



Lafayette, California

July 2021

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

## THE HISTORY ROOM IS OPEN AGAIN!!

We are pleased to announce that the Lafayette Historical Society has opened its doors to the public again. Please stop by to say hello and find out what has happened in the past year and a half. We are open Tu Th and Sat from 10-2. Our volunteers are available to answer any questions that you might have and show you around our space. We have a loyal group who show up weekly to archive historical materials, record and transcribe oral histories, catalogue the books in our library, write articles for our newsletter, create Lafayette History displays for the library, clip and file interesting historical information from newspapers.....we also have books and photos for sale.

Here are some snapshots of our wonderful volunteers:



**Tuesdays:**  
Sande, Patrick,  
Sharon, Nancy,  
Andrew, David  
and John.



**Thursdays:** Jay



**Saturdays:**  
Laura

Thanks also to Michael who assists with our website and other tech issues!!

## MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2021

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Wayne Lawson  
Richard Silbert  
Kim Bertolero  
Joanne Hughes  
Tracey Somerville

David Ogden  
Mary Ann Hoisington  
Eric & Margaret Schreiber  
Anne & Marshall Grodin  
Linda & Richard Staaf  
Betsy Willcuts

John Kennett  
Tracy Brog  
Blake Hedlund  
Jackie Truelsen  
Nancy Holtzapple

**Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.**

## ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. If you have a **red dot** on your address label for this issue, your membership is up for renewal in the next month or two. If you have a **red L** on your address label you are a Life Member and do not pay dues so if you'd like to make a donation it would be appreciated. We have made a small increase in membership fees effective July 2021.

Student Membership is \$15

Individual Membership is \$30

Family Membership is \$60

**Additional Donations are always appreciated**

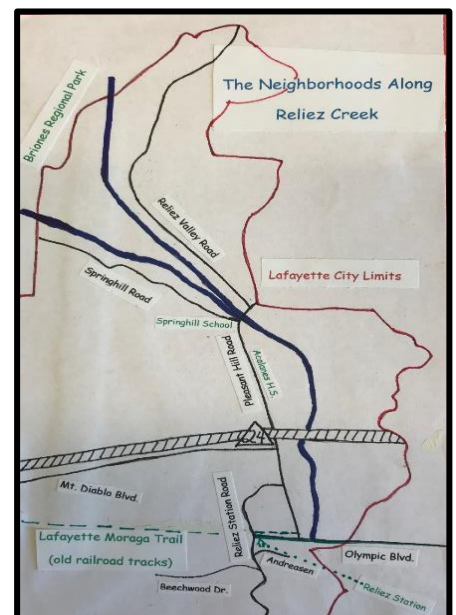
**Please send to LHS**

**PO Box 133, Lafayette CA 94549**

## ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral Histories which date from the 1970s have been stored on tapes and discs in the History Room. Many of these tapes have recently been digitized and are available for viewing on the Historical Society Website – [lafayettehistory.org](http://lafayettehistory.org). In the top row on the website you will find Archives/Oral Histories which will take you to the oral histories. Below is a list of the tapes that tell about early life in the area of Reliez Creek. The committee continues to work to make additional tapes available.

**Natale (Nat) Martino:** Nat Martino (1888-1977) gives us a sense of what daily life was like in the farm-centered rural area of the Springhill Valley. In 1919, he purchased



a farm house on today's Martino Road where he raised a family. He describes how he used farming practices he learned in Italy to create a successful fruit and vegetable farm.

**Jim Martino:** Jim Martino was the fourth child of Nat, who bought a house with 100 acres and began farming in the Springhill Valley in 1919. Jim, who helped operate the farm after finishing high school, says that his father won many prizes for his pears and other fruit. Jim also remembers that his father would leave at 3 AM in his Model T truck to get his fruit to the market in Oakland. In the 1940s, it became harder to make a living farming fruits and vegetables, so the family begun selling off their land. After returning from service in World War II, Jim worked in construction on many of the homes built on property that had formerly been part of his family's farm.

**Sherril Lecari Barber:** A primary entertainment activity in the 1940s was to take a Sunday ride into the country with a picnic lunch. Sherril and her family were living in Oakland and enjoyed their weekend rides and picnic lunches. One Sunday in 1945, they came from Oakland through the tunnel to Lafayette and visited Orchard Nursery and went on to have a picnic. Somehow they ended up on Springhill Road. It was springtime and everywhere the land was covered with wild mustard several feet high. Sherril and her brother Fred had a wonderful time playing in the field making tunnels and secret rooms. They met Nat Martino and her parents purchased property on Springhill Road. Sherril tells what it was like to grow up on Springhill Road.

## **BRIONES**

Briones Regional Park is much loved by all in our area. Almost no one knows whom it is named after, and we don't know much about her either. Yes, HER. She was one of the few single mothers to receive a land grant from the Mexican government.

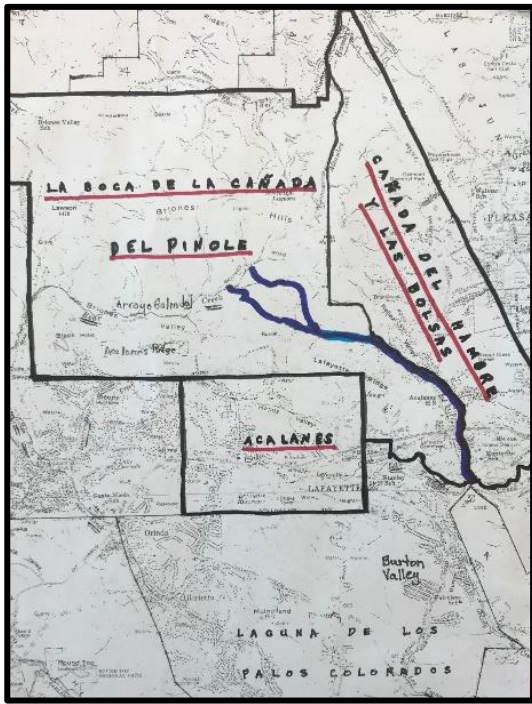
What we do know is that Maria Manuela Valencia de Briones was born somewhere in Alta California in 1796, which made her a Californio, a Spanish speaking resident of Alta California during the Spanish and Mexican era (1769-1848). As was usual, she came from a large family. One of her brothers was Candelario Valencia who had been granted the Acalanes Rancho by the Mexican government. This is the land grant that Elam Brown eventually owned and the beginning of the community of Lafayette.



Maria was 14 when she married Felipe Santiago Briones. He too was a Californio, born in Monterey in 1790. He had been part of the Mexican army at the Presidio in San Francisco. After leaving the army, he and Maria built a house in 1829 near the current Bear Creek Staging Area for Briones Park. They and their 12 children lived there for ten years before deciding to petition the Mexican government to grant them the land around them based on his military service. A year later, in 1840, Felipe was killed in a bloody dispute with native people in the area over horses.

Maria continued the request for the land in her own name. In 1842 she received the grant of Rancho La Boca de la Canada de Pinole which was 13,316 acres. The name means "Mouth of the Pinole Valley". Pinole is a native flour made sometimes from cattails.





After the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, the Californios were promised that their title to the land grants would be respected. However, Americans and others poured into the territory due to the Gold Rush and squatted on land which they believed should be public land as Mexico had lost the war. In 1851, a year after statehood, Congress was convinced to enact a law that stated that Californios must PROVE that they owned the land. This took long years and a tremendous amount of money to prove their land claims. Most were land rich but cash poor and went into debt. Unscrupulous land speculators, stubborn squatters, and mortgages they didn't understand caused the majority to eventually lose their land (for instance, the Peralta and the Moraga families lost all their land to a New York speculator due to debt).

Amazingly, Maria was able to hold on to hers. She sold some small parcels for legal expenses, but passed nearly all her land onto her heirs. Finally, in 1878, the U.S. government patented her grant.

The land that Maria sold to settle debt from her legal battle was along Reliez Creek and what is now Briones Regional Park (where Reliez Creek begins). In a public sale, Simon and Elias Blum bought the Briones Park property in 1870. They developed orchards and cultivated fruit. In 1909, The Peoples' Water Company, the precursor to East Bay MUD, bought some of the land for a watershed. In 1923, the Briones Reservoir was constructed. Briones Regional Park was opened in 1967 covering 6,117 acres.

The land around the branches of Reliez Creek that flow down from the hills was bought by Warren Brown, the son of Lafayette's founder, Elam Brown, and the first surveyor in the county. Continuing down the creek's west side, Peter Thomson, Lafayette's blacksmith for 50 years, bought a parcel. He lived in town, but he grew oats, wheat and barley on his land. The other owners of Maria's former land were land speculators – P. Merle and E.R. Carpentier.

Maria died in 1884, having successfully navigated a difficult time for Mexican land owners.

~~Laura Torkelson

## BOUNDARIES

Boundaries? Nothing was more confusing in the 1850's than boundaries. People lived on land with no clear idea of the actual owners, or the actual property lines. The boundaries of the Mexican land grants were still not settled, and what was thought to be Public Land often wasn't. Boundaries were based on natural features such as:

**“Beginning at the live oak tree forty inches in diameter and marked M.P. on Reliez Creek at the crossing of the road from Martinez...”**

**“...on the point of the hill on the west side of the valley...near a cluster of buckeye bushes...”**

**In 1872 the land was surveyed, and one of the areas that became problematic was the cemetery.**

**The first burial in the Lafayette Cemetery was Henrietta Hodges in 1854. She was 13 years old and had died of tuberculosis. The Hodges thought that the land belonged to their neighbor, Medford Gorham, and he did too....until the survey. It turned out that the lots people had bought were smaller than they had thought and that extra land they had considered theirs was not public land, but Rancho land (Briones) and they would have to pay for it. They did not want to have to pay, but by 1874 it was clear that the graveyard had fallen into the hands of a land speculator, P. Merle. 22 1/2 acres of land were lost to Medford Gorham, including the graveyard.**

**Gorham finally was able to settle a price to buy back the land - \$338.85 in gold coin. Two days later, he sold 4 1/2 acres to the newly formed cemetery district (formed to deal with this crisis) for \$100.**



**~~ Laura Torkelson**

## **CLARIFICATION**



**There is a clarification concerning the article on Housing Developments in the April 2021 Newsletter: Although Tony Lobo did a lot of work for Russ Bruzzone, it seems that the hill where the Plaza Shopping Center is today was actually taken down by Russ Bruzzone himself who purchased the equipment for the job.**

**This photo is of Mt. Diablo Blvd. in 1937 looking east with Plaza Park on the right. The hill on the left was one of the hills that was taken down to create today's shopping center.**



Lafayette Historical Society  
PO Box 133, Lafayette Ca  
94549

925-283-1848

[www.lafayettehistory.org](http://www.lafayettehistory.org)

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**2021**

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**Return Service Requested**

*Thank you to the Churchill Team for sponsoring this LHS Newsletter issue:*

Lafayette's Historical Society  
Preserves Memories

The Churchill Team Creates Memories!



Sereta and  
Randy Churchill

Combined 50+ years  
of local experience.

[Sereta@thechurchillteam.net](mailto:Sereta@thechurchillteam.net)

[Randy@thechurchillteam.net](mailto:Randy@thechurchillteam.net)



