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Front Cover: A portrait of Mercury/Hermes, Jupiter's messenger, pictured with his winged helmet and a caduceus, a staff circled with ribbons, is repeated several times on the corridor friezes of the Library & Courts Building. See article by Dr. Mark T. Riley.

Back Cover: This neoclassical plaque that graces the south wall of the first floor corridor of the Library & Courts Building was created by San Francisco sculptor H. Winterhalder. See page 11.

Illustrations / Photos: Pages 2-5, Center for Sacramento History, Rebecca Crowther, photographer; all remaining images are from the collections of the California State Library, Vincent Beiderbecke, photographer.

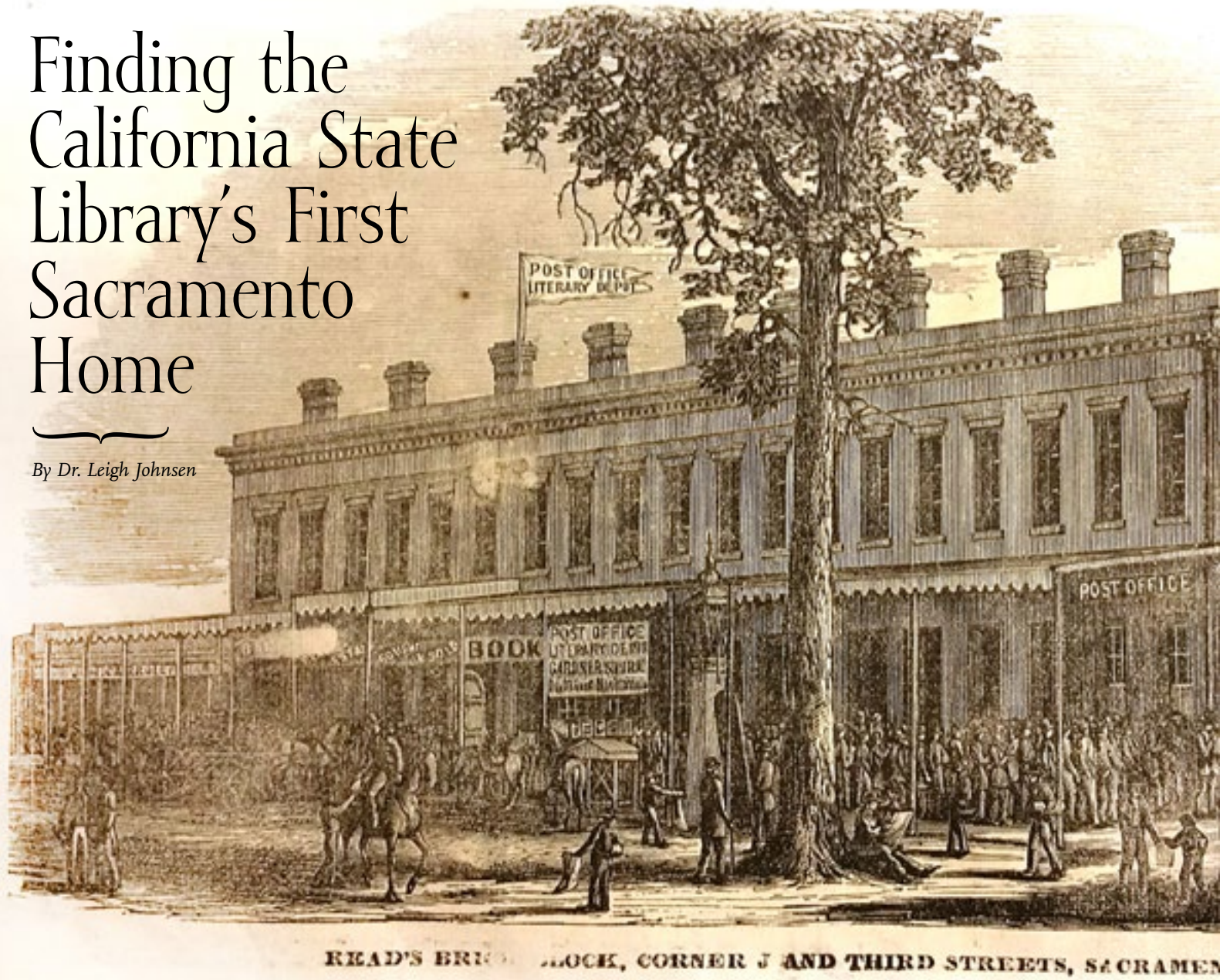
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Finding the California State Library's First Sacramento Home

By Dr. Leigh Johnsen



The California State Library has been misplaced for decades. It's not as though we can't find our way to its current locations in Sacramento or San Francisco. The problem rests with opinions of where it stood in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The building most often cited as its home between 1854, when Sacramento became California's seat of government, and November 1869, when the Library moved into the State Capitol, is the Hastings Building, which still stands at the southwest corner of J and Second Streets in Old Sacramento.¹ Other candidates have included the Overton Block, at the

corner of J and Third Streets, and a structure adjacent to the Hastings Building often called either the Hastings Annex or the Wormser Building.²

This article argues that the Hastings Building never hosted the State Library. Instead, it advances the candidacy of the so-called Wormser Building, and it envisions minor roles for the Jansen Building, another structure on J Street, and the Overton Block.

The Hastings Building, the long-favored candidate, may be the most famous structure in Old Sacramento. Its owner, Benjamin Franklin Hastings, was born in Pennsylvania around 1812 and arrived in

California in or before 1850. At that point, he had a wife twelve years younger than himself, an infant son, and apparently an older son from a previous marriage. The Sacramento City Directory for 1851 describes him as a merchant and banker.³

Hastings prospered in Sacramento. By 1853, he commanded enough capital to purchase three buildings on the southwest corner of J and Second Streets damaged or destroyed by Sacramento's disastrous fire of November 1852, but then rebuilt with bricks. One stood directly on the corner, the other two adjacent to it on the west side of Second Street. Their previous owner, Wesley Merritt, had lost them as a result of

“Read’s Brick Block, corner of J and Third Streets, Sacramento.” Located on the first floor was the Literary Depot of the Kirk Brothers, Book Sellers and Stationers. *Sacramento Pictorial Union*, July 4, 1854.



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financial hardship. Hastings bought them at auction, occupied them early in 1853, and modified them to form one structure.⁴

Hastings ran his bank out of the space on the first floor. Over time, other businesses moved into the building, among them Wells Fargo and Company.⁵ According to the *Sacramento Daily Union*, modifications started in December 1854 made space to house the California State Supreme Court.⁶

The Sacramento City Directory for 1854-55 claims that Hastings owned not only the structure that housed his bank, but also the only building adjacent to it on J Street. It describes both structures being made of brick, having two stories, and measur-

ing twenty by eighty-five feet. Hastings himself, it asserts, occupied one, whereas two brothers from Germany named Isadore and Simon Wormser ran a clothing apparel business out of the other.⁷

If the city directory was accurate, either structure could have been considered the Hastings Building. By extension, linking the State Library to either building would have placed it in the “Hastings Building.” Both possibilities, however, rest on the assumption that the directory was accurate, which it was not.

In a lithograph from 1854, two two-story brick buildings stand on the southwest corner of J and Second Streets. The one directly on the corner bears Hastings’ name, and its closest neighbor to the west that of the Wormsers. Both have the same facades now as in the past, judging from the number of doors and windows in each. Currently, frontage on J Street for the building the Wormsers rented measures twenty feet, whereas that of the Hastings Building is forty feet. These dimensions remained unchanged from 1854 to 2017.

According to early Sacramento tax records, the only parcel Hastings ever owned in this part of the city stood on the southwest corner of J and Second Streets. The segment that faced J Street bore the address of 30 J Street. Tax plats indicate that it measured forty by eighty-five feet.⁸ It did not have enough space to hold two buildings whose total measurements exceeded those dimensions. Force of logic and the weight of evidence demonstrate that Hastings owned only one building fronting on J Street at this corner and that somebody else held title to the structure the Wormsers occupied, at 28 J Street.⁹

Sacramento’s tax plats identify that owner as Jonathan Nichols. A native of Massachusetts, Nichols had set sail from Salem in December 1848 aboard the *Eliza*, the first ship to clear that port for San Francisco after the discovery of California gold.¹⁰ Charles Osmyn Brewster, a future partner of Nichols and another Bay Stater

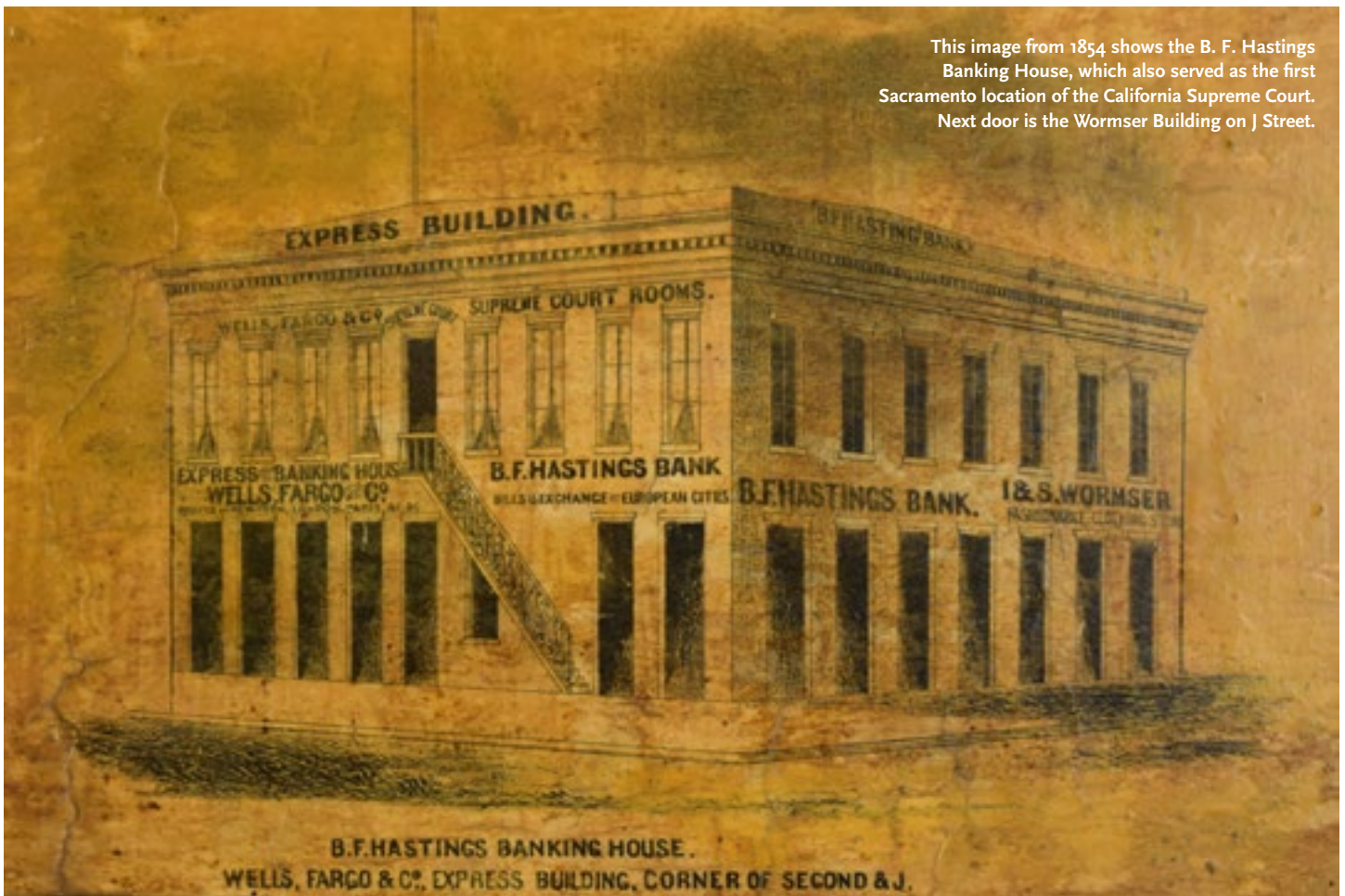


Historian Dr. Leigh Johnsen stands in front of the iron doors at the entrance to the State Library when it was located on the second floor of the Wormser Building in present-day Old Town Sacramento.

EDITOR’S NOTE

Leigh Johnsen wrote this article as a consulting historian at the Center for Sacramento History. He holds a doctorate in American history from the University of California, Riverside, and a master’s degree in library and information science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Articles of his have appeared in the Western Historical Quarterly, Civil War History, and the Journal of Church and State. In addition, he has worked for the Claremont Graduate University, the University of California, Davis, the University of the Pacific, and the San Joaquin County Historical Society and Museum. He has edited the Papers of Isaac Backus and, with John Niven, James P. McClure, and others, the Salmon P. Chase Papers. We are grateful to Dr. Johnsen for his meticulous research in locating the beginnings of the State Library in Sacramento.

This image from 1854 shows the B. F. Hastings Banking House, which also served as the first Sacramento location of the California Supreme Court. Next door is the Wormser Building on J Street.



hailing from Boston, arrived in California around the same time. At that point, both men were in their early twenties, apparently with neither wives nor children.¹¹

The trail gets colder for Nichols and Brewster shortly after their arrival in California. Nichols had already gained immortality as “a humorist of rare poetical and musical talent” and the composer of “Oh! California,” a revision of Stephen C. Foster’s popular song “O Susannah!” that mirrored the enthusiasm of California’s

forty-niners. Sometime in 1849 or 1850, Brewster and Nichols made their ways to Sacramento and gained legal title to the lot at 28 J Street.¹²

One single-story building stood on the lot at that point, and it was probably made of wood. If so, it most likely burned to the ground in 1852 due to the fire that destroyed most of Sacramento in November of that year. The building the Wormsers occupied two years later was the first brick structure known to

stand at 28 J Street. If the city directory of 1854-55 can be trusted on this issue, Nichols, who had become sole owner in 1850, had it constructed in 1853.¹³

Nichols’ building was the second to host the California State Library after it arrived in Sacramento. According to the city directory of 1854-55, it stopped first at the Overton Block, a short distance to the east of 28 J Street, on the corner of J and Third Streets. However, it stayed there only briefly.¹⁴ In November 1855, the *State Tribune* reported

The California State Library: Milestones in Early Sacramento

- 1854 FEB.** Sacramento becomes the seat of California’s government.
- MAY** The California State Library is located in the Overton Block, at the corner of J and 3rd Streets.
- 1855 JULY** The State Library moves into Jonathan Nichols’ building at 28 J Street, next to the California State Supreme Court, which occupies space in the B. F. Hastings’ Building.
- 1857 FEB.** Once again, the California State Library moves, this time with the Supreme Court, two blocks east to the Jansen Building, on the southwest corner of J and Fourth Streets.
- 1859 DEC.** The State Library and Supreme Court return to the southwest corner of J and Second Streets, two blocks to the west.
- 1869 NOV.** Finding a permanent home, the State Library settles into rooms in the recently completed California State Capitol.

its address as “the 2nd story of the Hastings’ Block,” a description vague enough to encompass a large section of the southwest corner of J and Second Streets.¹⁵

The city directory for that year seemed to offer more precision, placing the State Library in the “Hastings Buildings.”¹⁶ The editor and publisher in 1855 was Samuel Coleville, however, and accuracy was not one of his strengths, at least not in that neighborhood. Coleville had also master-minded the 1854-55 city directory, which had offered inaccurate measurements for the Hastings Building and listed the wrong owner for the so-called Wormser Building.

An article printed in the *Sacramento Daily Union* on July 12, 1855, clarified matters. According to it, the Library had landed at 28 J Street, the building Nichols owned. “The State Library...is in the process of arrangement in the second story of the brick building on J Street, adjoining Hastings’ building,” it reported. “Access to the library will only be had through the premises of the Supreme Court, a communication having been established between the respective buildings.”

According to the *Sacramento Daily Union*, the State of California paid Nichols 1,350 dollars to house the Library from April 1856 to January 1857. Up to the beginning of 1857, the Library had stayed at 28 J Street less than a year and one-half. However, in February, it moved once again, this time to its third address in Sacramento, retracing the route east on J Street, past the Overton Block, to the Jansen Building, at the southwest corner of J and Fourth Streets. The Supreme Court moved with it.¹⁷

Reality had not met expectations. Writing to the state controller, Justices Peter H. Burnett and David S. Terry complained about “want of proper accommodations” for the Supreme Court. They depicted “the room used as a State Library” as “being entirely unfit for such purposes.”¹⁸ However, complaints continued despite the move to new quarters. In 1859, the Supreme Court and the State Library



This 1854 map delineates the bustling business section of Sacramento. The darkened rectangular shapes bordering the streets indicate buildings.



The site of the California State Library (second building from the left) on J Street, in Sacramento, 1855-57 and 1859-69, as it appears in 2017. To the far left is the B. F. Hastings Building.

retraced their steps, heading back to their second location in Sacramento, at the corner of J and Second Streets.¹⁹

A change in ownership might have eased the transition. According to a deed from August 1859, Nichols took as equal partner Edward Holden Payson, who, as Nichols did at that point, resided in Essex County, Massachusetts.²⁰ Tax plats from the 1860s indicate that Payson eventually assumed full ownership with Alice M. Davis, his sister.²¹ To represent them in Sacramento, the siblings were known to

rely on William Mundy Harron, a former sea captain also from Essex County who happened to be Payson’s brother-in-law.²²

The State Library stayed at 28 J Street throughout the 1860s. Noting damage inflicted by California’s notorious flood of 1861-62, one newspaper article mistakenly placed it “in the same building with the Supreme Court,” in a statement that recalled Coleville’s in 1854.²³ However, in an entry that detailed the State Library’s location, governance, history, and holdings, the city directory for 1861-62 identi-