



The Historic Porteous Log Cabin in Ross

By Scott Fletcher

Marin History Museum Volunteer

Scottish immigrants, James and Janet Porteous, were leading citizens and wealthy landowners in San Francisco in the latter half of the 19th century. Newspaper accounts of the era document scores of real estate transactions the Porteous' were involved in all over the City. On an 1880 census form, James' occupation is unabashedly listed as "Capitalist." In 1883, they became early settlers in the Ross Valley after purchasing over 1100 acres of Rancho Punta de Quentin. They named their ranch Hyppolyte (An Amazonian Queen in Greek Mythology and 'freer of horses') which extended up the mountain from today's Phoenix Lake, northwest to the Meadow Club on Bolinas Rd and eastward through the Deer Park area and up the western slope of Bald Hill. In 1887 they built a large home on the property. Tragically, James died just a few weeks later at the age of 58. Janet continued living on the Ross Valley property and managing the ranch.

Using redwood logs from the Deer Park section of her ranch, Janet had a rustic log cabin built in 1893 as a residence for her ranch foreman, Martin Grant. Though undated, this photograph probably dates from the late 1890s and most likely includes Mr. Grant and his wife. The cabin has survived to this day and is situated along the north shore of Phoenix Lake. The Porteous' large home was in the hills just above the cabin. The ranch grazed more than 100 cattle and was Janet's primary residence although she also managed dozens of real estate transactions in San Francisco until her death in 1904.

In her will, Janet left over \$100,000 to family members, friends, household servants and charities (\$3.5 million in 2020 dollars) along with multiple properties in San Francisco and

Marin. Her chosen charities were the British Benevolent Society, still in existence today, that “provides aid and relief to British citizens in need” and the Porteus Club, established by Ms. Porteous, to provide housing and companionship for young working women of the city while offering them, “literary meetings, health talks, social meetings, physical culture, choral singing, needlework classes and cooking lessons.”

After Ms. Porteous’ death, Hippolyte Ranch was sold for \$60,000 and was purchased by the Marin Water & Power Co. which built a dam in 1905 just below the log cabin to create Phoenix Lake. The land and water rights to Phoenix Lake and the Mt. Tamalpais watershed passed to the Marin Municipal Water District after its voter-approved formation in 1912. Though mostly used for recreation and fishing, Phoenix Lake water has been periodically pumped uphill to help supplement Bon Tempe reservoir in dry years. The Porteous home burned down in 1925 and for years the log cabin was used as a gathering and meeting place for local civic organizations. Though it has fallen into disrepair, MMWD is planning to renovate the log cabin when funding becomes available in order to preserve this historic structure for generations to come.

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