

Modesto History Center Newsletter

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Modesto: 1870 Boomtown



Bob Barzan

At this point, we may never know why the Central Pacific Railroad chose the site they did for Modesto. Perhaps it was enough incentive that part of the townsite included land it correctly thought it would acquire through two federal railroad land grants (1). About October 10, 1870, the railroad's agent, the Contract and Finance Company, purchased 400 acres adjoining the land grants (2): 80 acres from Archibald Maze, 160 acres from John Atherton, and 160 acres from Solomon Albaugh. However, the map they filed with the county of the first townsite on May 3, 1871, was much smaller, about 230 acres. It covered the area from 5th to 14th streets and from F to L streets and was about half from the land grants and half from parts of the properties purchased from Maze, Atherton, and Albaugh.

If you had read newspapers from mid-October to mid-November 1870, you would have been confused about the name of the town. Some called it Ralston, some called it Modesto, some called it both. All sources agree that the town was originally named Ralston in honor of William Ralston, co-founder of the Bank of California and the man who arranged financing for the San Joaquin Valley line. All sources agree that Ralston refused the honor. Some newspapers reported the change was made to acknowledge what was thought to be Ralston's modesty. Other newspapers berated Ralston and the railroad owners, mocking their appeal to modesty in naming the town (3). Ralston had allowed Ralston, New Mexico, to be named for him earlier in 1870. There is a bigger story here waiting to be researched and told.

Confusion over the name did not delay the development of the town. Even before the line was completed to Modesto, residents of Tuolumne City and Paradise had arranged to have their houses and commercial buildings moved to the new town (4). Many hired Hiram Fisher of

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1880s photo looking from 9th toward 8th Street at I Street of Modesto's first depot constructed in 1870. The depot is to the left. It burned in August 1884. This is the only known photograph of the original depot.

Modesto History Center News – Denise Crosby

“A people without knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”

Marcus Garvey

Researching and writing about the 150-year history of our city is done to bring to life the place and our past, our cultural history. By knowing our history, we are better able to appreciate the influencers, those things that shaped today's values, rituals, practices, and prejudices. We may not be able to escape our history, but hopefully through greater awareness of past good and bad influencers we can better understand our situation today and build an inclusive tomorrow.

Like many cities, our history is told primarily through the eyes of a dominant, white community, sometimes accurately, often not. With rare exception, we have mostly ignored or excluded stories and voices of black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC). In every issue, we hope to include some of the forgotten or excluded stories of Modesto. Last issue, Bob Barzan brought to our attention the role of the Chinese men who built the railroad to Modesto.

In this issue Sharon and David Froba's article on Modesto's systemic racism is about racially restrictive covenants, the government supported segregation that was common all over the country. Historically the white American middle class was able to buy government subsidized housing and then improve its financial security through the equity in their homes. Unfortunately, people of color were deliberately excluded from these benefits and the results affect our community today. Besides supporting racism and exclusion, racially restrictive covenants were one of many influences that led to poverty for much of our community. As Sharon and David complete more of their research, we will share it with you so we can better understand our situation today and inform our decisions for a better future.

Also in this issue, Bob Barzan brings to light events from the earliest days of Modesto. Modesto came into being 150 years ago in October and November 1870. Bob has discovered a story that is richer than was previously known. And Ben Jameson-Ellsmore reminds us of a treasure in our midst that is usually overlooked, the Hall of Records. Finally, we remember the making of a world speed record.

Fun Facts About Modesto's Past

World Motorized Skateboard Speed Record

The year, 1972; the speed, 25 miles per hour. Who? Who else but Don Monaco, better known as Don from Don's Mobile Glass. Don had set speed records in cars, motorcycles, and planes. But think of it, 1972 was early skateboard times and Don was closing in on 40 years old. He set the record and then delighted all for a decade riding his skateboard in the 4th of July parade. One cool guy.



Modesto's Racial Housing History



Advertisement for a restricted district in Modesto, *Modesto News Herald*, 15 February 1928, page 4

People specifically excluded from one or more areas of Modesto between 1917 and 1968:

Negroes, Mexicans, Armenians, Asiatics, Chinese, Cubans, Filipinos, Hindus, Japanese, Malaysians, Natives of the Turkish Empire, Hawaiians

Insightful Videos:

Segregated by Design

<https://vimeo.com/328684375>

The Disturbing History of the Suburbs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETR9qrVS17g>

Sharon and Dave Froba

Beginning in 1917, Modesto real estate developers and property owners began to record racially restrictive covenants (RRCs) on deeds and subdivisions (1). A racially restrictive covenant was a clause in all the deeds of a real estate subdivision prohibiting any of the owners from selling or renting to persons who were not Caucasian. Though some covenants listed excluded groups by name, they typically read as follows: "No part of said real property shall ever be occupied by any person or persons not of the white or Caucasian race." The restriction usually ended with "...but household servants of bona fide residents upon said property shall not be deemed occupants thereof."

By 1948, fully half of the Modesto area was covered by RRCs. The subdivisions with RRCs were located in a general circle around central Modesto, but particularly in the La Loma area, and in the area roughly located between Orangeburg and Coldwell and between Tully and Sunrise. We have identified more than 90 subdivisions with RRCs in Modesto and we are finding more as we continue the research (2).

Beginning in 1934 with the establishment of the Federal Housing Administration, RRCs were required all over the country (3). They were outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1948 (4), but only because they required government enforcement. As a result, private parties, including realtors, continued to legally, and almost universally, discriminate until the enactment of the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Our reason in undertaking this research was because the effects of discrimination remain very much with us today. Studies have shown that past housing discrimination is the major cause of current White/African-American net worth disparity in the United States (5). It is important for the public and policy makers to have this information.

Continued on page 4.

Notes:

1. From 1885 to 1917, segregation in the United States was often enforced by various municipal zoning ordinances. In 1885, Modesto was the first city in United States to use a zoning ordinance to effectively segregate its Chinese residents. Though the Chinese were not mentioned by name, the ordinance mandated that laundries, nearly all Chinese owned, must be located west of the railroad tracks and south of G Street, in an area already known as Chinatown. Non-Chinese laundry owners were given an exemption. Historians see this as the first use of a city ordinance to mandate segregation. In **Buchanan v. Warley**, (245 U.S. 60, 1917), a Louisville, Kentucky, case, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ruled that such ordinances, even in light of a city's desire to promote public health, safety, and welfare, violated the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment and so are unconstitutional. After the ruling in 1917, RRCs were used to continue segregation.

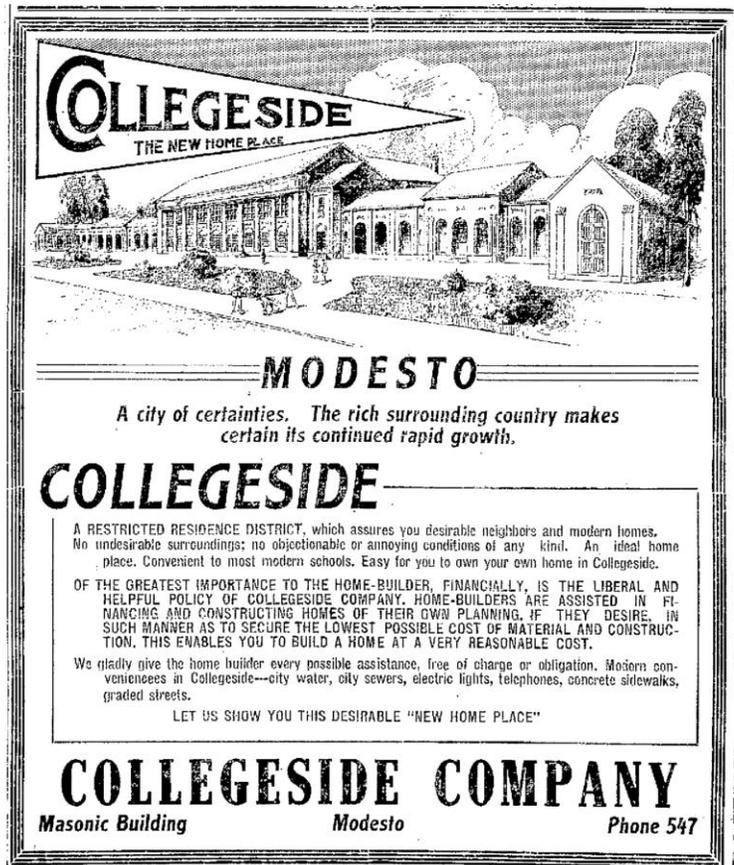
2. The data is currently being organized into an interactive website and database for public access by California State University Stanislaus Assistant Professor of Geography Dr. José Diaz-Garayúa.

3. Rothstein, Richard, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Liveright, 2017, pages 66-66, 83-84. *The Underwriting Manual of the Federal Housing Administration*, stipulated that "incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities." See also NPR,

<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>

4. **Shelley v. Kraemer**, 334 U.S. 1 (1948)

5. <https://www.epi.org/blog/housing-discrimination-underpins-the-staggering-wealth-gap-between-blacks-and-whites/>



Advertisement for a restricted district near Modesto High School, *Modesto Evening News*, 30 March 1918, page 4

Partial List of Once Segregated Modesto Neighborhoods

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alta Vista Tracts 1 & 2 | Griswold-Van Lier Tract |
| Barozzi Tract | Happy Homesites |
| Bare Tract | John Muir Park and Tract |
| Bernard Tract | La Linda |
| Brady Tracts 1 & 2 | La Loma |
| California Homes Tract | La Loma Terrace |
| Campus Tract | Las Palmas Village |
| College Avenue Tract | LeslieHugh Tract |
| College Gardens | M and G Olivewood Tract |
| College Gardens #2 | Mensingher Tracts 1, 2, & 4 |
| College Manor Tract | Paradise Homes #2 |
| Covena Park Tract #2 | Paradise Orchard Tract |
| E.C. Melrose Tract | Santa Ana Tract |
| Enslin Park | Sunrise Homes |
| Fontana Tract | Sunset Manor |
| Frazier Home Tract | Thousand Oaks |
| Garden Acres Tract | Wilson School Tracts 1, 2, & 3 |
| Garden Homes Tract | Zimmerman Tract |



Modesto Modernism poster of the Stanislaus County Hall of Records created by Jordi Camps, 2018

Stanislaus County Hall of Records

“The county hall of records from 1939, very modernist, and very progressive. It is fascinating that a city the size of Modesto embraced modernism at that time for its public buildings. It is an extraordinary building, a concrete building but the details of it show that it is not an imitative building at all. The architect really knew what he was doing to fit it to that site.” (1) --- Allen Hess, Architect, Historian

Benjamin Jameson-Ellsmore

The Hall of Records is a major and unique component of Modesto’s considerable architectural legacy. The structure was designed by Modesto’s own Russell Guerne DeLappe. DeLappe became a Modesto resident in 1898 when he was one year old. He graduated from Modesto High School and then received two degrees from UC Berkeley, his Bachelor of Arts from the College of Letters and Science in 1920 and his Master of Arts in architecture in 1923. Although his main office remained in the Bay Area, he completed numerous projects in Modesto. A few of these buildings include the 1928 Mellis Brothers grocery store at 7th and I streets, the Stanislaus County Hospital started in 1927, an office for himself and his father at 301 Downey, and several private residences which still stand in Modesto.

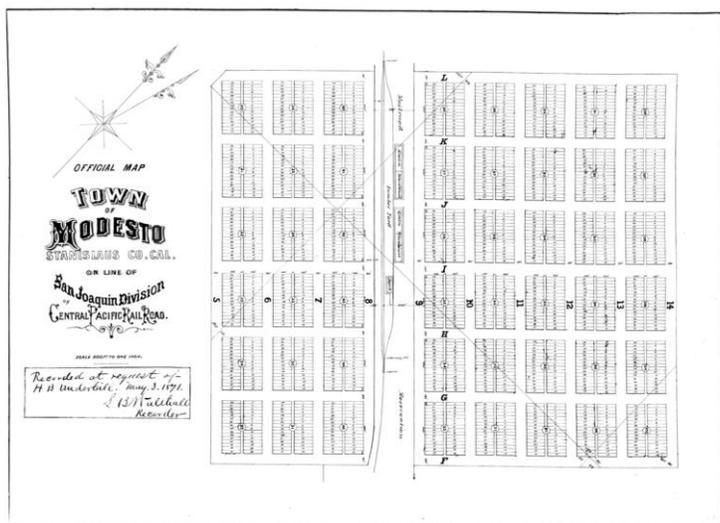
The Hall of Records is evidence of a 20-year journey of the Modernist Bauhaus architectural style from Germany in 1919 to New York in 1932 where it was repackaged as the International Style. This style, described by a geometric and utilitarian aesthetic, manifested in Modesto in 1939 in the Hall of Records. In fact, the building is acclaimed as the first ever International Style county building in California.(4) It is crucial that we understand and appreciate the historical, economic and cultural value of the building now more than ever, since most of its current functions will be replaced when the county’s new courthouse complex is built.

Local architect Barrett Lipomi describes the building as a “Mid-century Gem,” and advocates that we put it to new and creative uses similar to the neoclassical former post office directly across the street, which now houses a law office (3). Admiration for the Hall of Records extended beyond the local level as well. A piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle* asserted that “Beauty and utility were never more neatly combined.” (4) Not all historical sites should be preserved, however, the Hall of Records undoubtedly should be.

Read the entire Stanislaus County Hall of Records article at <https://modestoartmuseum.org/modesto-historic-structure-reports/>

1. *Modesto Modernism*,” Vimeo video, 13:49, posted by Modesto Art Museum, December 7, 2013. <https://vimeo.com/81278783>
2. Ray McDevitt, *Courthouses of California: An Illustrated History* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2001), 32.
3. Barrett Lipomi, “Mid Century Gem,” *The Modesto View*, August 3, 2013, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.modestoview.com/architecturereview-mid-century-gem/>.
4. K. E. Morris, “Courthouse,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 1953.

1870 Boomtown Continued



First official map of Modesto, May 3, 1871

of Stockton to do the job. (5) According to the *Tuolumne City News*, the first building, a hotel kitchen (6), made the journey on October 29. Over the next month, dozens of buildings were moved to Modesto and by mid-December the boom town had more than 75 buildings (7). Regular railroad passenger service began on November 8 (8). The *Tuolumne City News* moved to Modesto and became the *Stanislaus County Weekly News* with the first issue dated December 2, 1870.

The *Stanislaus County Weekly News* reported on December 16, "The depot buildings of the R.R. Company, now nearly completed, are larger and more commodious than any outside of San Francisco and Sacramento, which shows that a heavy business is anticipated at this place"(9). The post office was opened by December 23 (10). By the end of 1870, there were hotels, markets, saloons, stables, a restaurant, and more opened every day. Modesto was booming.

1. The Central Pacific Railroad received the land grants of the Western Pacific Railroad after it acquired the Western Pacific on June 23, 1870.
2. *Tuolumne City News*, October 14, 1870, page 2
3. "We are informed that the new railroad town near the crossing of the Tuolumne river is to be called Modesto. It is safe to assert that the Central Pacific Company, in naming the town have made the nearest approach to "modesty" of which they are capable." *Stockton Independent*, Vol. 19, Number 74, October 25, 1870. In reference to Ashmore being named for Nelson Ashmore, "Ralston declined the honor of having his name affixed to what is now Modesto. We are happy to know that Colonel Nelson Ashmore has no such weakness." *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, January 20, 1871, page 1. "The town was named in derision, but it has made the name so flippantly given famous throughout the state." *San Francisco Examiner*, April 26, 1890, page 9
4. *Sacramento Daily Union*, September 29, 1870, Volume 40, Number 6082
5. *Stockton Daily Evening Herald*, December 1, 1870 page 3
6. *Tuolumne City News*, November 4, 1870, page 2
7. Pacific Coast Brevities, *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 22, 1870, page 4
8. B. F. Tuttle, *Biennial Report of the Commissioner of Transportation for the Years Ending December 31, 1877 and 1878*, (Sacramento, State Printing, 1879), page 75. Accessed 29 July 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?id=RAZFAQAAMAJ>)
9. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, 16 December 1870, page 2
10. *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, December 23, 1870, page 2