

THE HISTORIC MCGEE-SPAULDING DISTRICT: AN INTRODUCTION

by McGee-Spauldling-Hardy Historic Interest Group

Walk down University Avenue, turn left at Jefferson, and pause before the noble facade of St. Joseph the Worker. You are now entering one of Berkeley's oldest and best-preserved districts. It was created, in classic mid-19th century fashion, by the union of a land company's ill-timed investment with an Irish immigrant's strategically placed farm.

The district has gained both unity and character from its boundaries: on the north, University Avenue; on the west, Sacramento Street; on the south, Dwight Way; and on the east, what is now Martin Luther King, Jr., Way but was originally Sherman Street. All quite early became major thoroughfares, handy for transporting produce, supplies, and people. But no such thoroughfare divided the area they enclosed. With its relatively flat terrain, rich alluvial soil, and reliable water supply (from Strawberry Creek), the district soon attracted the notice of James McGee, an Irish immigrant who had come to Alameda County in 1854. He bought enough land for a farm and by 1866 owned and worked the 115 acres south of Addison and east of California streets.

Just who owned the 45 acres between McGee's farm and Sacramento Street remains unclear. We do know that in 1876, two years before Berkeley was incorporated, this area was subdivided into quarter-acre lots by the Oakland Land Association and named the Spaulding Tract, possibly after N.W. Spaulding, a former mayor of Oakland who owned several of the lots.

The Association may have hoped to profit from the annexation of Berkeley to Oakland, a move strongly favored by some elements in the business community. In any case, Berkeley's incorporation in 1878, which placed both the Spaulding Tract and McGee's farm within the new town's limits, did not hasten the development of either. The tract remained sparsely populated, attracting chiefly absentee speculators and businessmen in search of suburban estates. One of the latter was Joseph Hume, a successful investor who also ran a Victorian-style minifarm on eight acres between Dwight and Bancroft ways. William Clark, a manufacturer who commuted to work at the Pacific Spring and Mattress Company in San Francisco, and his wife Lillie bought four acres of Hume's land and lived for many years in the large Stick Style Victorian (built by A.H. Broad in 1894) that still stands at 1545 Dwight Way. John Hunter, a West Berkeley businessman, built an impressive Queen Anne "cottage" on the one acre he bought from the Clarks in 1895. Now officially the Hunter House, it was declared a Structure of Merit in 2000 (Berkeley Landmark #231).

Meanwhile James McGee had become well known for having donated the land for both St. Joseph's Presentation Convent and Academy and the original St. Joseph's church built in 1886. The new St. Joseph's church, a gem of Classical Revival architecture (and, since 1991, a Berkeley Landmark), was built in 1907 on land adjacent to the original church site. McGee was elected to Berkeley's first Board of Trustees (as

the five city council members were then called), and offered to donate land for a permanent city hall -- in the hope, some say, that the area around St. Joseph's would become the city center. The offer was quickly buried in controversy. As for the city center, its future location had already been determined by the Central Pacific Railway's new line down Shattuck Avenue.

McGee died a rich man, but nobody -- though his two daughters lived on in Berkeley -- has found where his money went. By the late 1890's the rest of his property had been subdivided and was up for sale as the McGee Tract. However, despite its nearness to downtown and the Berkeley Town Hall located at University Avenue and Sacramento Street, the entire district remained a kind of suburb. Unpaved streets, difficulty of access, and the Dwight Way sewer's habit of overflowing every winter continued to deter most buyers. Above all, the lack of transportation connecting East and West Berkeley caused the district to retain its character as a rural enclave between the two. There was no street railway connection between the eastern and western parts of University Avenue until 1891; people had to walk the mile and a half between the two sections if they had no conveyance of their own. An 1891 view of Berkeley shows the McGee Tract as mainly open land and the Spaulding Tract covered with trees. As late as 1895, barley was being harvested and threshed between Addison and Bancroft, and cows were often tethered along California Street between Addison and University. According to a local newspaper, visiting the town hall, then at University and Sacramento, was like an expedition to "the rural districts of the frontier." Finally, in 1899, in a move that forever altered Berkeley's center of gravity, the Town Hall was moved to Grove and Center Streets. The job was accomplished by one horse at a cost of \$999. The move took 30 days and the Town Trustees continued to use the building en route.

All this was to change as new health and zoning regulations discouraged backyard farming and placed limits on the number of cows that could be kept in a backyard. Milk testing was instituted in the 1920's and the City Hall Annex (James W. Plachek architect, Landmark #122) was built to house the offices of the Department of Milk Inspection. Completion of a streetcar line down University also improved access to the district. But the greatest transformation came with the earthquake of 1906, when people fled across the bay in search of new homes and home sites. Vacant lots in the district, now more convenient for commuting to West Berkeley, Oakland, or San Francisco, were snapped up, and the former suburb underwent its first wave of development. It finally became part of the urban pattern in 1912, when the Southern Pacific ran a line of its electric street railway down California Street.

There was still plenty of room for growth. During the 1920's and 1930's many fine old houses, which can still be seen throughout the district's neighborhoods, were moved here to make way for the new Berkeley High School and U.C. Berkeley's Edwards Field. At that time, due to the expense of building materials, demolition was seen as a last resort. In the 1960's, this also changed. Demand for housing was used as an excuse to demolish innumerable distinguished old buildings and replace them with large, cheaply built blocks of apartments that altered, and sometimes destroyed, the character of established residential neighborhoods. Finally, a grassroots effort to forestall

further destruction led to the passage, in 1973, of the Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance, which placed strict restrictions on neighborhood demolitions. Also at this time, large portions of the flatlands were downzoned. The same movement impelled the City Council to pass the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance, which, through its “structure of merit” designation, was also designed to protect the unique character of central Berkeley districts such as ours.

WALKING TOUR INTRODUCTION

We have designed the following walking tour to show what we consider to be good examples of the various architectural styles in the district. Our stylistic categories are based on the illustrations in Rehab Right: How to Rehabilitate Your Oakland House without Sacrificing Architectural Assets, issued in 1978 by the City of Oakland’s Planning Department. Also listed are a number of buildings of historical interest. (We would welcome any reminiscences or other historical information from residents or former residents.)

The district includes the following Berkeley landmarks and non-residential buildings:

Landmarks

2143 MLK Way	City Hall (Landmark #1; National Register of Historic Places); 1908-9; Bakewell and Brown, architects
1835 Allston	City Hall Annex (Landmark #122); 1925, J.W. Placek, architect
1670-1676 University	Fox Commons (Landmark #211); three rustic brick-sided cottages (Mother Goose style); 1931, Fox Bros, builders
1600-1640 Addison	St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church (Landmark #164); 1907, Shea & Lofquist, architects
2418 California St	Hunter House (Structure of Merit, Landmark #231); 1895

Institutions (in addition to those listed under Landmarks, above)

2304 McKinley	Berkeley Buddhist Monastery; formerly the Church of the Nazarene, 1940’s (the original was built in 1898); the church was the base for the entire denomination west of the Mississippi
2301 McKinley	Washington School
2446 McKinley	Walden School
1809 Bancroft	Berkwood Hedge School; founded 1947; the site was originally occupied by the house and barn of a carriage painter
2125 Jefferson	St. Joseph’s Elementary School; 1912 (altered later)
1630 Bancroft	Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue--first synagogue in Berkeley and one of four Yehud Synagogues in Berkeley; completely remodeled in 2005

- 2235 Sacramento Berkshire Retirement Center; lot was originally occupied by a large Victorian. The four very tall palm trees flanking the back driveway and two others on the Spaulding corner remain (the lot was vacant in the late 1950's per A. Davis)
- 1744 University Lutheran Church of the Cross

Neighborhood Storefronts

- 2022 Grant Sandwich City, owned for many years by several generations of the Ambrose family. Early on the family home was in the 1700 block of Addison Street. The store closed in the late 1990's.
- 1600 Bancroft Corner store, owned for many years by the Syufy family who owned a chain of Berkeley movie houses in the 1920s; family lived above store. Mr. Lee was the proprietor in the 1970's. The store closed about 1980.
- 1649 Dwight Way Storefront
- 2301 Grant Storefront; once the home of a now-vanished collective called The Circus.
- 2300 Roosevelt Storefront; originally a store with living quarters above. Before WWI it was a stable with a saloon above, which was illegal because of the 1876 ban on alcohol sales within one mile of campus.

SUGGESTED WALKING TOUR

Start at City Hall (Landmark #1), 2134 Martin Luther King, Jr. Way

The Strawberry Creek culvert begins under Old City Hall. A 1903 Sanborn insurance map shows the creek running freely through from McGee to California with no development on either side for half a block. The Creek is now culverted underneath the 2100 blocks all the way down to Presentation Park, next to the University housing on California Street. When the University built the Presentation Minipark, part of the road collapsed into the creek. They had forgotten it was there.

Turn right (west) at Allston Way, then left (south) onto McKinley Avenue

- 2203 McKinley Brown Shingle Cottage
- 2208 McKinley Ranch house, moved to site from 4th Street in 1979. The original building on the site was the S.J. Sill house, a two-story building built in 1905 for S.J. Sill Co. as a dwelling and stable. The stable was used by Hink's Department Store for its delivery van and horses. The building was demolished in 1979.
- 2212 McKinley Italianate; A.E. Jacobson House; built in 1890, for the Jacobsons,

a family of teamsters at an estimated cost \$3000; John Spencer, contractor. Moved from Haste and Ellsworth in 1900. According to BAHA, the large redwood barn at the back was built in 1901.

2220 McKinley Craftsman Bungalow
 2228 McKinley Queen Anne
 2231 McKinley Colonial Revival; known as the Green Dragon House; architect-designed; built circa 1900. Bought by Yum Lee in 1923 for his sons to live in while attending UC.

At Bancroft Way turn right (west) and walk toward Roosevelt Avenue

1816 Bancroft Mediterranean
 1812 Bancroft Mediterranean; former home of the Naked People
 1732 Bancroft Farmhouse; moved from West Berkeley in 1904

At Roosevelt Avenue turn left (south) and walk toward Dwight Way

2307 Roosevelt Cottage (typical of early houses in the neighborhood)
 2322 Roosevelt Craftsman Bungalow
 2325, 2329, 2331 Roosevelt Classic Boxes
 2330 Roosevelt Brown Shingle (with gambrel roof)
 2336 Roosevelt Classic Box
 2400, 2402, 2406 Roosevelt Craftsman Bungalows
 2421 Roosevelt Brown Shingle

If you would like a break at this point, stop at the Becky Temko Tot Park at 2424 Roosevelt before continuing on to Dwight Way

2432 Roosevelt Neoclassic Rowhouse
 2442-46 Roosevelt Designed by architect, Walter Ratcliff

At Dwight Way turn right (west) and walk toward Jefferson Avenue

1733 Dwight Eastern Shingle Cottage
 1729 Dwight Queen Anne Cottage
 1715 Dwight Eastern Shingle Cottage
 1649 Dwight Storefront
 1633 Dwight Eastern Shingle; built 1907. Home of F.A. Postnikov (1872-1952) and family 1911- 1935. He was the first president of the Esperanto Society in Russia (1897) and introduced Esperanto to Japan in 1903; he was a Russian army expert in aerial navigation and balloon construction and warned against the launching of a dirigible in 1908 near Berkeley High that crashed after takeoff. He moved to the US in 1906. In the late 1920's the house was used as a meeting place of the Russian Women's Club of Berkeley. Mrs. Mary Postnikov was the president.
 1621 Dwight Transitional vernacular (Victorian and Craftsman)

At Jefferson Avenue turn right (north) and walk toward Channing Way

- 2438 Jefferson Craftsman Bungalow
2428 Jefferson Cottage; the mid-section was originally a 12 X 20 shed that was brought by barge from SF and used as a temporary shelter after the 1906 earthquake. The front and back were added later. The cottage has a wood sill but no foundation. The large fir and cedar trees were left in containers by the Japanese gardener when he was sent to a WWII concentration camp.
2413 Jefferson Colonial Revival

At this point you might want to take a quick detour to the 2300 block of Jefferson to check out the Sears prefabricated mail order bungalows, then return to Channing. The bungalows, numbers 2316 - 2330, were built between 1917 and 1923. The kits provided everything but tools, concrete, brick or plaster and labor.

At Channing Way turn left (west) and walk toward California Street

- 1615, 1611, 1609, 1605 Channing Craftsman Cottages (Apparently featured in a book about bungalows)

At California Street turn left (south) and walk toward Dwight Way

- 2417-19 California Classic Box; moved here when Berkeley High School was built
2418 California Queen Anne; Hunter House; Structure of Merit (Landmark # 231); BAHA Preservation Award, 2006, James Novosel, architect and owner. Built in 1895 for John Hunter, who bought one acre from the Clark family, who lived at 1545 Dwight Way. Hunter was the vice president of the Parker Match Company, located in West Berkeley.
2436 California Former coach house/barn for the Clark house at 1545 Dwight Way. Much later, it was converted to residence and moved to the back of the lot.

At Dwight Way turn right (west) and walk toward Spaulding Avenue

- 1545 Dwight Stick-style Victorian (Clark House); built in 1884 by A.H. Broad. Owned by Lillie Clark (and William) from 1885 to 1897. This is one of the earliest buildings still standing in Berkeley and represents the transitional stage between the city's rural beginnings and its urban development. The building was used as a commune in the 1970's and is now occupied by S.T.E.P.S..

Turn right (north) onto Spaulding Avenue and walk toward Bancroft Way

2444 Spaulding Brick Cottage (probably built by Fox Bros)
2410 Spaulding Mediterranean; used as bunk house while railroad line was being
built on Sacramento.
2405-07 Spaulding Cottage
2350 Spaulding Brick Bungalow (maybe Fox bros); built by Tom Roberts, Sr. who
built many Berkeley brick buildings in the 1920's
2348 Spaulding Brick Bungalow (same as 2348)
2315 Spaulding Eastern Shingle Cottage
2312 through 2346 Spaulding Bungalows
2311 Spaulding Transitional Queen Anne

At Bancroft Way turn right (east) and walk toward California Street

1547 Bancroft Neoclassic Rowhouse

At the corner of California Street and Channing Way look to your right (east)

1601-11 Channing Wartime Tract Houses

Continue along California Street to Allston Way

2221 California Stick

If you would like to take another break, stop at Presentation Park across Allston Way on California Street and/or at Allston Way turn left (west) and walk toward Spaulding Avenue; at Spaulding walk toward Addison Street

2104-06 Spaulding Mediterranean Moderne
2107 Spaulding Moderne Duplex
2140. 2136. 2120 Spaulding Bungalows

Turn right (east) at Addison Street and walk toward McGee Street

1600-1640 Addison St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church (Landmark #164); built
1907; Shea & Lofquist, architects
1646 Addison Stick-Eastlake; early 1880s

At McGee Street turn right (south) and walk toward Allston Way; at Allston turn left ((east) and walk toward Grant Street

1701 Allston Queen Anne; built in the early 1890s. During WWII troops were
quartered in the house. The first owner was Michael Powell, a
produce peddler on Shattuck Ave.
1711 Allston Farmhouse; built in 1910. When cult science fiction writer

Philip K. Dick lived here with a group of friends in the 1950's,
when he was a teenager.

1719-23 Allston	Architect-designed; Ludgrew House; built in 1905
1745 Allston	Brown Shingle (moved here)
1749 Allston	Craftsman; built in 1910, moved from Bancroft Way in 1920

At Grant Street turn left (north) and walk toward Addison Street

2139 Grant	Apartment building, Stone & Smith 1908
2111, 2115, 2117, 2119 Grant	Classic Boxes
2107 Grant	Victorian (cute, small)

At Addison Street turn right (east) and walk toward MLK Way

1806, 1808, 1812 Addison	Bungalows
1823-25 Addison	Queen Anne
1827 Addison	Queen Anne
1837-39 Addison	Queen Anne
1841 Addison	Queen Anne

The tour ends here -- Robin's Sandwich Shop is just around the corner at Addison Street and MLK Way.

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