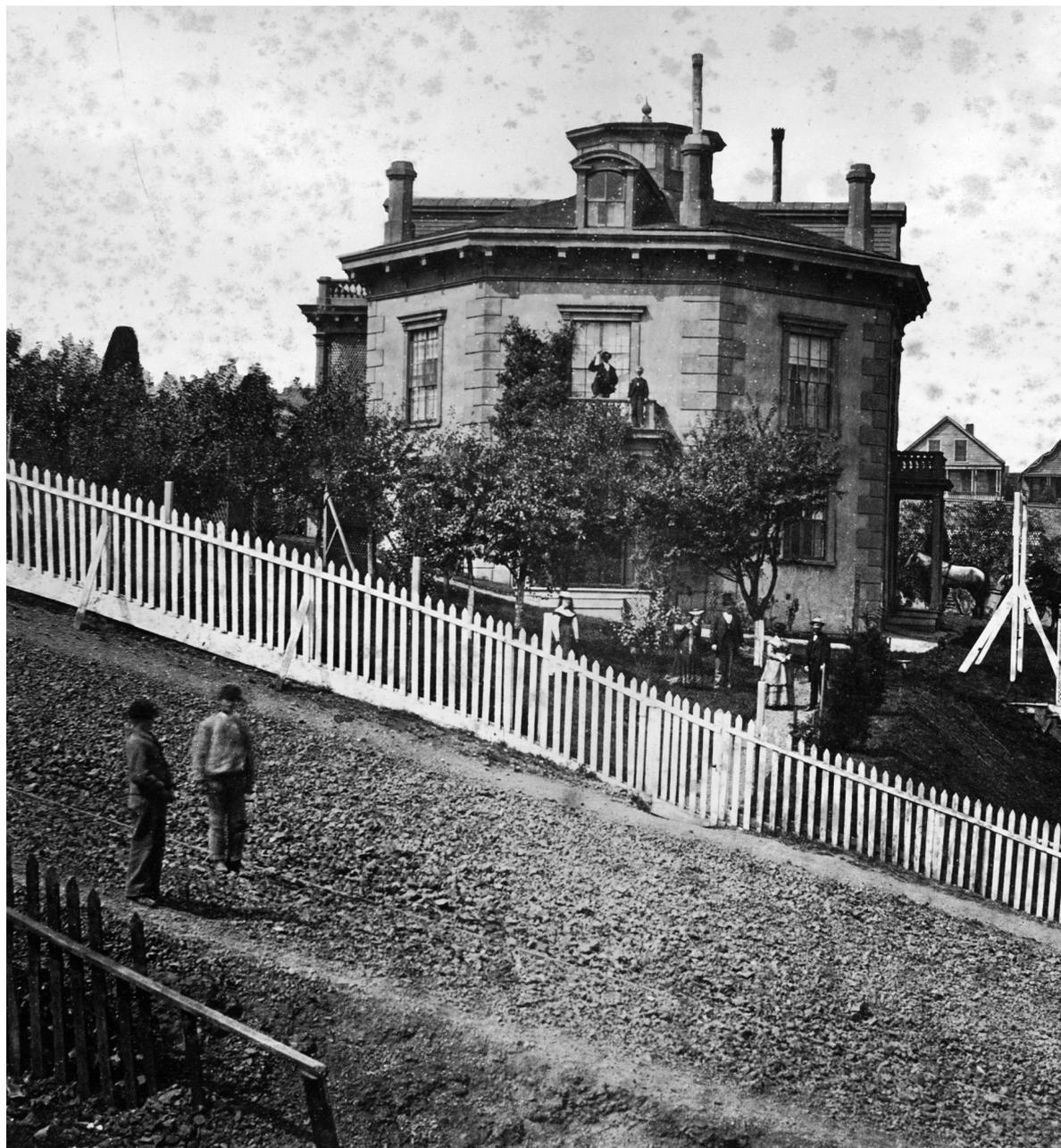


# THE ARGONAUT

JOURNAL OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# 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.

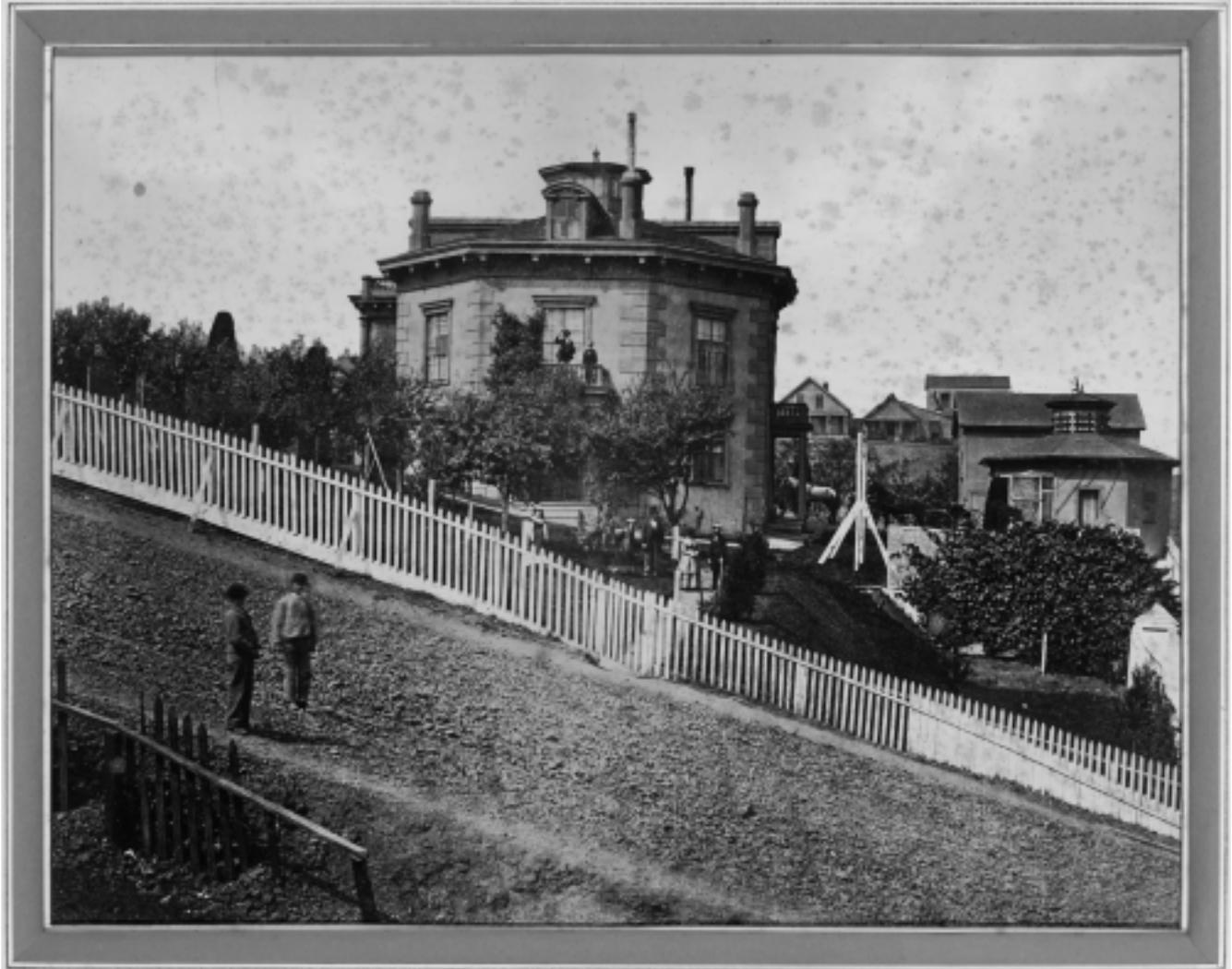
Several secondary sources state that a Mr. and Mrs. B. Henry Wyman lived in the octagonal house on Second Street. Mr. Wyman was from Maine, and Margaret Wyman was the sister of the writer Bret Harte. Bret Harte followed this sister and her husband, first to Arcata, and then to San Francisco. Much of 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

*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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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
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*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
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