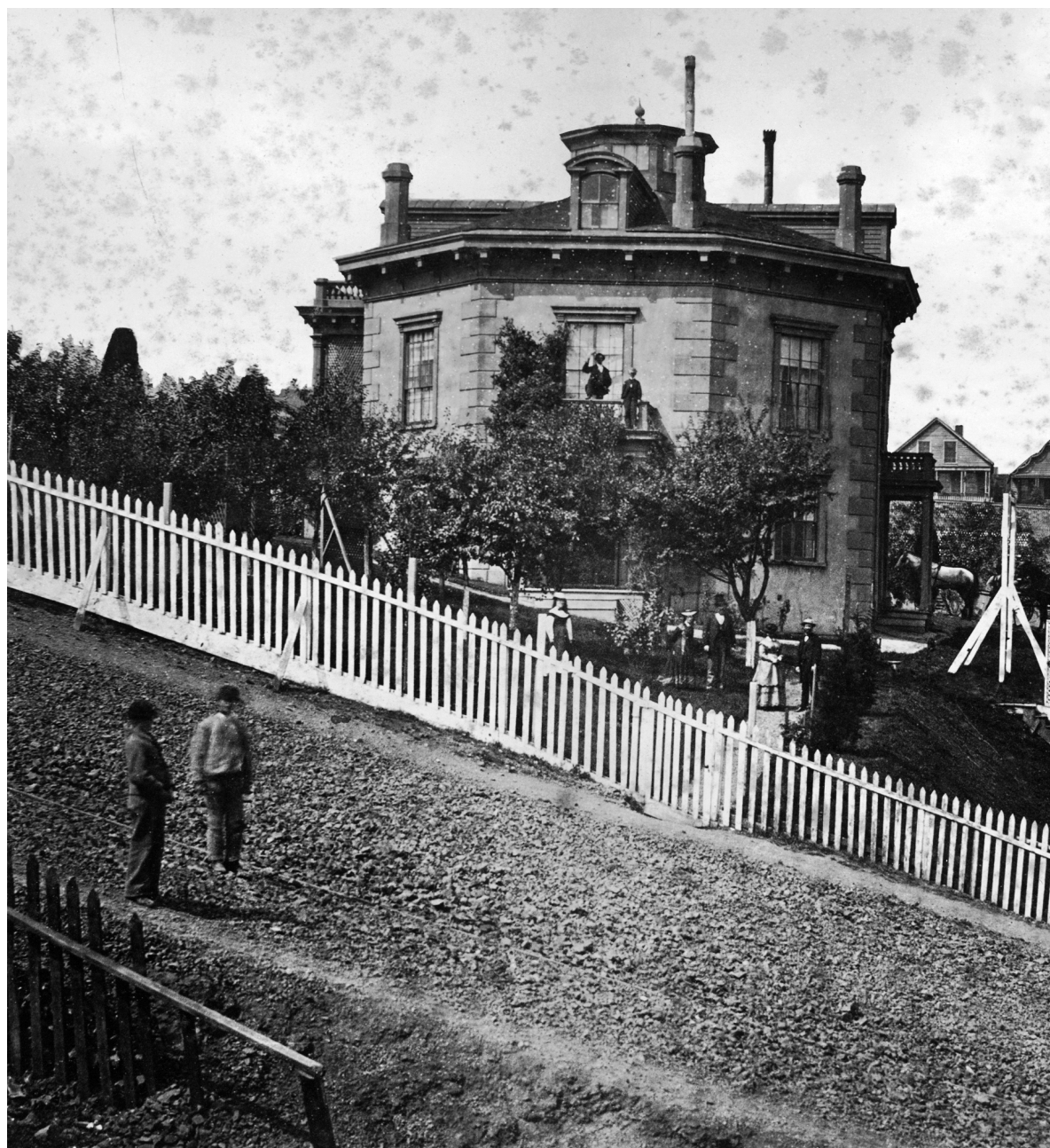


# THE ARGONAUT

JOURNAL OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# 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 wel[l] 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>

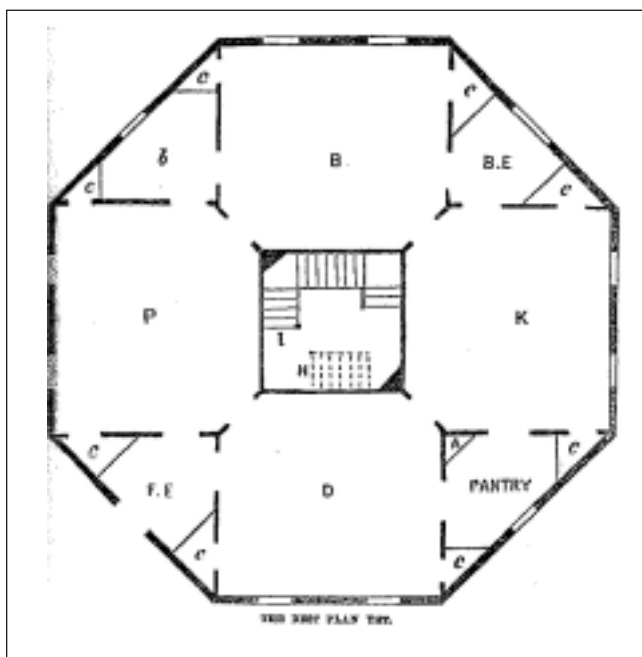
## OCTAGONS: A POPULAR DESIGN IN THE 1860S

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.*

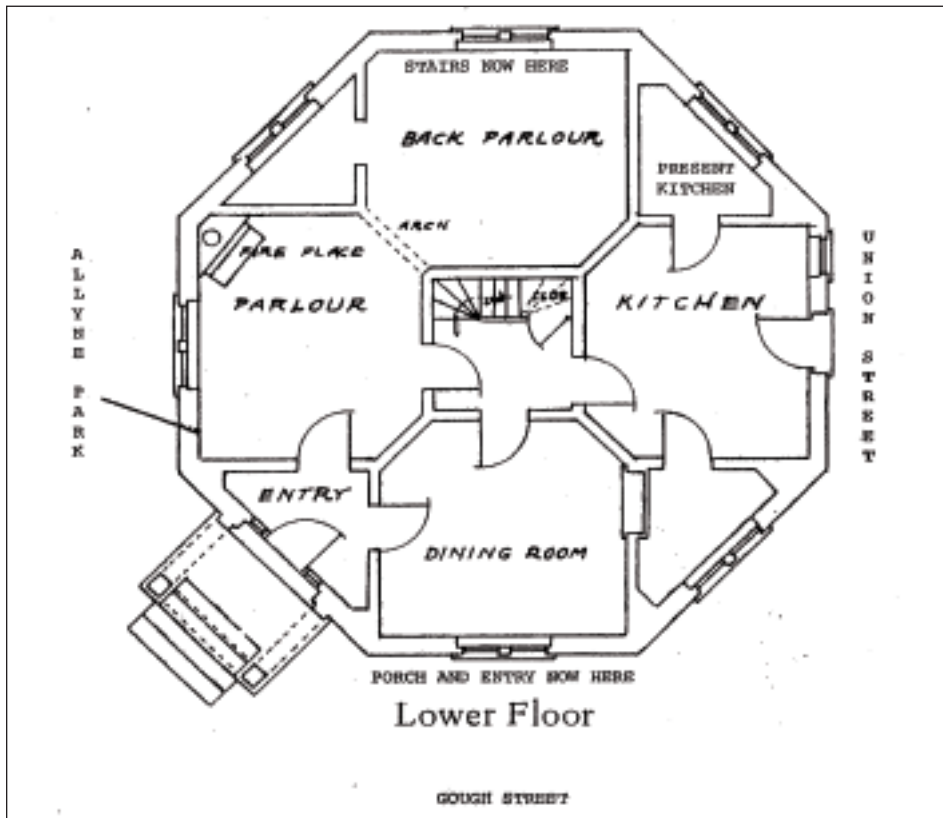
least nine different editions before the fad had run its course. Written and self-published by an amateur New York architect named Orson S. Fowler,<sup>12</sup> the book advocated the building of multi-story eight-sided homes with windows in all sides and a cupola typically positioned over a central 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.

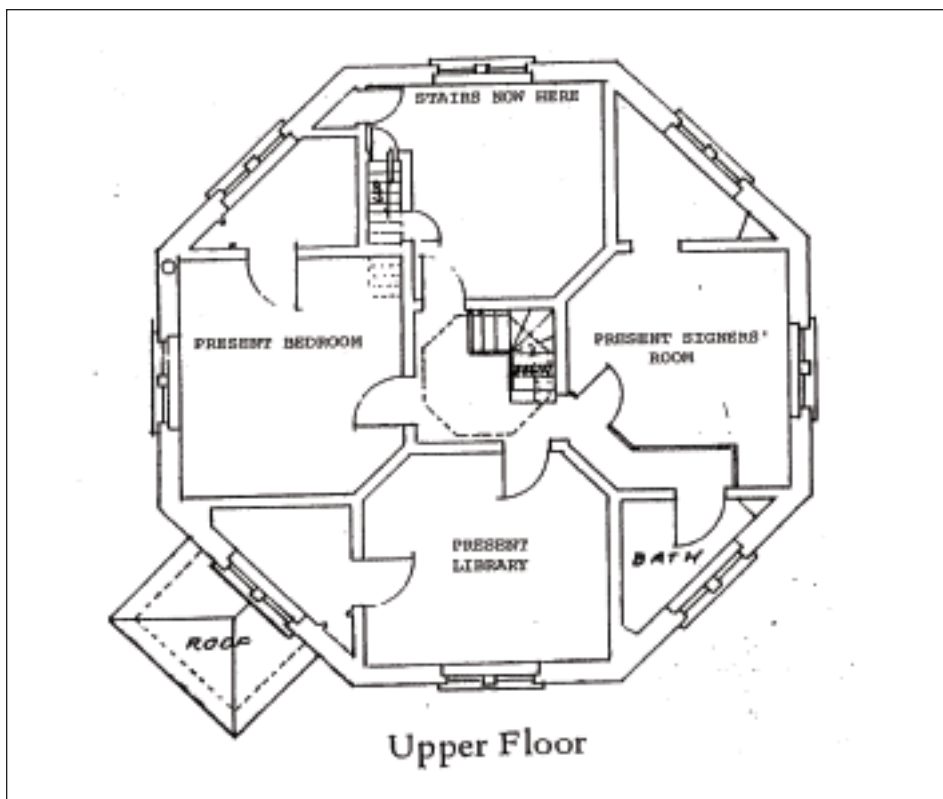
The image on the next page provides the best reconstruction of the Octagon House's original floor plan. The McElroys would have entered the first floor of the home through one of the four small triangular-shaped spaces. From there, they could have turned left to walk into the parlor (and beyond it the 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  
 nine years, my wife is a native of Lancaster 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's  
 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 next to me 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 discovered, we are sorry to  
 be obliged to inform you that our glorious union is  
 about being dissolved, in fact seven 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 Able, Abra. 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 giant 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 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 Duser. 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



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 Allyn sisters gifted to the NSCDA-CA the plot of land to the north of Octagon House, where a colonial-style garden was installed. Edith Allyn 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 Allyn house was torn down, and with \$10,000 donated by the NSCDA-CA, Allyn 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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*The McElroys' Octagon House. Photograph by. Jack E. Boucher, October 2, 1960.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

## NOTES

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.



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