

On the surface the history of Benicia is one of almost unadulterated failure. The town was founded in 1846, the joint effort of a Kentucky lieutenant in the U.S. Army then engaged in divesting Mexico of its northern provinces and a defeated Mexican general who happened to have firm title to the land on which the town was to be founded. Both Robert Sample and Mariano C. Vallejo saw the main chance for a city that, being nearer the rich agricultural interior of northern California than the already burgeoning San Francisco and having a fine harbor more than its equal, would surely forge ahead and become the chief metropolis on the west coast. But adversity struck again and again.

First, Thomas Larkin, the wealthy Yankee businessman who took over Vallejo's interest in the town, lost his faith in its future even before the gold-seekers in 1849 left their hearts and monies in San Francisco. An economic recession in the mid-fifties set Benicia back still further and the town might have disappeared except for two major factors—the establishment of a federal army post in 1849 and the designation of Benicia as the permanent state capitol in 1853. The state legislature tired of the blandishments of Benicia in less than a year, but the arsenal lasted until after World War II and for a hundred years provided an economic base for the town.

Through all this Benicia had enough ups to experience several architectural highs and enough downs to see that most of these efforts were not erased by progress. The arsenal with its dependencies (including a barn for camels!) offered architectural sophistication along with fiscal stability. The Greek Revival Capitol survived a number of recyclings and today is the focus of the town. As usual, the Episcopalians asserted their high taste in a building that still challenges the imagination, and the Congrega-

tionalists, Methodists and Catholics were not far behind. Most of the architectural evidence of the educational institutions that made Benicia "The Athens of California" is gone, but a surprising number of the houses of the 1850s and 1860s remain, significant for being humble and in a number of cases pre-fabricated. The town abounds in Queen Anne cottages erected before the bust of the late 80s, and salutes the recovery in the 90s with some similar houses. It even exhibits a few bungalows of the early 20th century.

Lucky is the city that gets the attention that Bruegmann has given Benicia, for his history is not narrowly architectural. He is interested in social and economic developments such as the relationship between Benicia and its rival San Francisco. Benicia might have become the terminus of the transcontinental railroad. Bruegmann sees the failure of this scheme as the final economic blow to the town's pretensions, though he indicates earlier the disaster that followed Tom Maguire's removal of his gin palace to San Francisco.

Again, one marvels at the research that certainly must have taken more than a summer to develop. There is so much evidence that the author is able to winnow out the really interesting material, putting it in the text and reserving the technical details for the extensive notes and appendices at the rear of the book.

This is simply a very good book. Why say more, except to note that local history is usually written abominably. Bruegmann's study of Benicia, though a story of aspiration followed by disappointment, is a model of lively thinking and writing. May it inspire more such meticulous, well-written and important work.

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ROBERT BRUEGMANN, *Benicia: Portrait of an Early California Town*, San Francisco: 101 Productions, 1980, 158 pp., 151 illus. including plans and maps. \$8.95 (paper).

Benicia, California—who has heard of it? Who cares? Obviously Robert Bruegmann cares very much. His book, the result of working as a historian for the Historic American Buildings Survey in Benicia in the summer of 1976, is the ultimate in thoroughness. That there should be so much evidence of the architecture and social development of a Bay Area town that even now seems barely to have got off the ground is in itself almost incredible. That the author has poured through every last bit of it is an act of love over and above the line of dutiful scholarship.

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