



# The Novato Historian

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## FEATURE SECTION

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Preserving Novato's History

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## A Tale of Two Trumbulls Two Generations of a Marin County Family

by (the unrelated) John A. Trumbull

*The following article is based upon a more complete article which includes the source references omitted herein. This more scholarly work is available from the Novato Historical Guild at 900 Sherman Avenue, Novato, CA. 94945.*

The first Trumbull we find referenced in the Marin County records is Robert John Trumbull. [For purposes of brevity and clarity I shall hereafter refer to him as Robert J.] While Scotland has been the point of origination for most of the Presbyterian Trumbull families that emigrated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have only family tradition as evidence that this was true of this family. Robert J. was born in Londonderry, Ireland, about June 24, 1837. His parents were said to be William T. Trumbull and Rebecca Provine Trumbull, both of whom Lizzie Provine Trumbull, Robert J's eldest daughter, believed were born in Ireland.

According to family tradition, Robert J., with his mother and brothers, came to Connecticut sometime during the 1840's or 1850's, where he became involved in the bookbinding business. In late 1863 or early 1864,

he journeyed by boat to San Francisco where he became an outspoken supporter of California. He did make a trip East in 1867, probably partly to continue his courtship of Elizabeth Hamilton. His return to San Francisco is documented in a lengthy letter reproduced in full in May Rogers Ungamach's book, *Novato Township*. This letter attests to his literary fluency as well as his Presbyterian morality.

Settling in the booming city of San Francisco in 1864, young Robert J. first served as a "compositor" with the firm of William P. Harrison & Co. on Clay Street. The next year he tried his hand as a photographer, then he became a "subscription agent for books and albums" operating out of an office on Montgomery Street. It was 1873 before Langley's San Francisco Directory first connects Robert J. with the nursery business: "*Trumbull, Robert J, seedsman, 427 Sansom, and clerk with A. Roman & Co., res. San Rafael*". By 1874 Langley eliminated the connections with the book business and thereafter we find Robert J. only listed as a purveyor of seeds, bulbs and trees at various addresses in the 400 block of Sansom Street. (The tradition is that

Robert J. terminated his San Francisco outlet after it was destroyed by the Great 'Quake and fire of '06.)

Robert J's residency in San Francisco was a time of major changes other than just in his occupation. Sometime between 1867 and 1871 he persuaded Elizabeth Hamilton to marry him and live in California. In December 1871 their first child, Lizzie Provine Trumbull, was born. In December 1873 a second daughter, Huetta Jean Trumbull, arrived. (Assuming the marriage as well as the births occurred in San Francisco, there is no official documentation that survived the 1906 fire and earthquake - or perhaps a subsequent governmental housecleaning - to officially establish the dates.) Robert Hamilton Trumbull, the third child and first son, was born in Marin County on August 1, 1875. Unhappily the birth of the fourth child, Willie, on January 24, 1878, was the cause of Elizabeth's death on February 12th. She was followed in death by Willie on February 14th. This left Robert J. a widower with three children under the age of seven years operating a business with two locations (San Francisco on Sansom Street and the San Rafael location on the corner of H and Center Streets) and performing significant church related duties. He had help from Charles W. Beebe in San Francisco, but I wonder who helped with the children.

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## Two Trumbulls

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In 1873, Robert J's residence location was listed by Langley as San Rafael. (In March 1872 his residence had been 1507 Jones Street in San Francisco.) The Marin County property records show that on May 21, 1870, William J. Dickson sold Robert J. a portion of Lot 21 in the Forbes Addition of San Rafael. This property, located 205 feet west of the intersection of Forbes Avenue and H Street, was a lot with 300 feet of frontage on the west side of H Street and a 125 foot depth. This was probably where the original Trumbull Mansion was constructed with the aid of a \$1,500 mortgage from the Savings and Loan Society. (The mortgage was repaid in full by February 1874.) Family tradition holds that Robert J. never personally occupied the fine, big house he had just built because he always associated it with his first Lizzie, but the children would make good use of it during the 1890's. Between 1875 and 1887 Robert J. purchased five more parcels in that neighborhood, leading one to wonder if the Lizzie Street which appears on the Subdivision map of the Forbes Addition filed on August 5, 1882, [presently called Pine Street] might perhaps have been named in honor of Elizabeth Hamilton.

Robert J. did remarry. On February 14, 1883, he wed a lady from the Centerville area named Lizzie Brier -- his Lizzie number three. This union prompted the editor of the Marin Journal to write a lighthearted piece commenting on the appropriateness of Robert J's letting a Brier into his nursery. In the same edition (February 23, 1883) was a squib announcing that Robert J. had liquidated his nursery stock and leased out the property for a

term of years. Unfortunately, this seems to be the only mention Ms. Brier would get in the paper until notice of her death to the creditors of her estate was published on April 29, 1897.

Probably the most influential institution in Robert J's life was the Presbyterian church. He was active in the San Rafael parish; serving as first a trustee and later as an elder. He was instrumental in enticing the influential Reverend Arthur Crosby to come west to serve San Rafael. Robert J. was active in the church at the district or Benicia Synod level; he attended the United States General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church on two occasions - first in May 1878 (just three months after the death of his wife and child) and again in April 1896. He was also a founding director of the San Francisco Theological Seminary from its inception in 1871 until his retirement from its board in 1899. During this period he participated in the first move from rented rooms in the Union Square area to its own quarters on Haight Street near Market in 1877, and also the second relocation in 1898 to the larger present site it now occupies in San Anselmo. This last move was very difficult since there was competition from an influential faction that wanted the new location to be in Palo Alto. With Arthur Crosby, Robert J. led the Marin County faction. To implement the decision, Robert J. personally, over a period of three months, canvassed all the churches in the Pacific Synod, raising 50,000 (1897) dollars in contributions to fund the construction of the new facility. For the last ten years of his service on the board, Robert J. was also financial manager for the seminary. The family tradition is that the large, old trees around the seminary campus were donated by Robert J., and the same has been said of the cypress that used to line Novato

Boulevard between Diablo and Wilson until their removal during the 1980's and '90's.

On July 5, 1913, Robert J. died quite suddenly. His obituary in the Marin Journal of July 10, 1913, is indicative of the reputation he left behind: "*Mr. Trumbull has lived in San Rafael for forty-one years, and in all this time no one has attributed to him an unkind or unjust deed. In domestic, social, business and religious relations he was ever fair and true, good and sagacious. His religion was a part of his daily life and he practiced the godly precepts that he advocated.*"

*"His keen sense of humor and ready wit was a pleasure to his friends, and his clear intellect and decisive views rendered him a most interesting speaker.*"

*"Some years ago at the general convention of the Presbyterian Church in session in Philadelphia, he made what was reputed to be the ablest address delivered before that intellectual body..."*

*"Probably no layman who has lived in San Rafael has done more to bring religion into good repute; he lived as he talked and talked as he lived."*

In addition to his reputation and the trees, Robert J. was survived by his three children. Lizzie Provine [called Vine by the family] never married, and was with Robert J. until his death. She was active in the San Rafael real estate scene, dealing with the Forbes Annex properties received from her father and brother.

Huetta Jean [known to the public as Jean, but often called "Dot" by the

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## Two Trumbulls

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family] became an officer in the Benicia Synod's Y.P.S.C.E. [Young Presbyterian Society for Christian Endeavor] group, using the H Street mansion to entertain on its behalf during the 1890's. She married the Reverend Raymond Caldwell Smith on August 23, 1900, shortly after his graduation from the San Francisco Theological Seminary, and the couple soon left for India to pursue mission work there. They had five children before "Asiatic fever" killed the Rev. Ray in September 1922. Jean returned to the States, living in Berkeley with her sister as of 1950. Two of the children continued their father's work in India: Ray C. Smith Jr. (also a graduate from the San Francisco Theological seminary, known as Rev. Caldwell Smith) and his sister, Anne Strickler. Robert John Trumbull Smith (known as Trumbull Smith) became an engineer. The other two were Jean Suendermann and Barbara Prther (whose late husband was principal of the Tamalpais Union High School ).

It is the career of the third child, Robert Hamilton Trumbull [who I shall refer to as Robert H. Sr., since he is the first of four persons with this name] that this article will follow.

Born in Marin on August 24, 1875, Robert H. Sr. graduated in the first class from Mt. Tamalpais Military Academy, an institution founded due to the joint efforts of his father and his pastor, Arthur Crosby. (This school later became the San Rafael Military Academy, and is now the co-ed San Rafael Academy.) Squibs in the social column of the Marin Journal indicate that as a young man, Robert H. Sr. enjoyed an active social life in addition to serving a term

as a trustee of the San Rafael Presbyterian church. He worked for a year with a nursery firm in San Francisco, and another year with the Edward E. Potter fire insurance firm. Then in 1895 he joined Parrott & Co., commission brokers and marine insurers, an affiliation he would maintain for ten years.

On November 10, 1900, Robert H. Sr. wed Edith Morrow Brown of Petaluma in a simple, private ceremony at the Brown home on D Street. This united two venerable Marin County families. Edith's parents were John McAllen Brown and his wife, Catherine Farley Brown. (To distin-

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Novato History Museum picture

Robert H. Sr. & Edith on their wedding day, November 10, 1900.



## Two Trumbulls

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guish his name from other Browns, John often used the surname "MacBrown".) He arrived in San Francisco in 1852, worked in the city for a year, then ranched in the Sacramento valley for several years. Finally he discovered the Chileno Valley of Marin to be more to his liking, so he began a dairying operation there, and accumulated a substantial amount of real estate before his untimely violent death at the hands of squatters in 1886. Catherine was one of the Farleys who came to California by covered wagon from Kentucky during the 1850's. This family first settled in Sonoma County, farming and ranching. For a time they lived as General Vallejo's tenants in the Petaluma Adobe. They too became Marinites when they moved their headquarters to the Hicks Valley-Nicasio area. In addition to Edith, John and Catherine Brown had five other children, the most well known of whom was Robert Spear Brown. He continued the family dairy business (with a partner, Elvas Brandon) until 1919, when he sold to the Dolcini brothers and retired to a 20 acre orchard in Novato. The other children were John MacAllen Brown Jr., Marie Leavenworth, Ada Waite, Alice Julia Adams and Genevieve Beggs.

For five years following their marriage, Robert H. Sr. and Edith lived in San Francisco, where their first child, Helen Elizabeth was born on November 25, 1904. In 1905 Robert H. Sr. was hired by the Novato Land Company, a corporation, to replace Robert D. Hatch as manager of its Novato properties, which were comprised of a major portion of the old Sweetser-DeLong ranch. His

responsibilities included overseeing the operation of a dairy, a cheese factory, an apple packing plant, a vinegar processing plant, a slaughter

house, a granary, a horse training operation for the San Francisco police department, a blacksmith shop for the ranch, the hay barns and the cook and

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Novato History Museum picture

Edith with Helen and Robert H. Jr.



# Two Trumbulls

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bunk houses for the 35 regular employees and the 100 seasonal workers. He would also preside over the subdivision of the property. While the first subdivision in the valley was the one F. C. DeLong did in 1888 which encompassed the area we presently refer to as Old Town, this partition of the ranch into five subdivisions was certainly the largest one. It encompassed the area bounded on the south by Arroyo Avicchi Creek (from the Nave Shopping Center to Hill Road), on the northerly side by Novato Boulevard, on the west by Eucalyptus and Vineyard Roads, and then down McClay to Center to Tamalpais and along Hill Road to the creek again. (There were small projections into Indian Valley on both ends of this area as well. I need to point out that, although the Novato Land Co. owned more land and had designated their dairy operations as Ranches A through H (with no G), the subdivisions, named A Ranch, B Ranch, C Ranch, D Ranch and E Ranch did not coincide with the dairy ranches.)

In partial compensation for his responsibility, Robert H. Sr. and his family were installed in the 14 room (plus full basement and attic) mansion that had been built for Messieurs. Sweetser and DeLong in the 1850's. They were living there when Robert Hamilton Trumbull Jr. was born. (Edith went to Petaluma to be with her mother on July 7, 1909, so the actual birth took place in Sonoma County.) Robert H. Sr. purchased the mansion and 42 acres of surrounding property in June 1918, and lived there until his death in 1952.

The children attended grammar school in Novato, and Robert H. Jr. followed his father's scholastic footsteps through the Mt. Tamalpais Military Academy. While Helen had to go a bit afar for companionship, Robert H. Jr. enjoyed the attentions of the Chinese cook and the Chinese houseboy as well as the regular vaqueros and the many visitors to the main house. (The Ann Kent California room at the main branch of the Marin County library and the Novato History Museum both have tape recorded interviews in which Robert H. Jr. entertainingly reminisces about life on the ranch. Helen Trumbull Kimball is also on tape at the Novato History Museum. These recordings provide a depth of detail, color and humor I do not have the space to include in this article.)

By 1909 Robert H. Sr. had become an active participant in the Novato community. Just three days before the birth of his son, he served as Grand Marshall of the July 4th parade. Supervisor Guemes-cendo Pacheco was "President of the Day", and Thomas P. Boyd Esq. the orator. There was a "Portola" float with L. A. DeVoto representing the Spanish Grandee. Robert H. Sr. had eleven general committeemen to aid him, among whom were A. V. DeBorba, Lou Bugeia, W. Cain (Novato Utility Company) and Ramon Corello. The Finance Committee included the following familiar names: Frank Gness, J. H. Kuser (doctor), S. Hamilton (Grant Avenue merchant), T. F. Keating (lawyer and later state senator), A. McIntosh and J. H. Bond (editor of the weekly Banner). On the thirty man Reception Committee we find H. Rudolff (justice of the peace), Capt. Leon Harribarren (former Scow schooner captain, now innkeeper at the Novato House), A. D. Scott (Grant

Avenue merchant), A. G. Scown, E. R. Samuels (merchant and later Fifth District supervisor), F. W. Sweetser (grandson of J. B. Sweetser and later Fifth District Supervisor), S. Porcella (owner of The Fashion Shop blacksmithy), D. Grossi, Jos. Gambetti, P. Magetti and Jas. B. Burdell. Among the twenty three names appearing on the Decoration Committee there were A. Yelmorini (merchant and inn keeper), J. Pronzini, Joe DeBorba, Frank Silva and Bruno Schultz (deputy sheriff). [Those of our readers who have taken the tour we provide annually to our third graders will recognize many of these names.]

In July 1912, the County Supervisors appointed Robert H. Sr. as their representative director on the first county water board. This district was created to explore the feasibility of consolidating the 16 private water companies then serving southern and central Marin. The board consisted of 5 popularly elected directors, one appointed by the supervisors and one appointed by the mayors of the seven towns within the district. In the summer of 1915 this board proposed passage of a \$3,000,000 bond to build the Alpine dam, the Pine Mountain tunnel and the distribution mains and lines appurtenant thereto. The bond passed, and Robert H. Sr. and the board had presided over the birth of the Marin Municipal Water District.

The first year the Novato Advance was published was 1922. Its issues for that year reflect the breadth of Robert H. Sr.'s local leadership. 1) His Ayrshire cattle "*carried off the most and best prizes in the stock contests...*" at the Sonoma County fair. 2) He joined H. Rudolff, A. W. Anderson, A. Grossi, Joe Pacheco, Walter Busher,

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## Two Trumbulls

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D.V.M., and F. J. Zimmerman as a committee to investigate the feasibility of establishing a cooperative creamery in Novato. 3) He completed a term as president of the Novato fire protection organization, during which a chemical engine was added to the equipment on hand and the organization's existing deficit was erased. 4) He sold his mill and lumberyard business in Novato. 5) He was unanimously elected chair of the Marin and Sonoma Poultrymen's Association. 6) He was a shareholder

and director of the Novato Utilities Company, through which the Cain brothers were supplying water, electricity and (later) telephone services in the valley. 7) He was one of three Novato members on the committee supervising the construction of the present Community house (which was completed in 1923). The following year, in addition to completing the duties initiated as numbers 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 above, he undertook more. 8) He, John E. Lindsay and G. D. Morrison were appointed to lobby the state road commission to get the Novato-San Rafael road widened. 9) He and Wm. Hanen (the editor of the

Novato Advance) were the Chamber of Commerce delegates to a conference in Santa Rosa entitled "Bridge the Golden Gate". [This would prove to be the beginning of a major commitment in later years.] 10) He was president of the Novato Farm Center and served on its dairy committee. 11) He was president of the Marin Farm Bureau, a county wide organization. 12) His Ayrshires took 11 prizes, including "Champion and Best herd of any breed" and "Purebred bull 3 years and older" at the Valley Ford Stock Show. While Valley Ford seems rather insignificant today, in 1923, Robert H. Sr. was competing against "...animals

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Novato History Museum picture

Directors of Golden Gate Bridge and Highway Transportation District. Robert H. Trumbull, Sr., second from left in overcoat.



## Two Trumbulls

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*from leading farms of the United States,...” and “The winning of the first prize ... speaks well for Mr. Trumbull’s judgment in selecting stock of the highest standard.”*

[Novato Advance]

A Hoover Republican, Robert H. Sr. was active in party politics. In 1928, he was elected to the Marin County Central Republican Committee. In 1932, he co-chaired Robert Duke’s unsuccessful campaign to unseat Clarence Lea, the Democrat incumbent to the House of Representatives. (There is more information on these men and this race in the series of articles on “The Birth of Hamilton Army Air Field, 1929 to 1933”, available through the Novato Historical Guild.) After the defeat of Herbert Hoover, Robert H. Sr.’s activity and influence in party politics waned. This affected daughter Helen, in that she took the civil service examination for postmaster of Novato in 1933 and scored well. However since that job is a political the triumph of the Democratic slate resulted in a short career for Helen.

One should not infer that Robert H. Sr. disassociated from public service. During the 1930’s he widened his influence in

nonpartisan organizations. He and M. Freitas were the delegates from the Market Milk Producers for San Francisco who went to Washington DC for the milk industry conference in 1933. Although not an officer in the Chamber of Commerce, he joined L. R. Knutte, J. R. Thompson and S. O. Scudder as a delegate to the State Convention in Los Angeles that same year.

In 1928, the Golden Gate Bridge and Highway District was incorporated. The board of the bridge corporation was composed of a representative from each county in the district. From the outset it faced powerful and stubborn legal opposition from the Northwestern Railroad and ferry company at each step. In addition, the massive, visionary project had to be financed.

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Novato History Museum picture

Robert H. Sr. and Edith celebrating their Golden wedding anniversary in 1950



## Two Trumbulls

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As the *Journal* noted: "It is apparent that if Marin County is to have the Golden Gate Bridge it will be by reason of the people voting at an election at which a two-thirds majority must be obtained to issue the bonds which would pay for the cost of the bridge. ...it is imperative that the man who is selected as the representative of Marin County on the board of directors should be a man in whom the taxpayers upon whom this burden would fall have implicit confidence, and whose judgment they would be willing to follow when he assures them that his business experience warrants him in recommending to them the passage of the bonds because the bridge is a self-sustaining proposition and would not become a further tax burden. The man selected for the position, therefore, should be a man whose standing in the community, whose general acquaintance throughout the county and whose recognized honesty and business ability will inspire the confidence, respect and co-operation of the voters generally, but more particularly of the taxpayers of Marin County, in supporting the bridge bonds." Both the Marin County Real Estate Board and the Mill Valley Chamber of Commerce publicly endorsed Robert H. Sr., who at this time was serving both as chairman of the county Republican committee and as a director of the First National Bank of San Rafael. In December 1928, he was unanimously selected by the County Supervisors as Marin County's representative to the Golden Gate Bridge District board, and the next month that board elected him to be its vice president. For the next eight years he played a key role in the success of

the bridge project, chairing the finance committee that secured the initial funding. The conflicts and challenges surrounding approval and construction of the bridge are a fascinating part of the history of the 1930's which warrants much more detailed coverage than I can give it here. Suffice it to say, Robert H. Sr.'s crusade for the bridge is strikingly similar to Robert J's crusade for development of the San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Simultaneously with the challenge of the Golden Gate Bridge, on November 6, 1933, Robert H. Sr. was one of 30 incorporators of the North Bay Production Credit Corporation as well as one of the original directors and its first chairman; he was also chair of the loan committee. He served this organization for 10 years. Founded in the Great Depression, the N.B.P.C. Association was designed to make loans to farmers and ranchers in Marin and Sonoma counties using their crops or herds as security. It was a primary vehicle for hedging against unreliable markets and predatory lenders.

In 1946, Robert H. Sr. rose to his final challenge in the public arena. Upon the retirement of R. A. "Rube" Thompson, he filed for election to the office of Fifth District Supervisor for Marin County. Four others sought the position: Henry R. Sanborn, Jack Dias, Reno L. Grandi and Maurice Deny. Deny tried to make it a spirited race, but the election was generally without issues, heat or rancor. Trumbull, with 564 votes mainly from Novato, and Grandi, whose 386 votes tended to be from outlying areas, survived the primary election. In November, Robert H. Sr. took Grandi 946 to 753 in an election in which the major Novato issue was a sewer bond which passed by a margin of 188 to 16. Robert H. Sr. ran for reelection in 1950 against Gordon Voorhies. His campaign slogan was "I've worked for the best interests of the country. I'm running on the basis of my merits, if the voters want me, all right." He won: 1,361 to 696.

On November 4, 1950, Robert H. Sr. and Edith celebrated their golden wedding anniversary with 200 friends and business associates at Maison Marin (the building presently occupied by the Hilltop Cafe).

Daughter Helen and her husband, Walter F. Kimball, DDS. came from Walnut Creek. Son, Robert H. Jr. with his wife, Marjorie, came from Kentfield. Also present were the grandchildren (Richard S. and Edith Lynn Kimball and Robert Hamilton Trumbull III) and his sisters, Mrs. Caldwell (Huetta Jean) Smith and Lizzie Trumbull, at this time both residents of Berkeley.

On July 17, 1952, the *Independent Journal* ran the following four column headline:

### "County Mourns Death of R. H. Trumbull Sr."

It also included a two column picture. In addition to detailing the suddenness of the heart attack that felled him at age 77, the article mentioned the lumber business "... his large poultry ranch at Novato, and an insurance brokerage business which he operated at the northern Marin town until his death." The same article notes that he had served on the Golden Gate Bridge board for "...a dozen years, serving as its vice president during one period and as chairman of its key finance committee."

Robert H. Sr. was survived by his son, Robert H. Jr., his grandson, Robert H. III, and a great grandson, Robert H. IV. His wife, Edith died in Sacramento in the summer of 1956, where she was living near the Kimballs. Robert H. Jr., who worked as a real estate appraiser in the Assessor's office in Marin County, and later for a bank in Hawaii, died in Marin on August 26, 1991, at the age of 82. Robert H. III presently resides in upstate New York, and he has written a play which debuted in San Rafael in January 1997. "Questions of Mercy" is based in part on his recollections of his grandparents. Robert H. IV is also a resident of New York, and is still unmarried. ♦