the restaurant manager and owner, Gabby, also reported that he felt a haunted presence there. Numerous employees reported hearing strange noises at the hotel.

Several experts in sensing ghosts have examined the hotel. Some of them used extra sensory tools to measure their presence. They reported positive findings of intense hunting atmosphere.

First Street of Benicia has placed the Union Hotel on its Annual Halloween Walk of Haunted Houses. During the tour, the guide talks of various ghosts at the Union Hotel including that of crying Mary reappearing at the hotel at night.

In 2003, Fred Fuld of Concord, California, made a movie titled "Union Hotel in Benicia", a part of the documentary "Bay Area Ghosts". The documentary was presented at the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival. Subsequently, the documentary "Bay Area Ghosts" was screened in Los Angeles and Las Vegas Festivals. It was awarded an Honorable Mention at the Los Angeles Award Festival.

The Union Hotel for decades, if not centuries, has been a beloved destination point for many Benicians and visitors. Zoa Metz, a bartender of the Union Hotel from 1981 to 1993, wrote that the "Union Hotel was, is, and always will be Benicia's Phenix".

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Notes

1. The Woytak Family donated the stampless diplomatic letter written by Storer to the Benicia Historical Museum.
2. . History of the title to the property on which the Union Hotel stands today was compiled by a Member of the Benicia Historical Society and a neighbor of the Union Hotel, Ms. Peggy Martin. Today the Lane next to the Union Hotel bears her name The Peggy Martin Lane.