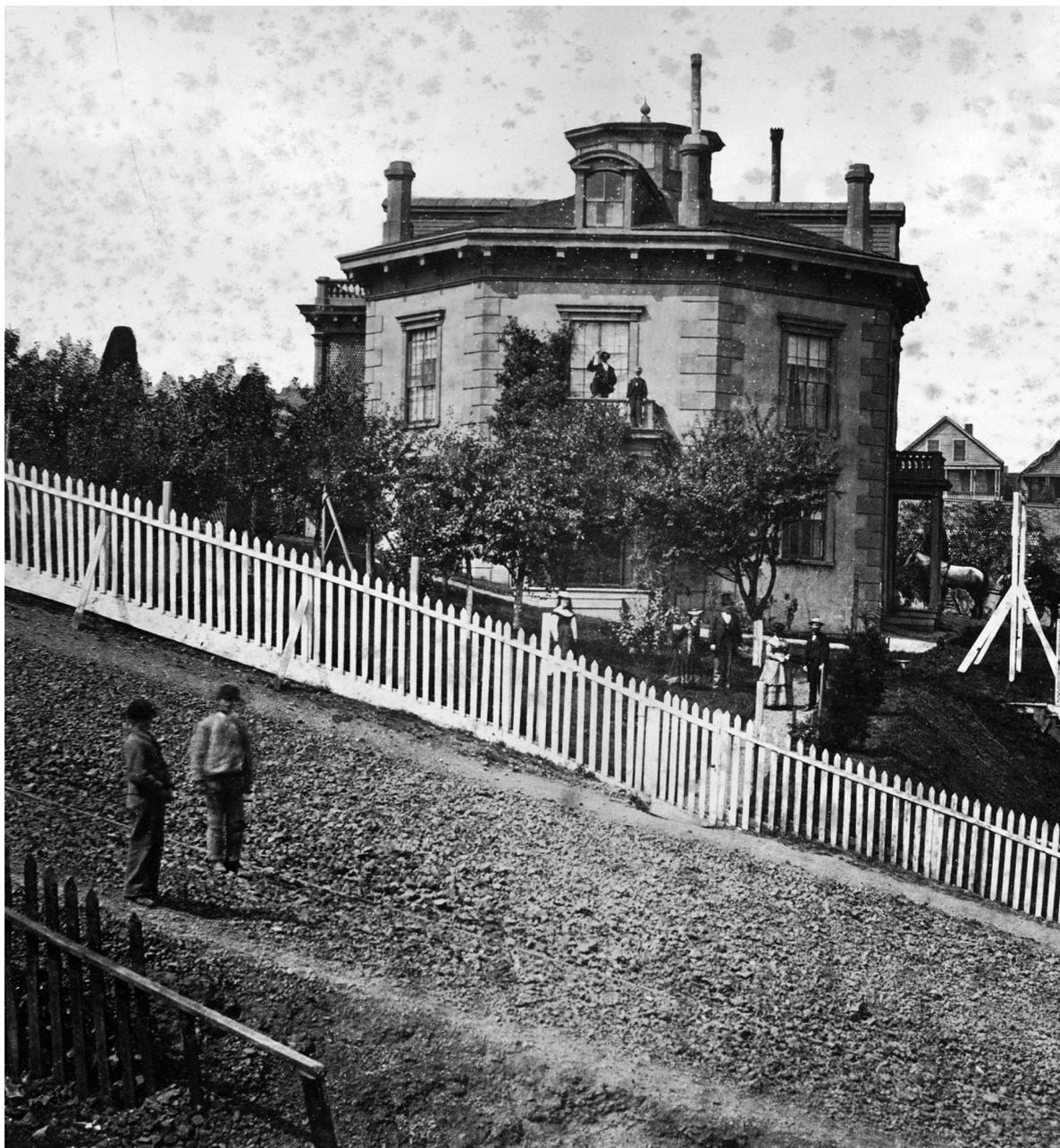


# THE ARGONAUT

JOURNAL OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# THE ARGONAUT

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*Journal of the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society*

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# CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF HISTORY AT OCTAGON HOUSE: 1861–2011

by Janis M. Horne

*This year marks the 150th anniversary of the building of the Octagon House. What better way to celebrate that anniversary than to recount the history of this San Francisco landmark?*

When The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in California<sup>1</sup> saved the Octagon House from destruction in 1952, almost nothing was known about the early history of this eight-sided wooden residence located on the corner of Gough and Union streets in San Francisco. A contemporary newspaper account speculated that the house could have been constructed anywhere between 1848 and 1864. In the absence of facts, the newspaper substituted fancy, recounting an apocryphal ghost story claiming that, “on the night of each November 24 something may be heard climbing the stairs to the second floor. At the 20th step, the something lets out a piercing shriek. This is followed by a muffled thumping, as of a body falling down the 20 steps to the first floor landing. Then there is silence.”<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY UNCOVERED

This state of ignorance did not last long, as the house’s story would soon be revealed by a surprising find. Less than one year later, in March of 1953, an electrician working on the renovation of the home discovered a “time capsule” left by its original owners, William Carroll McElroy and his wife Harriet Shober McElroy. The round tin canister (along with a cache of newspapers) had been hidden near the stairs going up to the house’s cupola. The time capsule contained newspaper clippings, an ambrotype photograph of the original family, and a letter written by William C. McElroy on July 14, 1861. The letter confirmed that the



*Newspaper photo of electrician holding the time capsule, from “Old Octagon Yields Story,” San Francisco News, March 30, 1953*



*Photo of Octagon House in the 1940s. Courtesy of Octagon House archives.*

Octagon House was built and owned by the McElroys as their “privet Residence.” With the information gleaned from the time capsule, the history of this 150-year old San Francisco treasure could finally be told.<sup>3</sup>

The story begins in the gold rush year of 1849, when a Lancaster, Pennsylvania woman named Harriet Shober joined countless other Americans in immigrating to San Francisco. Noted in her obituary as being a descendent of some of the early settlers of Lancaster, she may have spoken German as well as English.<sup>4</sup> We don’t know why Harriet immigrated or what she did when she first got to the city, although there is an unsubstantiated theory that she worked as a housekeeper at the first Hotel St. Francis on Dupont Street.<sup>5</sup>

Two years after Harriet’s arrival, a Martinsburg, Virginia miller named William C. McElroy also

immigrated to San Francisco. Circumstantial evidence suggests that he was of Irish descent. He came from the part of Virginia that would later become West Virginia. William appears to have first migrated to St. Louis, Missouri, where he is listed in the city directories as having operated flour mills in 1848 and 1850. A disastrous 1850 fire that completely destroyed over nine blocks of buildings along the St. Louis waterfront may have led to the loss of his business and resulted in his decision to move to San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> Once he arrived, William seems to have resumed his occupation as a miller. In 1856, he was listed in Colville’s city directory as the proprietor of Eureka Mills on Francisco Street. That very same year, Eureka Mills was advertised in the *Daily Alta California* newspaper as producing “guaranteed superfine” flour.<sup>7</sup>



*Ambrotype photograph of McElroy family from time capsule. Courtesy of Octagon House archives.*

William and Harriet presumably met in San Francisco sometime in the 1850s. They were married on June 9, 1859, by a Rev. Dr. Anderson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church located on Stockton Street. By 1860, the couple had also apparently adopted their daughter Emma Eliza McElroy, who was listed in several census records as having been born in New York of foreign parents. She was nine years old when Mr. McElroy wrote his letter in 1861.<sup>8</sup>

In that same letter, William McElroy somewhat complacently noted that, at ages forty-two and forty, he and Harriet were “a very good Looking old Couple.” Readers can judge for themselves whether this was true from the ambrotype of the

family that was placed in their time capsule. Pictured with Mr. and Mrs. McElroy are their daughter Emma Eliza and a nephew named Samuel A. Wolfe. Of Samuel, an artist, little is known other than that the family hoped he would “be in a more Respectable business” by the time the time William’s letter was discovered.<sup>9</sup>

The McElroys were a prosperous, middle class couple—as Mr. McElroy wrote, “pretty well off in this worlds goods.” In addition to being a self-identified miller, William was listed in the city directories from 1863 to 1865 as the proprietor of Gough Gardens (possibly a plant nursery or vegetable market), located on Presidio Road near Gough. However, Harriet had money of her own.

As her obituary later noted, “She was a lady of remarkable business ability and energy.” Harriet owned property on Stockton Street between Clay and Washington streets believed to be worth \$250 per front foot in 1861. In addition to loaning \$1,800 to Charles T. Gough on the security of a mortgage, in 1859 she purchased from Gough for \$2,500—as her separate property—the land on which the Octagon House would be built. Harriet may even have asked her future husband to sign an “ante-nuptial” agreement before their marriage.<sup>10</sup>

The McElroys built their Octagon House in 1861 on the east side of Gough Street, on a lot that ran from Presidio Road (today’s Union Street) to Vallejo Street in Cow Hollow. At that time, Cow Hollow was a very rural area, populated primarily by dairy farmers and vegetable gardeners. It was connected to the city and to

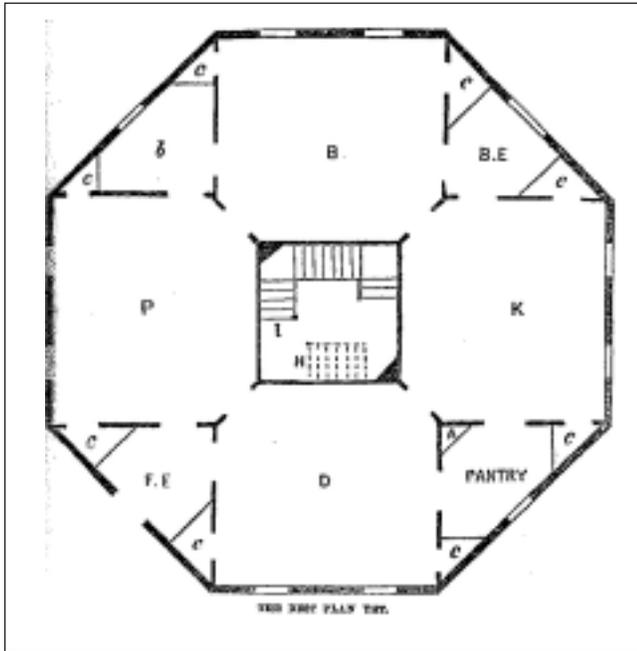
Fort Presidio by the meandering Presidio Road. A major source of water, Washerwoman’s Lagoon, lay just north of that road. Beyond the lagoon, north of today’s Lombard Street, large sand hills led to the San Francisco Bay. The earliest known photograph of the Octagon House, believed to have been taken in the 1870s after over a decade of development had begun to transform Cow Hollow, clearly shows both Washerwoman’s Lagoon and the sand dunes.<sup>11</sup>

## OCTAGONS: A POPULAR DESIGN IN THE 1860S

The McElroys chose to follow the latest architectural fad in building their home. Octagonal houses were first popularized by an 1848 book titled *A Home For All*. The book went through at



*Looking north from Jackson Street, between Gough and Octavia, probably in the 1870s. Photograph by Carleton Watkins. Washerwoman’s Lagoon, the sand hill north of Lombard, and Fort Mason are prominently visible. The McElroy octagon house can be seen at its original location, the southeast corner of Union and Gough. Photo courtesy of the Greg Gaar collection.*



*"The Best Plan Yet" – Floor plan submitted by Mr. Howland and originally published in Orson S. Fowler's A Home for All, 1853.*

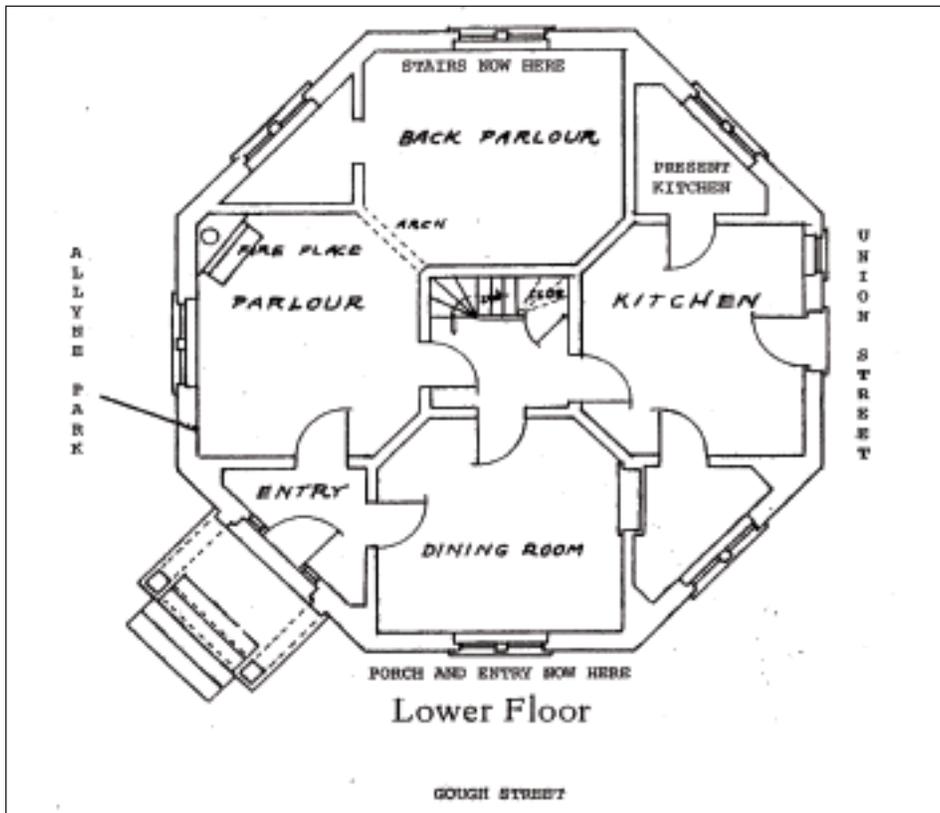
least nine different editions before the fad had run its course. Written and self-published by an amateur New York architect named Orson S. Fowler,<sup>12</sup> the book advocated the building of multi-story eight-sided homes with windows in all sides and a cupola typically positioned over a central stairway. (Later editions also promoted "gravel wall" or concrete-like construction techniques.) Fowler's book argued that eight-sided houses were healthier and more economical than four-sided houses. They were healthier because the windows and cupola would let in more natural light and ventilation than traditional housing. They were more economical because the octagon came close to the circle (or sphere) in maximizing the volume of interior space, while providing a more compact floor plan. Fowler's book inspired the construction of more than a thousand octagonal houses across the country, not to mention churches, schoolhouses and other structures.<sup>13</sup> At least five other octagonal homes are also known to have been built in San Francisco during the mid-nineteenth century.

The McElroys may have taken the inspiration for the floor plan of their approximately 1,620-square-foot two-story home from a plan published in the 1853 edition of Fowler's book. Submitted by the book's engraver, Mr. Howland, and called "The Best Plan Yet," it featured four roughly square-shaped rooms surrounding a central stair-case, with the rooms separated by triangular shaped spaces at the corners.<sup>14</sup> This floor plan bears some striking similarities to the layout of the McElroys' home.

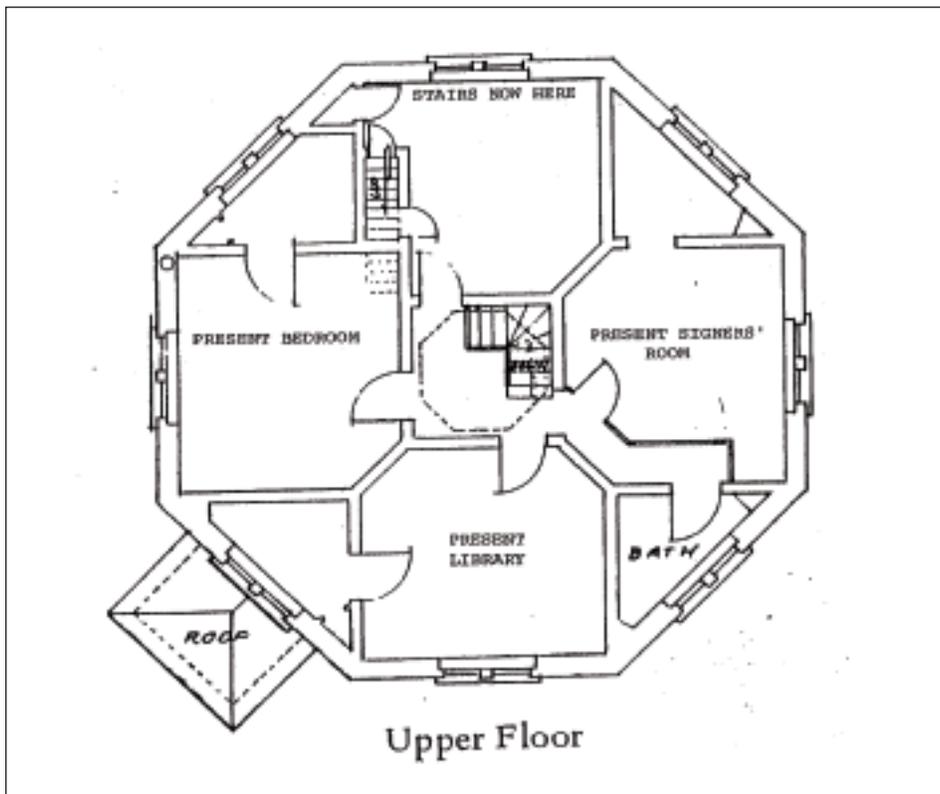
The image on the next page provides the best reconstruction of the Octagon House's original floor plan. The McElroys would have entered the first floor of the home through one of the four small triangular-shaped spaces. From there, they could have turned left to walk into the parlor (and beyond it the back parlor), or turned right to enter the dining room. Both rooms gave access to the central stairway, which in turn gave access to the kitchen. A fireplace in the parlor and the kitchen stove probably provided the only sources of heat in the house.

Upstairs, the home featured four rooms comparable to the rooms below surrounding the central staircase. A separate staircase ran from that floor to the cupola, which was positioned directly above the main stairs. Imagine the views the McElroys must have experienced from the cupola of their hillside home. Looking in one direction, they could see the city of San Francisco growing by leaps and bounds. Looking in another direction, they could see the traffic on Presidio Road, the sand dunes, and perhaps even shipping along the Golden Gate.<sup>15</sup>

What led the McElroys to commemorate the building of their house by creating a time capsule? A review of William's letter and the newspaper clippings suggest the family was driven by a sense of living in historic times. After all, the couple had witnessed the extraordinary growth of San Francisco as it transformed itself from a sleepy village of "three thousands Souls" in 1849 to a bustling metropolis "of about Ninety Thousand in 1861." William's letter is filled with a sense of pride at what had been accomplished in the new city, citing statistics on the growth of trade, the



Octagon House floor plans – lower and upper floors.  
 Courtesy of Octagon House archives.



average annual yield from the gold mines, and the number of manufacturing firms in San Francisco. “I do not believe that, the world ever has furnished a parell to our progress as a City in the Same time,” he wrote. “Look which ever way you will and you observe happiness prosperity and wealth.” Among the news clippings in the time capsule was an article exemplifying his point—it reported on the departure from San Francisco of the Panama-bound steamship *Uncle Sam* with a cargo of 190 passengers and nearly \$1.3 million in gold.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps even more importantly, the McElroys knew the United States was on the verge of Civil War after the election of President Abraham Lincoln in November of 1860 had led many southern states to secede from the Union. Most of the time capsule’s newspaper clippings chronicle the unfolding crisis from the time the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter to the most recent skirmishes in Virginia prior to the battle of Bull Run on July 1, 1861. The dispatches, which originated in St. Louis, were transmitted by pony express from St. Joseph, Missouri, to Fort Churchill, Nevada, and thence by telegraph to San Francisco. They contained a fascinating mix of fact and rumour. This “news”

San Francisco July 21st 1861

This Religion House was built and owned by Wm. McElroy and his wife Harriet S. McElroy and is intended as our private Residence, we have only one daughter aged 17 years, my wife is a native of Connecticut Pa and her maiden name was Choler (aged 40 years) I am a native of Virginia (aged 42 years) and we are a very good looking old Couple and pretty well off in the world goods. My wife landed in this City in 1849 and I arrived here in 1851 and of course as you will perceive we were married in this City our daughter's Christian name is — Emma Eliza. The young man that you observe in the picture standing naked is my nephew Master Land A. Wolfe an artist by profession, we are in hopes that he will be in a more respectable looking by the time that this paper is disseminated, we are sorry to be obliged to inform you that our glorious union is about being dissolved, in fact some of the Southern States have already pulled out inconspicuously as they say that the Northern States have elected a Black Republican President and of course opposed to Slavery and this is the true cause of the quarrel the President's name is Abraham Lincoln Comm. — only called Old Abe. This City has increased, in the past thirteen years from a population of three thousand souls in 1849 to about twenty thousand in 1861 and continues to increase with great steps we have had since 1849 regular Steam Ships between this City and

A portion of William McElroy's letter from the time capsule.  
 Courtesy of Octagon House archives.

must have been eagerly devoured by a divided San Francisco anxiously waiting to learn the fate of the Union. William's letter makes it clear where the McElroys' loyalties lay. "I say to you that the great bulk of the People of the State of California are very strong for the union of these States, and for myself and family, we are for the maintenance of our glorious Constitution and the Laws of the land as they are and as our Fathers transmitted them to us."<sup>17</sup>

William McElroy would live to see the restoration of his beloved San Union before his death "after a short illness" at age fifty-eight on December 23, 1869. "Friends and acquaintances" of this "pioneer miller" were invited to attend the funeral "THIS (Sunday) morning ... from his late residence, corner of Gough and Union Streets." He was survived by his widow, Harriet and their daughter, Emma Eliza, who would both continue to live in the Octagon House for many years to come.<sup>18</sup>

On January 29, 1870, just over one month after her father's death, eighteen-year-old Emma Eliza began keeping a scrapbook, which is preserved in the Octagon House's archives. The first two items she pasted in the scrapbook were her father's obituaries. A typical Victorian woman's scrapbook in many ways, Emma's journal contained morally-uplifting essays, poems, anecdotes, and illustrations interspersed with humorous poems and cartoons, as well as dried leaves from picnics and other outings. The last dated entry was May 1888, although most items were pasted in the scrapbook without dates and out of chronological order. Nevertheless, the scrapbook is a revealing record of Harriet's and Emma Eliza's lives after William's death.<sup>19</sup>

Emma Eliza became a schoolteacher at the Broadway Primary School, located on the north side of Broadway between Montgomery and Sansome streets in San Francisco. Toward the end of the 1870s, she may even have been an assistant principal at the school. Throughout the decade, she apparently lived with her mother at the Octagon House. Harriet McElroy continued to be a good manager of money—the 1870 census lists her as owning real property worth \$30,000 and personal property of \$3,000. However, mother and daughter supplemented their income by renting rooms in the house to a variety of boarders. A dressmaker named Amelia Woolf and the family of laundryman Leopold Bower were cited as living there in the 1870 census. Four single boarders were listed in the 1880 census.<sup>20</sup>

Emma Eliza apparently was in no hurry to marry. Her views of men and marriage may have been reflected in one of the earliest dated entries in her scrapbook, a humorous poem titled "The Men I meet in the City." It ended

"They will do very well for flirtations,  
 But sure twould be a disaster,  
 If one should become their poor victim  
 And call him her lord and master;  
 But I like them quite well as gallants,  
 and wouldn't mind one for a *beau*,  
 Yet when it comes down to proposals,  
 Excuse me if I answer 'No!'"<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the 1870s, Emma Eliza's scrapbook records excursions, with no mention of a beau, to such places as Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, Yosemite, the redwoods in Sonoma County, Saratoga, Piedmont, and Contra Costa. In 1876, she travelled to the East, perhaps to attend the "Brilliant Wedding" of a Miss Bettie Shober (possibly a family relative) in her mother's home town of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.<sup>22</sup>

It is not until February 22, 1879, that the first mention of her future husband appears in Emma Eliza's scrapbook. He was Samuel Tallman, a grocer-merchant listed in the 1880 census as a forty-eight-year-old widower from Ohio. Between 1879 and 1881, the couple visited Belmont, Golden Gate Park, Meacham's Orchard, the Santa Cruz fair, Felton Big Trees, and Mission Dolores, among other places. They were finally married on January 25, 1882, by the Rev. T. K. Noble in San Francisco. They celebrated their wedding with a visit to Monterey. Emma Eliza memorialized the honeymoon by pasting coral into her scrapbook with the notation, "Hubby and I" and the place and date—Monterey, January 27, 1882.<sup>23</sup>

The couple may have lived with Harriet McElroy at the Octagon House while Samuel continued his grocery business. Sadly, the marriage lasted only five years. Samuel Tallman died of typhoid pneumonia at the age of fifty-six on May 1, 1887. This may have been the same epidemic that led the San Francisco Board of Health to lobby for the closure of all the dairy farms in Cow Hollow due to unsanitary conditions. Tallman was buried at Cypress Lawn Memorial Park in Colma in a lot that, not surprisingly, had been purchased by his mother-in-law, Harriet McElroy. His obituary invited "Friends and acquaintances ... to attend the funeral ... from his late residence, 2618 Gough street. Internment private; no flowers." A year later, in the last dated item in the scrapbook, Emma Eliza and her mother visited one of Tallman's relatives "on their way east for the purposes of spending the summer."<sup>24</sup>

Emma Eliza continued to live with her mother in the Octagon House until remarrying, on April 4, 1889, a forty-five year-old widowed attorney

from Ohio named Abraham P. Van Duzer. They were married by the Rev. Robert McKenzie of the First Presbyterian Church. The marriage announcement appeared in the April 7, 1889 issue of *The San Francisco Morning Call*. After the wedding, the newlyweds resided at Abraham's home at 822 Guerrero Street in San Francisco.<sup>25</sup>

1890 was the last year that Harriet McElroy was listed by the city directories as living at the Octagon House. The aging widow then moved into her daughter and son-in-law's home on Guerrero Street. From then on, the McElroy family would rent the Octagon House to tenants.<sup>26</sup>

The first and perhaps most famous McElroy tenant was the poet and journalist Daniel O'Connell, who lived at the Octagon House with his family from 1891 to 1892. He was a co-founder of the Bohemian Club, where he was active in organizing poetry readings and staging plays. His daughter, Mabel O'Connell Moran, later described the Octagon House "as a place of cheer and hospitality ... the scene of many a gay dinner party with such old-time friends as Charles Rollo Peters, Raphael Weil, Joe Strong, Henry D. Bigelo, Charles Stanton, little Alma de Bretteville (Spreckels) and a host of others .... It was here that

**In Memoriam.**

The passing away of Mrs. Harriet Shober McElroy in this city on January 13 takes from among us one of the oldest pioneer ladies of this State. Mrs. McElroy was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1816, and at the time of her death was in her 83d year. She arrived in San Francisco on the 22d of November, 1846, and has resided in this city ever since. She was a lady of remarkable business ability and energy; charitable and kind, and leaves behind her a large circle of friends who admired her for her sterling worth and many good deeds. She had a wonderful memory and often entertained her friends with graphic recitals of the stirring events of the early history of this city. Her life was an example of quiet, earnest endeavor for all that is good and true, and it may be truly said of her—

"None knew her but to love her,  
None named her but to praise."

Her ancestors were among the early settlers of Lancaster, where many of her relatives reside. She leaves in this State a daughter, Mrs. A. P. Van Duzer, and a niece, Mrs. Wilcox, residing in San Francisco, and a nephew, Mr. Cyrus Michaelberger, of Stockton.

A. P. V.



Harriet McElroy's newspaper obituary, *The San Francisco Call*, Friday, January 20, 1899.



*Fiorenzo Cavagnaro, a wine merchant, and his family moved into the Octagon House in 1893. While the house was being repaired, they lived in Oakland, but returned in 1907. Photo of Octagon House after the 1906 earthquake. Courtesy of Octagon House archives.*

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my father wrote the opera, Bluff King Hall.”<sup>27</sup>

The Octagon House was next rented to wine merchant Firenzo Cavagnaro, who lived there with his family from 1893 until his death in about 1905. His widow Magdalen Cavagnaro and her family continued to live at the Octagon House through 1907. “During the time we lived there,” their daughter, Mrs. Cristina Farlatti recalled, “it was a comfortable old home full of charm and beauty. The grounds were filled with the choicest of old urns.”<sup>28</sup>

In 1898, Harriet S. McElroy deeded the title of the Octagon House to her daughter Emma Eliza “in consideration of Love and affection which first party bears toward second party, and for her better maintenance, support, protection and livelihood.” The very next year, on January 12, 1899, Harriet died at the age of eighty-two of acute bronchitis. Imagine the changes that Harriet had witnessed in San Francisco in the fifty years since her arrival in the gold rush year of 1849. Harriet’s obituary noted that “She had a wonderful memory and often entertained her friends with graphic recitals—of the stirring events of the early history of our city.”<sup>29</sup>

Emma Eliza still owned the Octagon House when the Great Earthquake of 1906 destroyed so much of San Francisco. The Octagon House suffered considerable damage, but fortunately did not burn because it was west of Van Ness Avenue, where the great fire was stopped. Sisters Mabel C. Reston and Gladys I. Reston, neighbor children who lived at 1917 Green Street, later recalled how they gaped at the damage to the Octagon House, which they called the inkwell house due to its octagonal shape. “It amused us children to see a red rocking chair precariously balanced and ready to topple into the garden below, and a tall parlor table lying on its side; also pictures hanging in topsy-turvey fashion on the walls and the family sewing machine with treadle and wheel ready to slide down the steeply sloping floor.” The renting Cavagnaro family was forced to flee to Oakland until the Octagon House was sufficiently repaired for their return.<sup>30</sup>

Emma Eliza McElroy died just three years after the Great Earthquake, on April 12, 1909. Having no children of her own, Emma Eliza willed the Octagon House to her stepdaughter, Kate Van Duzer, who inherited it after some delay in 1917. The house then changed hands several times before it was purchased by Pacific Gas & Electric Company. PG&E, which apparently wanted the property as the site of a future substation, owned the home from 1924 to 1952.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these ownership changes, from about 1910 to 1949, the Octagon House was rented to just one family—that of clerk of the U.S. Customs Court, Augustine Riley. His three spinster daughters continued to live in the home after their father’s death.

The reclusive sisters apparently rebuffed *San Francisco Chronicle* historical writer Robert O’Brien several different times when he tried to visit their home in the 1940s. On one occasion, he attempted to interview one of the Misses Rileys as she was picking up her mail. She was an uncooperative interview subject, answering most questions with the response that “the house was not for sale and she did not want to subscribe to any newspaper.” When asked how she liked the house, she replied, “I do not care for it. It is very badly arranged and very inconvenient to keep orderly and clean.” Whether that exchange actually occurred or not (Mr. O’Brien was often suspected of inventing stories about the home), the Octagon House probably was an inconvenient place to live, as PG&E never put electricity in the residence in all the years it owned it.<sup>32</sup>

From 1949 to 1952, the Octagon House stood vacant, becoming increasingly dilapidated with the passage of time. A photograph from a 1952 newspaper article showed its deteriorating state. Runaways from the Youth Guidance Center even squatted there. In 1952, PG&E sought bids to tear down the house so the land could be sold separately. At this point, the Octagon House seemed doomed to destruction.<sup>33</sup>



*The Allyne sisters are pictured on either side of Mrs. Lindley H. Miller. Courtesy of Octagon House archives.*

## SAVED!

Fortunately, two factors combined to save the historic home. First, after having been recently informed by the DeYoung Museum that it could no longer house the Colonial Dames' collection of colonial and federal antiques, the NSCDA-CA was looking for a historic house to serve as both a museum and its state headquarters. Second, two of the society's members, the Misses Edith and Lucy Allyne, lived across Gough Street from the Octagon House and graciously agreed to donate a portion of their property to its rescue.

So, in 1952, after some negotiations, PG&E sold the Octagon House to the NSCDA-CA for \$1 plus the cost of moving it. Having saved the

house, the Colonial Dames were faced with the even more challenging task of renovating it. The society turned for assistance to retired architect Warren Charles Perry, the former Chairman and Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley. In one of the last projects of his life, Perry oversaw the relocation and renovation of the residence. His unique design successfully preserved the spirit of the old house while adapting it for new uses.<sup>34</sup>

The Octagon House was moved from the east to the west side of Gough Street to the plot of land donated by the Allyne sisters. The home was rotated before being placed on its new site; the original porch was also removed and a new porch was added. The greatest number of changes



*The Octagon House being moved from one side of Gough Street to the other. Courtesy of Octagon House archives.*

occurred on the ground floor, which needed to accommodate large numbers of museum visitors as well as NSCDA-CA events. Perry removed the central staircase and interior walls separating the four main rooms to create one large room in the shape of a Maltese cross. He built a new staircase at the rear of that room and installed four corner cupboards for display purposes. A one-story addition to one triangular corner created a small but usable kitchen. The windows were reconfigured

and other changes were made to make the house more functional. Upstairs, much more of the architectural integrity was retained, including three original rooms and triangular corner spaces.<sup>35</sup>

On April 7, 1953, before the renovation was completed, the NSCDA-CA held a dedication ceremony to lay the new cornerstone of the house. Imagine the excitement when, less than two weeks before, a workman discovered the



*Photo of the Octagon House from  
 "Colonial Dames Come to the Rescue of Famous  
 Octagon House" by June Hogan.  
 San Francisco Chronicle, July 27, 1952.*

original time capsule left by the McElroy family. It must have made the dedication ceremony quite a festive occasion.

In the summer of 1957, the Allyne sisters gifted to the NSCDA-CA the plot of land to the north of Octagon House, where a colonial-style garden was installed. Edith Allyne died in 1960 and Lucy in 1963, leaving their 1872 Victorian mansion south of the Octagon House to several educational, religious, and health institutions. These organizations put the property up for sale, raising the prospect that a 140-unit apartment building might be built next to the Octagon House. Mrs. Harold H. Ashley, then-President of the NSCDA-CA, joined with the Union Street

Association and other organizations to urge the City of San Francisco to buy the property and convert it to a neighborhood park. After an intensive lobbying campaign, the city finally agreed. The Allyne house was torn down, and with \$10,000 donated by the NSCDA-CA, Allyne Park was opened to the public. As a result, the Octagon House is now bordered on both the north and the south by oases of green that provide a welcome respite from the concrete of the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>36</sup>

In 1968, the Octagon House was designated Historical Landmark No. 17 by the city of San Francisco. In 1972, it was placed on the National Registrar of Historical Places. It survived the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 unscathed, and in 1993 its garden won a special award from San Francisco Beautiful, a privately funded civic group, "in recognition of a contribution to the creation and preservation of the beauty and traditions of San Francisco."<sup>37</sup>

In May 1954, the Octagon House opened as a museum for the NSCDA-CA's collection of Colonial and Federal period decorative arts and furniture dating from about 1700 to the 1840s. (Its earliest piece is a Dutch map from the seventeenth century.) The collection grew in size and quality through gifts, bequests, and purchases. It has been curated by experts in the field of American decorative arts and history. Today it contains furniture, ceramics, silver, pewter, portraits, samplers, looking glasses, toys, and other examples of English and Early American craftsmanship. It also houses a nearly complete collection of signatures by the signers of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>38</sup>

As the Octagon House celebrates its 150th birthday, the Colonial Dames pay tribute to its builders, the McElroys. We expect their "privet residence" to welcome visitors for many years in the future.

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Octagon House, A Museum of the Decorative Arts of the Colonial and Federal Periods, is open to the public from 12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. on the second Sunday and second and fourth Thursdays of each month except January. It is closed on holidays. Special anniversary open house hours: 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., July 9 to July 17, 2011 (excluding July 14). Group tours may be arranged. Inquiries should be directed to Octagon House, 2645 Gough Street, San Francisco, CA 94123, (415) 441-7512.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Janis M. Horne is California Museum Properties Chairman and Co-Chair of the Octagon House 150th Anniversary Committee for the NSCDA-CA. She is also a Senior Vice President at Bailard, Inc., an investment management firm. This is her first publication.*



*The McElroys' Octagon House. Photograph by Jack E. Boucher, October 2, 1960.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

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## NOTES

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1. The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in California (NSCDA-CA, Colonial Dames, or the society) is a non-profit organization that actively promotes our national heritage through historic preservation, patriotic service and educational projects. In addition to owning and operating the Octagon House, the NSCDA-CA supports several museum properties in San Diego. It is one of the state societies making up the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA). The NSCDA and its constituent societies own, operate or support museum properties across the United States, as well as Sulgrave Manor (the ancestral home of the Washington family) in England. For more information, visit [www.NSCDA.org](http://www.NSCDA.org).
2. Jane Hogan, "Colonial Dames Come to the Rescue of Famous Octagon House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 1952.
3. "Old Octagon Yields Story," *San Francisco News*, March 30, 1953, p.1; Robert Strebeigh, "Octagon House Mystery Solved," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 30, 1953, p. 36; Octagon House Docent Manual, September, 2003, based on society archives and curator's information, hereafter cited as Docent Manual.
4. Harriet S. McElroy's obituary, *San Francisco Call*, January 20, 1899. Many of the early settlers of Lancaster, PA were German. Harriet Shober's sister's baptismal certificate was in German, and a German Sunday-school newspaper was among the newspaper archive found with the time capsule in the Octagon House.
5. Octagon House time capsule contents; Joseph A. Baird, "A History of Octagon House," pamphlet published by The Colonial Dames of America Resident in the State of California, 1973; Katherine Bruce Jones, C.G.R.S., "Another View of the McElroy Family of Octagon House," unpublished paper read at Octagon House Docent Study Group, July 13, 1990, Octagon House Archives.
6. Jones, "Another View."
7. Advertisement, *Daily Alta California*, June 26, 1856, p.3.
8. Marriage announcement for Wm. C. McElroy and Miss Harriet Schober, *The Evening Bulletin*, June 11, 1859; Jones, "Another View"; McElroy letter, Octagon House time capsule.
9. McElroy letter and photograph, Octagon House time capsule.
10. McElroy letter, Octagon House time capsule; Jones, "Another View"; Harriet McElroy's obituary, *San Francisco Call*; John L. Levinsohn, *Cow Hollow: Early Days of a San Francisco Neighborhood from 1776* (San Francisco: San Francisco Yesterday, 1976), p. 28.
11. William Kostura, "The Cows of Cow Hollow" and "Cow Hollow Dairyman, 1853-1911," *The Argonaut: Journal of the San Francisco Historical Society*, vol. 9, no.1 (Spring 1998), p. 36; Levinsohn, *Cow Hollow*; Jones, "Another View."
12. Orson Squires Fowler was an eccentric in an age of eccentrics. Best known as the popularizer of the octagon house fad, Fowler was a man who practiced what he preached. In 1853, he built his own 60-room, three-story octagonal mansion in Fishkill, New York. "Fowler's Folly", as the mansion was known, stood for less than 45 years before it was demolished in 1897. In addition to being an amateur architect, Fowler was one of the first Americans to promote the pseudo-science of phrenology, the belief that character could be determined by the shape of one's skull. A practicing phrenologist, he published the *American Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* and a number of other phrenology manuals. Fowler also wrote on a variety of reform topics, from vegetarianism to teetotalism to the dangers of corsets to women's health. Finally, he gained a certain amount of notoriety by writing and publishing health and sex manuals in furtherance of his career as a marriage consultant and sex educator. Source: Orson S. Fowler, *The Octagon House: A Home for All*, unabridged reproduction of 1853 edition with a new introduction by Madeline B. Stern (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), pp. vii-xi.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. vi, viii, xi-xii.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.
15. McElroy letter from Octagon House time capsule.
16. *Ibid.*, newspaper clippings from Octagon House time capsule, including "Treasure Per Uncle Sam" (undated and unidentified).
17. McElroy letter from Octagon House time capsule; newspaper clippings from Octagon House time capsule, including "Arrival of the Pony! Fight at Baltimore. Jeff. Davis Marching on to Washington. Blockading of Southern Ports" (undated and unidentified, with an April 22, 1861 dateline).  
  
Author's Note: Mr. McElroy also identified himself as a supporter of northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, principal opponent to Republican Abraham Lincoln in the presidential election of 1860, and supporting a "Douglas Democrat" for San Francisco Supervisor for the 12th District according to a political notice in the Octagon House's archives. There is no evidence that McElroy himself ran for political office.  
  
The political notice read, "Union Douglas Democratic Ticket for Supervisor of the 12th District, William C. McElroy." The 12th supervisorial ward or district ran from Larkin Street on the east to the Pacific Ocean and north to the bay. The winning candidate for the district in 1860 was James W. Cudworth. No evidence was

- found in newspapers or city records that McElroy was a candidate for supervisor in those years. The presidential election in 1860 was a four-way race with Republican Abraham Lincoln winning California by some 600 votes. The other candidates were northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge, and Constitutional Unionist John Bell. The information in this note is courtesy of Paul Rosenberg, San Francisco, historian on San Francisco supervisorial races.
18. Two obituaries of William C. McElroy, unidentified and undated, in Emma Eliza McElroy's Scrapbook, Octagon House archives.
  19. Scrapbook, Octagon House archives; Jones, "Another View", p.1.
  20. Jones, "Another View," pp. 7-8.
  21. Scrapbook, Octagon House archives.
  22. Ibid., Jones, "Another View," pg. 7.
  23. Marriage announcement for Samuel Tallman and Emma Eliza McElroy, *The Morning Call*, Jan. 27, 1882; Scrapbook, Octagon House archives; Jones, "Another View," pp. 7-8.
  24. Samuel Tallman obituary, *The Morning Call*, May 2, 1887; Scrapbook, Octagon House archives; Jones, "Another View," p. 8.
  25. Marriage announcement of Emma L. Tallman to A.P. Van Duzer, *The Morning Call*, April 7, 1889; Jones, "Another View," p. 9.]
  26. Baird, "A History of Octagon House"; Jones, "Another View p. 9.
  27. Hogan, "Colonial Dames Come to the Rescue"; Baird, "A History of Octagon House."
 

Note: Henry Derby Bigelow (1862-1928) was night editor of the Hearst *Daily Morning Examiner*. Charles Rollo Peters (1854-1899) was a San Francisco-born painter noted for canvases depicting moonlights on missions and California sites. Joseph Dwight Strong, Jr. was a well-known painter and bohemian who married Isobel Strong, daughter of Mrs. Robert L. Stevenson. Raphael Weill (1835-1920) was the French-born partner of the White House department store in San Francisco, a leader of the French and Jewish communities, and bon vivant (a chicken dish bears his name). Alma de Bretteville Spreckels, with her husband, donated the California Palace of the Legion of Honor art museum to San Francisco in 1924. The information in this note is courtesy of Judith Robinson, a member of the NSCDA-CA.
  28. Ibid.
  29. Harriet McElroy's obituary, *The San Francisco Call*, January 20, 1899; Baird, "A History of Octagon House"; Jones, "Another View."
  30. Julia Bell, ed., "Eyewitness to Disaster: Five Women (each in her own words) Tell Their Stories of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire in San Francisco," pamphlet published by The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in California, 1987, p. 34; Hogan, "Colonial Dames Come to the Rescue."
  31. Emma L. Van Duzer's obituary, *The San Francisco Examiner*, April 15, 1909; Jones, "Another View, p. 9-10; Baird, "A History of Octagon House."
  32. Hogan, "Colonial Dames to the Rescue"; Baird, "A History of Octagon House.
  33. November 20, 1952 letter from Carolyn Livermore, Chairman of the Headquarters Committee to the members of the NSCDA-CA, Octagon House archives.
  34. David Parry, "Architects' Profiles: Pacific Heights Architects #8- Warren C. Perry" internet article, [www.classicsfproperties.com/Architecture/WarrenCPerry](http://www.classicsfproperties.com/Architecture/WarrenCPerry).
  35. Docent Manual, pp. 27-28
  36. Docent Manual., p. 28, Appendix D.
  37. Docent Manual, pp. 25, 29.
  38. Nancy Perrin Weston, Mrs. Vanderlynn Stow, and Elinaor Fisk. *A History of The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in California, 1895-2003*, published by NSCDA-CA in 2004, p. 101.

# SAN FRANCISCO'S “OTHER” OCTAGON HOUSES

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by Ruth Donohugh

Octagonal houses were a major part of the visual landscape of San Francisco in the 1860s and 1870s. Most of them were built on 50-or-100 vara corner lots. A vara measurement was roughly a yard (thirty-three inches) and was used when the original town of Yerba Buena had been laid out following the traditional Spanish pueblo model of a rectangular grid encompassing a plaza.<sup>1</sup> Most of the octagonal houses did not survive the subdivision of these larger pieces of land as they had been split into 25 x 100 foot lots more suitable for the building of multiple units of flats. Today, only two of the original octagon houses survive: the privately owned Feusier house on Green Street and the McElroy Octagon House on Gough Street, owned by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in California. Originally there were as many as eight octagon houses; five of them have been documented in photographs. All of San Francisco's octagon houses seem to have been inspired by Orson Squire Fowler's book, *The Octagon House: A Home for All*. The construction of the walls used a gravel and concrete mix that could be made on-site, following plans outlined in the book. The octagonal shape was supposed to allow more interior space with light and air from all directions.

The construction of octagonal buildings has been documented as early as 300 BC. The first documented example is the Temple of the Winds

in Athens, Greece. Thomas Jefferson built his famous Virginia octagonal house, Poplar Forest, as a retreat in 1806. The Octagon House in Washington D.C., while not truly octagonal, was completed in 1801. It was used as a temporary White House during the War of 1812 and is now the headquarters and museum for the American Association of Architects. Octagonal structures were found in more common buildings before being popularized by Fowler. The early Danish settlers in upstate New York built octagonal churches. The earliest documented octagonal structure in the United States was one of these, built in 1630.<sup>2</sup> Navajo Indians also built hogans, roughly spherical dwellings with an east-facing door to welcome the morning sun. Today, Navajo reservations are dotted with octagonal hogans.

Most of the builders of the octagonal houses in San Francisco were from the New England states. Of the houses that survive in photographs, the oldest was probably the Palmer house at Second and Harrison streets. There were two octagonal houses at the top of Russian Hill: the Feusier (existing) and the John Bull houses. Another was built on lower Russian Hill and one in North Beach. The one was called merely a “summer home” outbuilding and the other we will refer to as the “octagon boarding house.” The McElroy house on Gough exists today because of its more remote location. (In 1861, when the McElroys built their house, Cow Hollow was a rural area populated by dairy and vegetable farmers.)



*The Palmer octagonal house at Second and Harrison streets. Courtesy of California Historical Society.*

## THE PALMER HOUSE AT SECOND AND HARRISON

The octagonal house at Second and Harrison was likely the first one built in San Francisco; photographs of it exist dated as early as 1856. This octagonal structure was unique. It boasted decking and balconies all the way around the first floor and a roof in the style of Fowler's own octagonal home in Fishkill, New York. It is also unique for San Francisco octagonal houses in that the kitchen and possibly the stairwell were constructed outside of the octagonal perimeter of the house. Before the 1870s, Rincon Hill and South Park were considered very desirable neighborhoods in San Francisco. Anecdotal comments

about this house frequently mention that it was lovely, with beautiful gardens.

This octagon house was constructed by the Palmer family of Maine. Cyrus Palmer was the eldest son. He sailed to San Francisco from Maine, arriving on August 18, 1849.<sup>3</sup> Cyrus was a true pioneer, a member of the first vigilance committee and an organizer of the first fire company.<sup>4</sup> He first worked in the lumber business for Macondray & Company. He later branched out, acquiring an interest in two vessels in the Puget Sound trade, carrying lumber and oil to San Francisco. His parents and siblings were still in New England in 1850, but soon followed him to San Francisco in 1852.<sup>5</sup> The Palmer family engaged in a number of enterprises. Cyrus's father,

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William A. Palmer, and his brother, Wales L. Palmer, operated lumber, shipping, foundry, and mining businesses in San Francisco.

The Palmer house was built on a rise overlooking the harbor on Second Street between Harrison and Folsom streets. This location provided a 360-degree view of the neighborhood and the rapidly growing family businesses. In the 1861 San Francisco Directory, Cyrus is listed as operating Miners Foundry on the site; the business was established just below the octagon house on the same block.

Cyrus's career ambitions were not limited to San Francisco. In 1856 he was elected to the state legislature. He was re-elected for two additional terms. He then secured the lucrative \$250,000 contract for Miners Foundry (which by then was being run by his brother Wales) to supply all of the iron work for the state capitol in Sacramento. This contract was in effect from 1867 to 1871.<sup>6</sup> Cyrus Palmer gave testimony regarding attempts to bribe him while in office, which were reported in the *Daily Alta*.<sup>7</sup>

In August of 1865, Cyrus Palmer was sued by George Donner regarding the 100-vara lot upon which the octagonal house and foundry were located. In the suit, Donner claimed that there were irregularities in the acquisition of the property when it was granted to Palmer by Alcalde Hyde. The jury found in favor of the plaintiff, which may have led to the demise of the Palmer octagonal house.<sup>8</sup>

The entire Palmer family is originally listed in the city directory as living in the house in 1858. Subsequent city directories show different addresses within the compound, with Wales L. Palmer being the final family member to live in the house. In 1903, Wales L. Palmer sold the property to A. Schilling & Co.<sup>9</sup> The 1899-1900 Sanborn maps (detailed maps of cities used to assess fire insurance liabilities) show no octagonal structure on this property. Subsequent maps outline the large Schilling factory, which produced coffee, spices, and extracts, as the principal occupant of the block.

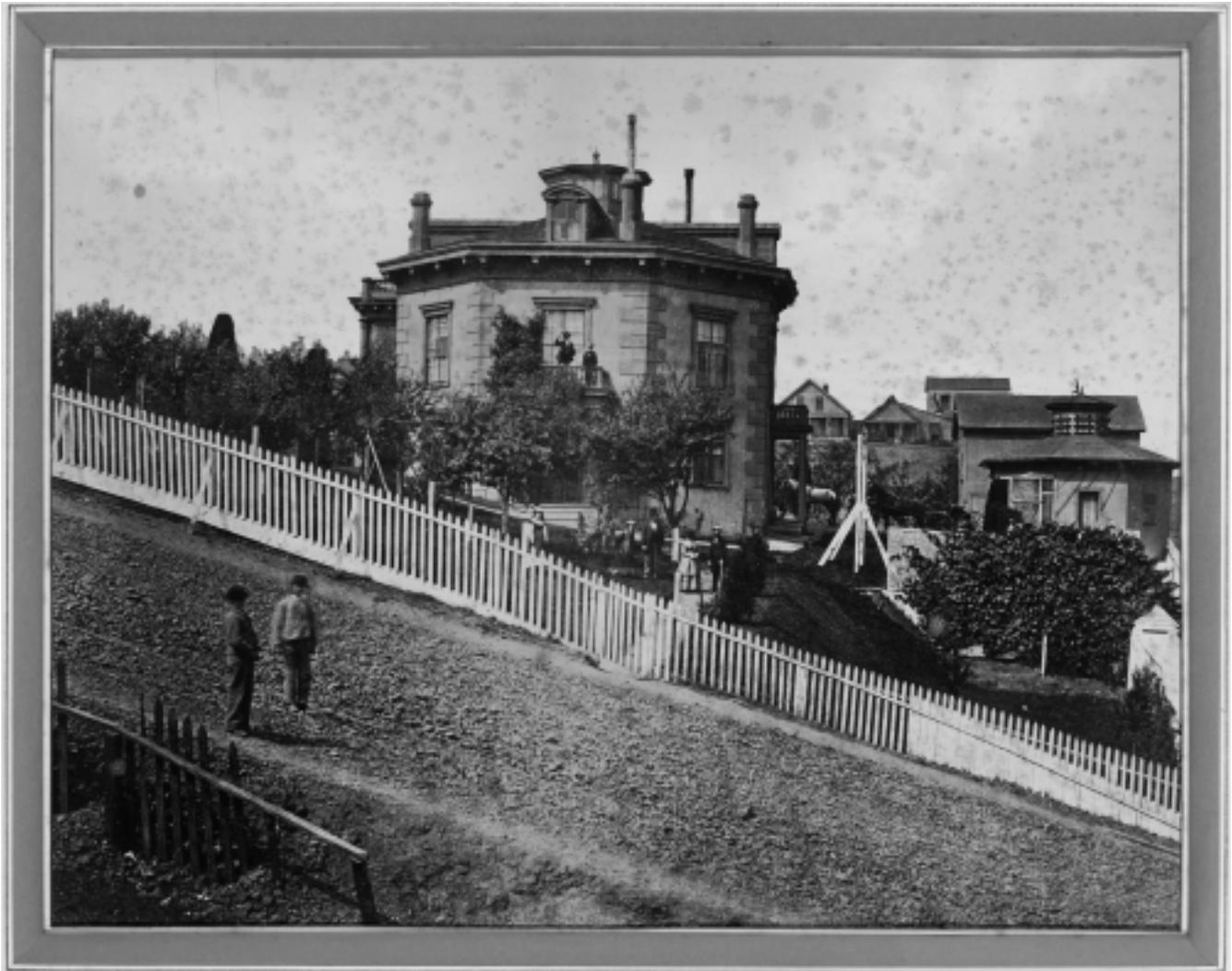
Several secondary sources state that a Mr. and Mrs. B. Henry Wyman lived in the octagonal house on Second Street. Mr. Wyman was from Maine, and Margaret Wyman was the sister of the writer Bret Harte. Bret Harte followed this sister and her husband, first to Arcata, and then to San Francisco. Much of his experiences with them became part of his writing for the *Overland Monthly*, a monthly magazine in California which included work by some of the earliest chroniclers of the state.<sup>10</sup> The Palmers were always the owners of the house, but in 1861 the city directory address for the Wymans would place them within the compound.

Another interesting fact is that the Palmers were from the small town of Machias, Maine, the same hometown as Gilbert Longfellow, who built the Pasadena octagonal house at a later date. Two of the octagonal houses built in Wisconsin were also built by Palmer brothers from Vermont who had been in the lumber business.

## THE JOHN BULL HOUSE ON RUSSIAN HILL

The so-called John Bull house on Russian Hill was probably the most prominent octagonal house in the San Francisco landscape in the 1860s. It was located at the corner of Green and Jones, across the street diagonally from the Feusier octagonal house. It was on a large lot with an additional smaller octagonal outbuilding on the site, as well. It seems to have been originally built by John W. Harker. He and his family were from New York, but their names appear in the 1850 census in Missouri, where his occupation was listed as "commission merchant." According to the 1852 California census, the family was working in the hotel business in El Dorado County, California.

By 1854, Mr. Harker was the proprietor of Harker & Co. with offices in Placerville and San Francisco. Together with George M. Weaver, the painter, they put together an overnight sensation called "The Grand Panorama of the Overland Route to California."<sup>11</sup> It visually recreated the



*John Bull House. Photo by Nathan M. Klain. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

trek many of the miners and local people had made to get to California. This moving picture panorama show was then taken on the road to theaters throughout the state, to great fanfare.

By 1858, the Harker family residence was the John Bull octagonal, according to the city directory. It was certainly the grandest of the octagonal houses built in San Francisco, featuring dormer windows and a cupola. The photograph of the house, taken by photographer Nathan M. Klain, shows a close-up view of the building. Most likely, it is the Harker family portrayed in the foreground. Located at the top of Russian Hill, this octagon house would have provided the most

spectacular panorama of the city and the bay.

Mr. Harker then invested in stock in the First National Bank of Nevada, declaring himself president of the company in 1861.<sup>12</sup> Somehow, the bank was robbed of all of its assets when he was out of town, causing suspension of the business. Lawsuits were filed. Mr. Harker and his wife were jailed during the process. The California Supreme Court determined that they had indeed hidden assets, and that they had fled the state to avoid the legal repercussions.<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, the house changed ownership. Mr. Harker and his family appear as boarders on Montgomery Street in the 1880 census.



*Another view of the John Bull house. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.*

The house was subsequently owned by George Fritch, a prominent coal merchant, who arrived in San Francisco in 1850 from New Brunswick, Canada. He and his family occupied the house for most of the time it was standing. They were living there as early as 1871 and they were still there in 1890, according to city directories. Mr. Fritch was married to a woman from England. It was said, even in his obituary, that he was “a native of England.”<sup>14</sup> The house seems to have been called the “John Bull house” for this reason. John Bull was a nickname for an Englishman, as Uncle Sam is a nickname for an American. No one named John Bull ever occupied the house.

George Fritch started as a coal merchant. Later he imported and distributed coal, investing in steamers to transport it. An 1854 advertisement announces the opening of a second branch of Fritch & Co. coal west of the Plaza.<sup>15</sup> He had investments in mines in 1863, as seemingly did most of the San Francisco population.<sup>16</sup> In 1875,

one of his coal steamships, Eastport, went aground near Point Arena, killing three people and proving a total loss of \$85,000 for him and two partners.<sup>17</sup> By 1880, he had recovered sufficiently to be one of the five capital partners in Carbon Still Coal of Washington Territory with a total stock of \$200,000.<sup>18</sup> George Fritch was a director of the Oceanic Steamship Company in 1902, along with Claus, A. B. and John D. Spreckels.<sup>19</sup> Alma Spreckels was said to have been a guest at the house, according to one of the Fritch daughters.

George Fritch’s daughter, Lizzie, was married in their octagonal residence at the top of Russian Hill. It was described in the society pages as follows: “The Fritch residence, which is oval shaped, is located on the summit of a bluff and commands a fine view of the San Francisco harbor.”<sup>20</sup> It was likely that the home’s “fine view” caused it to be demolished and replaced by a larger, multi-story residential building by the time the 1905 Sanborn

maps were printed. The new, much larger residential building is depicted as having a slate roof. It appears intact in photographs taken after the 1906 earthquake and fire. The site is currently the location of the luxury residential towers located at 1000 Green Street.

George Fritch retired to San Rafael in 1903, and died there in 1907.

## THE FEUSIER HOUSE ON RUSSIAN HILL

In the 1862 panoramic lithograph by Charles B. Gifford of San Francisco on display at the California Historical Society, the two octagonal houses built on Russian Hill are in the foreground. The one on the left is commonly referred to as the Feusier house. It was named after Louis Feusier, a wholesale grocery merchant from France who lived in the house from the 1870s. He raised five generations of Feusiers there. It exists

today and is owned privately. While dwarfed by its neighbors, the house is lovingly maintained and well worth viewing at 1067 Green Street.

The Feusier house, like the Bull house, was constructed using concrete gravel for the walls, following the Fowler building plans. It was built in 1858 by George L. Kenny from Ireland. He is listed in the city directory as residing there as early as 1861 and was still there in 1873.

George L. Kenny came to San Francisco from New York in the company of his friend, Hubert Howe Bancroft (his namesake is the Bancroft Library). Kenny and Bancroft immediately went to make their fortune in the mines together, and found that they did not much care for the work. Bancroft had worked as a clerk for his brother-in-law, who had been a bookseller in New York. Hubert Howe Bancroft was able to begin his career by having shipments of books sent on credit to be sold in San Francisco and Sacramento. In December of 1856, the firm of H. H. Bancroft and Company opened with Kenny and Bancroft as the entire staff.<sup>21</sup>

George L. Kenny modestly cited his profession in the 1880 census as “sales clerk,” yet by all accounts he ultimately played a huge role in the success of Bancroft’s bookselling business, allowing Bancroft the luxury of time for historical musing and writing. In a biography of Bancroft regarding his move to California and pursuit of gold fever, this commentary is made about Bancroft: “His major contribution to the project was to persuade a fellow clerk and boon companion,



*A 1940s photograph of the Feusier house. Courtesy of California Historical Society.*



*Green Street looking east with Feusier house on the right (before the mansard roof addition) and John Bull house on the left corner. Courtesy of California Historical Society.*

a gangling and amiable Irishman, George L. Kenny by name, to go along.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1868 H. H. Bancroft officially turned the bookselling operation over to his brother, A. L. Bancroft. Mr. George L. Kenny is credited with introducing business forms and office supplies to the store. The Bancroft bookstore and publishing business was the largest of its kind west of Chicago at that time.<sup>23</sup> Mr. Kenny ultimately married Mr. Bancroft’s widowed sister Celia after the death of his first wife, truly becoming part of the Bancroft family.

This octagon house was originally built very simply by Mr. George L. Kenny. It had two stories and was more like the octagon house on Gough Street in appearance. When Louis Feusier bought it in the 1870s, he added another story, a mansard roof, and a cupola to the building. This type of remodel was very popular in the 1870s. The mansard roof addition is frequently referred to as

“frenching-out” and was often done to old federal-style buildings, as well.

In addition to running a wholesale grocery business, Feusier was active in a local fraternal society and participated in Republican politics, serving as the city treasurer under Mayor Phelan.<sup>24</sup> Feusier was also convicted in 1897 for violating the Pure Food Act by selling currant jelly that contained no currants, just sugar and coal tar coloring.<sup>25</sup>

His son, Clarence L. Feusier, an investor in mining, was interviewed about growing up in the house. In the 1945 article he states that “the octagonal plan for a building of that size, is not very satisfactory. The triangular rooms are too small.”<sup>26</sup> This, together with the dilemma of where to place furniture, seem to be common complaints among those who have lived in octagonal houses.



*The Feusier house survived the 1906 earthquake and fire and appears on the right in this photograph. The multistory building that replaced the John Bull house stands on the left. Courtesy of California Historical Society.*

The 1906 pictures of this house after the earthquake show exactly where the fire stopped. This lovely house was listed for sale in the 1980s for over a million dollars. It is on the National Register of Historic Places for San Francisco, San Francisco Landmark #36.

## THE OCTAGON BOARDING HOUSE

In the 1860s there existed, on the northwest corner of Lombard and Leavenworth streets, an octagon house almost identical in appearance to the one on Gough Street. In those years many people in the building trades lived in this area. In an 1857 map, Leavenworth is depicted as not being cut through to Chestnut. This house was located on the bay side of Lombard at the bottom of the Lombard block that is currently called “the

crookedest street in the world.” In researching this house, ownership was hard to determine for certain. This is due to the fact that many of the deeds burned in 1906.

It seems likely that the house was built by Arden Ellis of Maine. Ellis may have arrived on the same boat from Maine as did the Palmers. He is listed in the 1870 census as owning real estate valued at \$25,000 with an occupation of “laborer.” In various *Riptides* articles by R. O’Brien on octagonal houses, he cites an 1859 San Francisco *Daily Bulletin* article (which I have not been able to locate) referring to three ‘cement houses on Russian Hill built on the Fowler Plan costing \$3,000 each on Green and the other \$1,800 to build.’ Mr. Ellis died in 1872 at the age of 42 of consumption, leaving a widow, Margaret. It is after this in 1873 that the only original written reference to the house exists as follows:

“Rooms to Let-Furnished or unfurnished sunny,

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cheerful and cheap rooms, suitable for single gentleman, widowers or bachelors, or men with wives, housekeeping accommodations if required. Octagon house, northwest corner Lombard and Leavenworth.”<sup>27</sup>

In the 1880 census, widow Margaret’s name appears at the address with a boarder who is a brick mason. Another boarder is a ship captain. One of their famous original boarders was Henry Channing Beals, a well-known editor of the *Commercial Herald*. His name garnered much publicity after he left the octagonal boarding house when his much-younger wife filed for divorce on her deathbed to marry her lover and purported father of their three children.<sup>28</sup>

Another smaller octagon house was an out-building on Lombard towards Hyde that is referred to as a “summer house” in the early Sanborn maps. Within the city there exist several other octagonal structures, such as one on Cascade referred to as *El Ocho*. They are not as old and do not seem to be have been strictly built based on the Fowler plan.

The octagonal houses of San Francisco were built by very original people. It is unfortunate that only two of them survive today. It is hoped that with these pictures and information it is

possible to envision the landscape of the era and appreciate the great affection many historians have for octagonal houses.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*Ruth Donohugh has lived and worked in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1972. She and her husband Frederick D. Minnes very much enjoy all aspects of American history.*

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Walton Elbert Bean 1914-1977, professor of California History at UC Berkeley. In true UC Berkeley form he taught this class in a huge auditorium to hundreds of students at a time. His knowledge and complete delight in the telling of California History made us wish that his class would never end.*

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#### NOTES

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1. Rand Richards, *Historic San Francisco A Concise History and Guide* (San Francisco: Heritage House Publishers, 1991), p. 38
2. Carl Frederick Schmidt, *The Octagon Fad* (published by Carl F. Schmidt 1958)
3. Alonzo Phelps, *Contemporary Biography, Pacific States* (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft 1881-1882) V.2 pp.274-5
4. *Ibid.*, p. 274



*The octagonal boarding house on Leavenworth Street north of Filbert Street. Courtesy of California Historical Society.*



The octagonal boarding house stands in the center of this photo. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

5. "Passengers," *Sacramento Daily Union*, Volume 2 Number 279, 12 February 1852
6. Phelps, *Contemporary Biography*, Pacific States, p 274
7. "Second Dispatch," *Daily Alta California*, 28 January 1863
8. "Court Proceedings," *Daily Alta California*, Volume 17, Number 5643, 18 August 1865
9. "Real Estate Transactions," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 9, 1903 p.12
10. "Bret Harte in Union 1857-1860" by Lynwood Carranco, *California Historical Quarterly* Vol 45, No. 2, (Jun., 1966) pp. 99-112
11. Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: a biographical dictionary 1840-1865*(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) p 277
12. "The Harker-Clark Case," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 25, 1875
13. "Reports of Cases Determined in The Supreme Court of the State of California" Vol 49, p. 466
14. "Deaths of the Day," *Los Angeles Herald*, volume 34 Number 181, 31 March 1907
15. *Daily Alta California* advertisements, 1 March 1854
16. "The City," *Daily Alta California*, 7 May 1880
17. "Steamer Wrecked," *Daily Alta California*, Volume 27, Number 9243, 25 July 1875
18. "The City," *Daily Alta California*, 7 May 1880
19. "Old Officers Re-elected," *San Francisco Call*, Volume 87, Number 53, 22 January 1902
20. "Weddings," *Daily Alta California*, Volume 38, Number 12706, 26 January 1885
21. John Walton Caughey, *Hubert Howe Bancroft: Historian of the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946), p. 20
22. *Ibid.*, p. 17
23. *Ibid.*, p. 278
24. "Officials Who Go In With The New Charter," *San Francisco Call*, Volume 86, Number 161, November 1899
25. "Adulterated Food Cases," *San Francisco Call*, Volume 83, Number 123, 2 April 1898
26. "A San Francisco Curiosity," compiled by William R. P. Clark, ante 1947, California Historical Society
27. *San Francisco Chronicle* classified ad, July 11, 1873 p.1
28. "A Sensational Divorce Case," *Sacramento Daily Union*, Volume 7, Number 195, 7 October 1878

## THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The San Francisco Museum and Historical Society is a non-profit California corporation, dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and presenting to its members the history of the City and County of San Francisco through regular monthly meetings, excursions and tours, sponsorship of exhibits and films, and publications. Membership in the Museum and Society is open to anyone wishing to join. For more information call us at 415-775-1111.