



HOME

ABOUT
"R" HOUSE

VIRTUAL
TOUR

FAMILY
HISTORY

CALENDAR
OF EVENTS

SCRAPBOOK

"R" HOUSE
NEWS

HISTORICAL
NOTES

"R" SHOPPE

TOURS &
RENTAL INFO

MEMBERSHIP

"R" FAVORITE
LINKS



RENGSTORFF HOUSE

STEVENS CREEK

Historic, Navigable, Misspelled



Elijah Stephens

The creek tumbles through lush canyons high above Santa Clara Valley, then meanders through Cupertino, Sunnyvale and Mountain View, where it washes the half-mile length of the eastern boundary of Henry Rengstorff's "home farm." Another half-mile it meets Rengstorff's busy landing, where little scow schooners are taking on hay and grain. From there the creek's current and the Bay's tide carry the lively, working sailboats another mile and three-quarters to San Francisco Bay. This was a typical scene along the 22-mile length of Stevens Creek during much of the time when the Rengstorff family lived on their farm.

The origin of the creek's name is not well known. In 1844 the South Carolina-born blacksmith and trapper Elijah Stephens, who had spent time as a mountain man in the Pacific Northwest, was in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where he joined ten families in a wagon train headed for California. Stephens was elected captain, and the party came to be known as the Stephens-Townsend-Murphy party. John Townsend, a physician, and Martin Murphy, Sr., heading a family group of 23, also came to have leadership roles. Two years before the ill-fated Donner Party, the Stephens expedition was the first wagon train to cross the Sierra Nevada and, though not without travail, was a dazzling success. Fifty travelers left Iowa; 52 arrived in Sacramento, there being two births along the way. (For more information on the Stephens-led trek borrow the documentary video "Forgotten Journey" from local libraries.)

In 1848 Stephens settled on Cupertino Creek and named his 160 acres "Blackberry Farm," subsequently adding another 156 acres. But in 1864 he sold all of his property to George McCauley and William McClellan, claiming, "It's gittin' jist too crowded, too durn civilized." He relocated to Kern County where he started a small ranch in what is now Bakersfield, where he died in 1883. Now a golf course, the name Blackberry Farm lives on in Cupertino. Fittingly, it is on Stevens Creek Boulevard.

Cupertino Creek was renamed Stevens Creek after Stephens, although no one today is sure how the misspelling came about. His only known photograph is shown nearby.

Martin Murphy Sr. purchased a rancho south of San Jose. Martin Jr., also a member of the Sephens party, in 1849 purchased the 4,800 acre Rancho Pastoria de las Borregas, standing astride Mountain View and Sunnyvale. During the gold rush two other sons of Martin Sr., John and Daniel, began prospecting, becoming quite successful. The Sierra foothill town of Murphys is named after them. Martin Murphy Sr. and his descendants owned vast acreage and became one of the most prominent of California's families.

John Townsend became California's first licensed physician. He was prominent in San Francisco, where he was a member of the town council. He and his wife were treating cholera patients in San Jose in 1850 when they both contracted the disease and succumbed. Townsend Street in San Francisco is named after him.

Much of the Rengstorff success emanated from the banks of Stevens Creek. With imagination you can relive some of this history as you stroll, run, skate or bike along the Stevens Creek Trail, which extends from Shoreline at Mountain View, not far from the Rengstorff House, all the way to a point near El Camino Real. Another 1.7 miles of the trail, extending to Mountain View High School, is under final review. Eventually the trail may extend to Mr. Stephens's Blackberry Farm and all the way to the creek's headwaters. Correction of the spelling has not been contemplated.

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