

The Origin of the Name Sebastopol

by

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Signs of settlement in the early 1850s in the area that was to become Sebastopol would have been only the Millar and Walker trading post/store and the two store men's residences. Medical doctor Joseph Morgan Millar (Dr. Millar) died in January of 1875 (McClure, 2005 and 2008) and left his entire estate to John Walker. When John Walker died in mid-February of 1895 (McClure, 2008) he was one of the wealthiest and most benevolent men in the county. The Millar and Walker (M & W) store was originally near an old Native American trail to the coast which crossed the Laguna by a ford. Borba (1936) states that the original location of the M&W store was at the southern limit of Sebastopol in 1936 and was where the Shaw station is. From its original location, the store was subsequently moved to the eastern boundary of Walker hill and when the bridge built on the road to Santa Rosa, the old store was moved again to the bank corner of Main Street in Sebastopol. (The Walker hill site is now occupied by the hospital on Palm Avenue. A concrete bridge crossed the Laguna and was built on the road to Santa Rosa in the summer of 1921.)

John Walker was the Bodega postmaster in the M & W store. At the time, the Bodega post office received mail for all of northern coastal California mail patrons to the Oregon boarder. The Bodega post office was moved out of the M & W store Bodega and was combined in the west with the Smith Ranch post office at the corners of the Smith Ranch (*Petaluma Journal and Argus*, January 23, 1868). Sebastopol was now officially recognized by the federal government, was unique in its name, and John Daugherty was

appointed to be its first postmaster. (The Sebastopol in Napa county and its post office became Yountville, leaving three Sebastopols in northern California according to the Petaluma paper. Gudde, [1996] says that there were Sebastopols in Tulare, Sacramento and Nevada counties, but the towns no longer exist and while the Petaluma article says that only the Sebastopol in Sacramento county did not have a post office, the other Sebastopols also probably did not have post offices.)

While working as a clerk in the M & W store, Joseph Henry P. Morris homesteaded land for Pine Grove about one mile north of the store. John Daugherty was his first customer, and purchased enough land from Morris for a store on what was to become Main Street in Sebastopol. (It is erroneous to assume that there were major clusters of pines, hence the apt name of Pine Grove, since Douglas firs, a native tree in the Sebastopol area, are commonly called pines.)

There is no doubt that the village of Pine Grove was renamed Sebastopol during the Crimean War (October 1853 to its end in a peace treaty at the beginning of April in 1856). In November 1855, ads in the Petaluma paper for the Empire Line of stages from Petaluma to Bodega, stopped in Pine Grove. But by the end of May in the following year the stage line had changed ownership. The ad for the new owner says that Bodega stage now stopped in Sebastopol. Further mention of a local Pine Grove was not found anywhere. Pine Grove was renamed Sebastopol in the about seven month period between November 1855 and the end of May of 1856.

Local newspapers at the time of the Crimean War did not openly support the Russians or the siege of Russia's Sebastopol. However, the Petaluma Journal (September 15, 1855) published a letter written about a visit with General Vallejo outside of Sonoma in mid-May of 1855. The writer of this letter noted that the general had strongly opposed the encroachment of the Russians in the county and was of the opinion that if it was not for the actions of Vallejo protecting the land from the "greedy clutches of the Czar" "Americans would likely be like England and France wasting blood and treasure in a protracted siege of Fort Ross, the Sebastopol in America." (The Russian name for Fort Ross was Stawianski.)

News that the flags of France (a tricolor) and England (the cross of Saint George) flew on the navy ships of the winners at the end of the siege of Russia's Sebastopol, took nearly two months to arrive by a ship in the nearby port of San Francisco (September 8 to November 3, 1855). While the Russians had bravely defended their port of Sebastopol for nearly a year (September 25, 1854 to September 8, 1855), the "News of the Week" in Petaluma's *Sonoma County Advertiser* noted that while the Russians had exhibited great valor and nobility in defending their port, their actions were only a slight defeat for the Czar and the Russian spirit would continue. (While technically now in the Ukraine, Sevastopol remains the home port for the Russia's Baltic naval fleet and the Danube is still open international waters. Old local newspapers at the time refer to the Russian port of Sebastopol, but this paper uses Sebastopol only when referring to the village/town in Sonoma county.)

In the afternoon of the day following the news brought by ship to San Francisco that the siege of Russia's Sebastopol had ended, the city by the Bay held a picnic to celebrate the event. The picnic was described by a correspondent for the *Petaluma Journal* (December 1, 1855) and was attended by French, English and Sardinians representing the Turks.

While everybody enjoyed themselves immensely, the correspondent described the picnic at South Point as being more like "an Irish Fair." "Torn coats, black eyes and bloody noses were prominent and wine bottles, loaves of bread and fowl flew around among the combatants." "A roast chicken struck Council Dillon in the breast." The activity at the picnic occurred among the flags of the participants. The picnic event committee apologized to the guests in the San Francisco morning paper for the actions of the picnic celebrants, and the apologetic article also stated that a crowd of at least 5,000 people had carried American and Russian flags and to show their sympathy for the Russians by marching to the residence of the Russian consulate and his family in San Francisco. (The estimate of 5,000 people was a very large crowd considering that the stated crowd was about one tenth of the entire population of San Francisco at the time.) The newspaper correspondent was of the opinion that neither of the San Francisco actions at the end of the siege were in "good taste" and "only the full force of pickpockets reaped a rich harvest in watches, etc."

Many historians of the area, some old and others more recent, have written with some variation, that a local legend was the event which led to the origin of renaming Pine Grove to Sebastopol. Essentially, they all repeat the legend that Stevens and Hibbs got into a lively argument and when the crowd yelled, Fight, Hibbs took refuge in John

Dougherty's store, and since the scene was just like Russia's Sebastopol, the name of the village in Sonoma county got a new name. (Reenactment of the local origin legend is currently often part of many gatherings held in the Sebastopol area.) A very fanciful and elaborate version of the renaming story was part of the winning essay in a PG&E sponsored contest in the mid-1930s (reprinted in the *Sebastopol Times* on July 30, 1937). The author of the essay, Lucille Rood Kelly, writes about "old Jeff Stevens" and "Pete Hibbs" providing first names for the two participating men. Lucille stated that Stevens was enthusiastic about the many changes to the town coming in the future and the town should have a new upscale name like Sebastopol to provide for the additional changes coming in the next 50 years. But Hibbs expressed caution, having read the old San Francisco newspapers and was familiar with the wars in Europe. While Hibbs supported renaming the town he argued with Stevens. But both men had gathered as part of a crowd on the stoop of John Daugherty's store, and when Hibbs argued violently with Stevens, the rest of the crowd on the stoop yelled, Fight, Fight, Fight!. The remainder of Lucille's essay essentially follows the local legend of renaming Sebastopol and is a delightful bit of local history.

The first mention of the word, Sebastopol, in the Petaluma newspapers was in early April of 1860 (*Sonoma County Journal*, April 6, 1860) in which Petaluma readers could get off the stage in Sebastopol and continue with their journeys by taking the "little steamer Georgina." About three months later, Petaluma readers were invited to recreate and relax in the adequate offerings of Sebastopol (*Sonoma County Journal* August 3, 1860) As in all good newspapers, Sebastopol is mentioned in the Petaluma newspapers in subsequent

years for every drowning, untimely death, or for any news worthy event which occurred in the vicinity of Sebastopol. Especially germane to this paper was a letter to the *Petaluma and Argus* in 1865 (July 13) from Sebastopol in which the writer describes the Fourth of July activities of the community. The letter also states that Sebastopol owes its name to “Russia’s renowned Fortress.”

Having spent much time on historical research, verification and writing of this paper, the author favors the solution of the Sebastopol 1865 writer since they would have been alive at the time of the name change, but concludes that there is no clear answer to the question about the origin of the name, Sebastopol. Without question Sebastopol is one of the many Russian names we have today (the Russian River, for example,) which are remnants of the county’s Russian heritage. However, having the Russian name of Sebastopol does not prove it is the origin of the name of Sebastopol. The local legend of Hibbs taking refuge in a store does not explain the origin of the Sebastopol name since apparently they were going to change the name anyway and the siege of Russia’s Sebastopol had been followed in the news for nearly a year and the alternative name of Sebastopol for the town was in the air, so to speak. America had recently fought a civil war and relearned that American democracy relies on a one-man, one-vote system. Many newspaper articles at the time clearly express distain for undemocratic Europe and assert that if left to the people, there would have been no Crimean War and siege of Russia’s Sebastopol. So Pine Grove became Sebastopol. What better way to show a one-man, one-vote system in action.

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