

Casa Grande/New Almaden Quicksilver Mining Museum



Submission for the Visual San Jose Historic Photo Contest: <http://visual-sj.format.com/homepage>

Location: 21350 Almaden Road, San Jose, CA 95120

Date photograph taken: 3/28/15

Photographer: Ronald Horii

Email: rhorii@prodigy.net

Category: historic structure

Description:

This Classic Revival-style mansion in the National Historic Landmark district of New Almaden, 12 miles south of downtown San Jose, is one of the oldest buildings in Santa Clara County. It was originally constructed in 1854, commissioned by Captain Henry Wager Halleck and built by architect Francis Meyers. Captain Halleck was a veteran of the Mexican War who became a lawyer, then later the manager of the New Almaden Quicksilver Mine from 1853-1862. He left when the Civil War broke out and eventually became commanding general of the Union armies in 1862.

New Almaden was the site of the first mine in California, beginning in 1845. It eventually became the richest. More mineral wealth, over \$75 million, was pulled from the hills of New Almaden than from any gold or silver mine in the state. Its quicksilver (mercury) was vital to the recovery of gold

and silver from their ores and was an essential part of the economic boom created by the Gold Rush. Named after the famed Almaden Mines in Spain, the mines of New Almaden eventually rivaled their Spanish namesake in their output. Without the New Almaden mines, the United States would have been dependent on Europe for mercury.

Barron, Forbes and Company of Tepic, Mexico obtained ownership of the mines in 1846. Their first mine manager was Henry Halleck. He ordered construction of the 3-story brick, adobe, and wood building in 1852, which was intended to be a hotel for visitors and company dignitaries. When it was completed in 1854, it was designated the mine manager's residence and named the "Casa Grande," Spanish for "Big House." At one time, it had 27 rooms, including a basement. The building became the official residence and mine office for a succession of mine managers. The upper floor was used for living quarters for the mine manager's family. The Casa Grande also served as a country retreat for wealthy mine investors and VIPs. Notable visitors included William Sharon, D.O. Mills, William Ralston, and James Fair. One of the managers, James B. Randol, remodeled the mansion for his family and had the 6 acres of grounds around the Casa Grande landscaped with the assistance of John McLaren, designer of Golden Gate Park.

Around the turn of the century, the mines became depleted, and they were sold, along with the Casa Grande, in 1927. Mercury mining in the hills continued at a smaller level until 1976. The Casa Grande had a succession of private owners who developed it into a resort and recreational facility known as Club Almaden, modifying the building and grounds. The sign for Club Almaden, mounted on a towering redwood tree, still welcomes visitors to the Casa Grande today. A dance floor was added, which was later turned into a ballroom and afterwards into a live theater called the Opry House, which featured vaudeville acts.

In 1997, Santa Clara County purchased the building. They used it to house the Almaden Quicksilver Mining Museum, which started as a private collection by Constance Perham, who displayed it in her house in New Almaden. The new museum opened in 1998. The building underwent extensive renovation from 2009-2010 to restore it to its configuration when it was a mine manager's residence from 1854 to 1925. It reopened in January 2011. It houses interpretive exhibits and displays on the history of the New Almaden mines and on the lives of its workers and their families. It also contains 3 rooms that are furnished with antiques to depict the elegant lifestyle of a mine manager's family. The Casa Grande is open to the public 5 days a week. It is also available for school and community group tours. The grounds may be rented for private functions, like weddings and parties. For more information, see: <http://www.newalmaden.org/AQSPark/CasaGrande/PioneerDay10.html>
<http://www.sccgov.org/sites/parks/parkfinder/Pages/Almaden-Quicksilver-Mining-Museum.aspx>