

LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

The Lofts at Fort Visalia: A Perfect Historical Tribute

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One square block of land in downtown marks the spot where Visalia began. It was the town's first neighborhood. For the few families that lived there 171 years ago, it offered a new home, safety, and opportunity for new beginnings. Today, the block is again welcoming new arrivals, offering them safety and the opportunity for new beginnings. So what's the story behind this interesting encore event?

In the fall of 1852, a small wagon train led by three brothers, Osee, Warren, and Reuben Matthews, arrived on land that became Visalia. The heavily forested area, mostly unsettled, was in the heart of what had just become Tulare County. The travelers liked what they saw and set up camp. But they were apprehensive, thinking the local native people might be hostile, so they cut down Valley Oak trees and built a log stockade-type structure for protection. They also invited a local hunter named Nathaniel Vise who was camping nearby, and who had claimed much of the land in the area, to join them. The group spent nights inside the enclosure and during the day they farmed outside. When they discovered that the locals posed no threat, they abandoned the structure and the town sprang up, taking the name Visalia in honor of Vise's ancestral home in Kentucky.

Thanks to Edgar Reynolds, a member of the Matthews' party and nephew of the Matthews brothers, we know the block bounded by Oak, School, Garden, and Bridge streets is where they built their stockade—a structure that would later become known as Fort Visalia. Even though we know the block on which the fort stood, its exact location within the block has been a mystery.

When Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) bought the block from the City of Visalia, their plan was to build affordable housing. The non-profit community development organization was aware of the parcel's historic importance, and out of a strong sense of community and an appreciation for local history, the company invited Visalia Heritage, (VH), a local Visalia history non-profit organization, to serve as a historical consultant. VH recommended that prior to construction, the land be examined to attempt to locate the exact footprint of the fort. SHE agreed and hired ASM Affiliates, an archeology company, to use radar equipment to find it.

In 2021, the archaeological digs began. Several areas of interest were identified, but unfortunately, later explorations revealed no evidence of the fort's location. Several historical artifacts, however, were discovered from a later time period. After the archeological work was finished, the land was prepared for the housing project that SHE so aptly named The Lofts at Fort Visalia.

The housing development will soon be finished and SHE describes the project this way: "The Lofts at Fort Visalia is an 80-unit multifamily housing development in downtown Visalia. The project will provide safe, affordable housing with a variety of on-site amenities and supportive services. The Lofts will consist of studio units designated for artists, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units. Forty of the 80 units will be reserved as permanent supportive housing units for homeless individuals and families. These residents will have wraparound supportive services provided by the Tulare County Health and Human Services Agency.

An on-site community room/art gallery space named in honor of Peter N. Carey, former Visalia mayor and former SHE CEO, will host resident and community services programs. The Visalia Arts Consortium and My Voice Media Center will be located within the community space to provide arts programming and classes to both residents and the greater Visalia community.

Outside, an interior courtyard and barbecue area will provide meeting space for residents to gather and host small functions and events. On the corner of Oak and Bridge streets, the Fort Visalia plaza will host a log wall monument with plaques presenting the history of Visalia.

The original granite obelisk with attached brass plaque will be incorporated into the newly designed log wall monument. The original marker had been placed on the block in 1981 by both the Tulare County Historical Society and the Mt. Whitney Council of the Boy Scouts.

To further honor the historic location and Visalia's history, SHE asked VH to design and decorate the lobby area using a historic theme. As the centerpiece for the room, VH asked retired Visalia architect Michael Tellian to design and build a model or diorama of the fort. Protected with a Plexiglass cover, the to-scale miniature represents how the fort might have looked, as no photographs are known to exist. The walls of the room present a timeline using Visalia photographs to help visitors appreciate the town's long history.

In keeping with the artistic theme, The Lofts has incorporated an outside mural by muralist Eric Rodriquez on the southwest corner of the building, with plans for an additional mural from muralist Michael Vasquez in the southeast plaza area.

The Lofts project means so much to so many in the community. It offers pleasant and affordable housing, and art and gallery space for residents and the community, while acknowledging and educating residents and visitors about the historical significance of the site. Michael Kreps, President of Visalia Heritage is especially pleased with it and emphasizes that, "Visalia Heritage is proud to be part of the housing project and is thankful to Self-Help Enterprises for funding and incorporating Visalia history into so much of the project."

No one may be as excited as Tom Collishaw, President/CEO of Self-Help Enterprises. “The Lofts at Fort Visalia is the realization of a dream that SHE envisioned for this underutilized site for over a decade. It combines history, the arts, and desperately needed housing in a vital space that adds to the economic vitality and culture of downtown Visalia,” he said.

Located at 340 E. Oak Ave., The Lofts at Fort Visalia will host a grand opening on Thursday, December 7, 2023. The public is invited. An open house will begin at 4:00pm, with a brief dedication at 5:15pm followed by hosted tours of the apartments and the various amenities on site.