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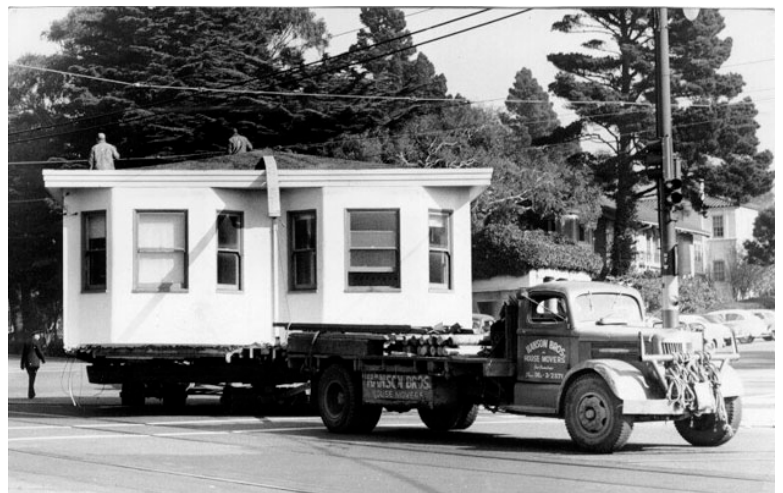
Fall 2020

Due to continuing uncertainty over the course of the covid pandemic, NCCSAH is holding off attempting to schedule any tour programs indefinitely. Meanwhile, in the interest of maintaining communication with the membership, we present this issue of the newsletter featuring an article authored by Richard Brandi, current president of the NCCSAH board of directors. We thank him for his generous contribution to this issue.

The Transplanted Houses of Portola Drive: Post-War Planning for Traffic Transforms A Neighborhood

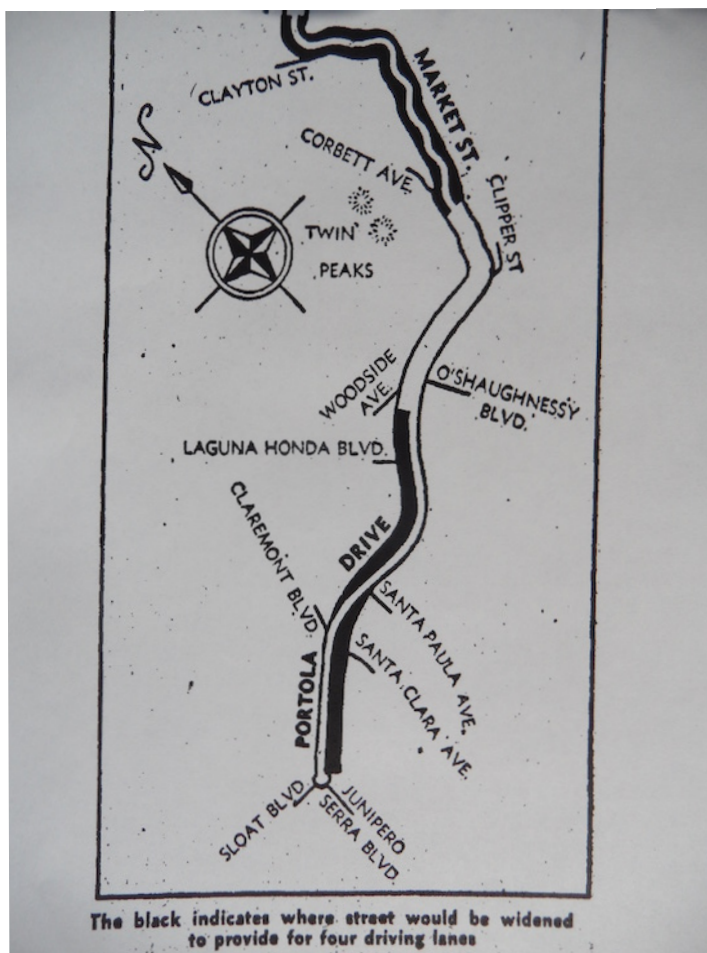
After World War II, San Francisco widened many streets and built freeways to accommodate ever-increasing automobile and truck traffic. The rights of way for these projects used vacant areas when possible, but hundreds of houses were in the way of many projected routes and had to go. More than a thousand houses were removed just to build Interstate 280 in the southern part of San Francisco.

Many houses were relocated rather than demolished. As a child, I was fascinated to watch houses being moved. I couldn't imagine how something so heavy could be picked up and wheeled across town. Although house moving today is rare, it was once commonplace. Houses were moved not only to widen streets and build freeways, but also to make space for apartment houses, government buildings, schools, playgrounds, and the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition.



The Hanson Bros. firm tows a house from the 1200 block Portola Dr. to Daly City, 1955. SF History Center San Francisco Public Library

One of many streets widened during the 1950s for automobile traffic was Portola Drive. It was a section of the old Corbett Road, a dirt trail dating from the 1860s that traversed the slopes of Twin Peaks. During the building of the Twin Peaks tunnel in 1914–1917, Market Street, which ended at Castro Street, was extended up and over the hill until it intersected with Corbett Street. At that point, Market Street ended and became Portola Drive. It was the main route for traveling by car over Twin Peaks. Originally the street had two lanes



*Map of widening project—bold lines show where the street would be widened under the plan.
San Francisco Chronicle, July 12, 1954.*

of traffic, parking along the curb, and many curves and grade changes as it followed the contours of the hillside.

The steady increase in homebuilding west of Twin Peaks during the 1920s caused an increase in auto traffic. During the 1930s, proposals for widening Portola were successfully opposed and instead of widening it, the parking lane was eliminated, resulting in four lanes of traffic. But this arrangement was viewed as archaic and inadequate. The City's 1946 Master Plan proposed a freeway for the route. The *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 23, 1946) editorialized in favor of the "Portola Freeway" saying, "Let's get on with this job. Let's design this future San Francisco as we want it, and strike out boldly to reach it."

Two years later, the plan called for the freeway to end at O'Shaughnessy Boulevard, at which point

Moving the Houses

Contractors bought the houses in the Portola Drive project area from the city with the understanding that they would be moved. One prominent contractor who bought several houses was Charles L. Harney, who also won the bid to widen Portola. He paid around \$1,000–1,500 for each condemned house.

One of four house moving contractors in San Francisco at the time was the Hanson Brothers (see page 1 photo), who claimed to have moved 3,000 buildings by 1950. The company was founded in 1916 by Swedish immigrants Nils, Ben, and Herman Hanson. To move a house, the contractor inserted 16-inch, square pine beams through the foundation and under the floor joists, installed another crosswise set of beams creating a crib, jacked up the house four to five feet, installed wheeled dollies, and pulled the house onto the street. Houses either slid under overhead utility lines or the utility lines were temporarily cut, and houses were towed to a new location.

In the meantime, the contractor constructed a foundation on a vacant lot not too far away. Often a full-height garage was built to receive the house so that a one-story bungalow became a two-story building. In the early 1950s, the cost to move a one-story house that could slip underneath overhead wires was about \$1,200—more, if utility lines had to be cut. The cost of constructing a new foundation was about \$5,000. A contractor could figure to spend about \$1,000–1,500 for a condemned house, \$1,200 to move it, \$5,000 for a new foundation, the cost of a lot, say \$3–4,000, for a total of roughly \$10–12,000 plus any engineering, marketing and selling costs. In the mid-50s, a new two-bedroom, one bath house sold for between \$14,000 and 16,000. So, it seems that house moving could be profitable.



Left: 1000 block of Portola looking north from Miraloma Dr. in September 1951. All the houses on the left side of the street were moved or demolished. Right: Same location on August 19, 1958. Both photos: San Francisco History Center, S. F. Public Library.

Portola Drive would become a six-lane thoroughfare. But even the transportation consultant said that such a project was too costly and would destroy too much housing. Instead, he recommended widening the street. Initially, the consultant thought the widening could be accomplished by narrowing the sidewalks without affecting any houses. But residents were opposed. "I would rather have them take the whole house than nine feet at a time," said Frank S. Fisk of 1385 Portola. "They'll get this plan over my dead body." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, February 11, 1951.) Mr. Fisk was soon to get his wish. Not the part about his death but by a proposal for a much more ambitious project.

Engineers realized that merely narrowing sidewalks would not work. A modern, high-speed boulevard of the 1950s required four wide traffic lanes, a parking lane along the curb, and a center median for left turns. Curves would also be eliminated or made less sharp to increase safety (and also allow higher speeds). This approach would take more land than earlier plans—much of that land occupied by houses.

On June 4, 1954, the Streets Committee of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a plan to raze 71 buildings and remove another 45 to widen Market Street and Portola Drive over Twin Peaks, from Castro Street to Sloat Boulevard. Over the objections of residents, Supervisor Leo Halley concluded that "the great overall good to the community far outbalances the harm to a few people." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, June 4, 1954.) As the project

moved forward, many houses along Portola Drive were picked up and driven to vacant lots in San Francisco and San Mateo County.

Not surprisingly, the affected homeowners were not happy being forced to give up their homes. Most resented being uprooted; some thought the money would be better spent on freeways. "Aside from the destruction of the beauty of the neighborhood, we oppose it on general principles because city officials admit it is only a temporary expedient," said St Francis Wood resident Walter E. Drobisch. (*San Francisco Examiner*, June 4, 1954.) However, other neighborhood organizations supported the plan. The West of Twin Peaks Council (an umbrella group of neighborhood associations) voted 7 to 3 in favor of the project. The mayor and board of supervisors approved the plan.

Opposition increased as it became clear what houses would be changed or removed. "I will be without a garage, front or rear yard, for an unneeded parking lane project," said Ben Dotson of 1441 Portola. "The street is a speedway now and would become a death trap," said Mrs. Marcella Fletcher, whose house at 1325 Portola would be removed. Edith M. Gitsham, a widow at 1260 Portola, said she had "lived in this beautiful view home for 24 years. I guess they will move my house back and in so doing our lovely roof garden will be destroyed." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, July 18, 1954.) Actually, her entire house was removed. Some property owners complained that they were being paid less than it cost to buy a comparable house in another

neighborhood. Others felt a perverse sense of relief, having lived for years under the threat that Portola would be widened; at least now they knew how that change would affect them.

Portola Drive marks the boundaries of several residential developments. Claremont Court sits on the north side of Portola from Waitham to Dorchester Way; Miraloma Park lies across the street, on the south side of Portola. West Portal Park sits on the north side of Portola from Dorchester Way to Sloat; St. Francis Wood sits across the street.

The project fell heavily on those living in Claremont Court and, to a lesser extent, St. Francis Wood, a well-known enclave of single-family houses and generous landscaping, part of the early 20th-century “residence parks” movement. Claremont Court was supposed to become a residence park but it never achieved the results of St. Francis Wood. Much of the building stock is made up of stucco-clad houses on narrow lots without landscaping or the amenities found in St. Francis Wood.



*House moved from 2 Kensington Way, south across Portola Dr., to corner of Lansdale and Dalewood in Miraloma Park.
Photo by the author*

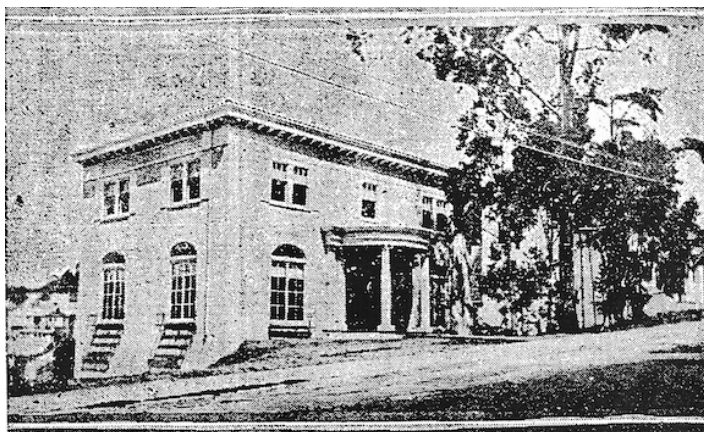
Roughly speaking, the widening project took land from Claremont Court on the north side and St. Francis Wood on the south side. Nearly all of the houses on the north side of the 1000, 1100, 1200 blocks of Portola Drive were removed. St. Francis Wood houses on the south side of the 1300, 1400, 1500, and 1600 blocks of Portola were either demolished, sited farther back on their lots, or relocated. It’s not clear from newspaper accounts whether the city resorted to eminent domain to acquire the houses or negotiated prices with the property owners. Newspaper accounts call the houses “condemned” but do not mention any lawsuits.

Based on aerial photos and Sanborn maps, the houses on the 1000 and 1100 blocks of Portola were often one-story bungalows with garages in the rear reached by an alley. Larger houses with two or three stories were built on the 1200 block. The Department of Building Records show eight original building permits. Of these, three had architects (T. J. Welsh and J. W. Carey; D. Jackle; and C. O. Clausen); the rest were designed by their builders (Charles H. Manning, James Arnott & Son, and Walter Knickerbocker).

It’s not clear how many houses on Portola Drive found new sites or were demolished. Although permits were required to relocate houses, the records at the Department of Building Inspection are incomplete. Nonetheless, the available records show that many houses were moved and the permits often list the destination. Portola houses were scattered in many neighborhoods, including the Bayview, Crocker-Amazon, Glen Park, Merced




*1290 Portola was not moved, but it lost its original portico (shown in photo below from the San Francisco Chronicle, September 19, 1925) when the front yard was cut back.
Photo by author*



Heights, Miraloma Park, outer Mission, and Portola Districts. Some ended up in San Mateo County.

In most cases, house moving was uneventful, but opposition arose in 1955 when Charles Harney got permission to place seven houses on Dalewood Drive in the Miraloma Park neighborhood. At the time, no houses had been built on Dalewood, but the Miraloma Park Improvement Club, the Sherwood Heights Association, and the Sherwood Forest Associations, appealed to the Board of Permit Appeals. They feared the old houses would lower property values, presumably because the 30- and 40-year-old houses did not mix well with the 1950s architectural style then in vogue. The appeal failed, and the transplanted houses are now surrounded by houses built in the late 50s and early 60s. (See photos top of page 6)

One of the houses Harney wanted to move came in for special criticism: a two-story, L-shaped house on the corner of Kensington Way and Portola Drive. Harney was planning to move the house to the corner of Dalewood and Lansdale in Miraloma Park. Opponents argued that the site was not suitable because the backyard would be only eight feet deep. The objections were not successful, and the house was moved to its present location (photo top page 4).

Portola Drive still bears a scar where houses were removed. Along the 1000-1200 blocks is an open space called “Portola Slope Protection” by the Department of Public Works (DPW). There’s no hint of what happened to people and the houses that once were there. 

—Richard Brandi is a historic preservation consultant. He is the author of several books and articles, including *San Francisco’s St. Francis Wood* (2012), *San Francisco’s West Portal Neighborhoods* (2005); “San Francisco’s Diamond Heights: Urban Renewal and the Modernist City,” *Journal of Planning History* (May 2013); “Farms, Fire and Forest: Adolph Sutro and Development West of Twin Peaks,” *The Argonaut* (Summer 2003). His book, *Garden Neighborhoods of San Francisco: The Development of Residence Parks 1905-1924*, is due for publication this December.



“Portola Slope Protection” on 1000 block of Portola Drive, was once crowded with houses. Photo by the author.

Additional photos on the subject of this article appear on page 6

Sources:

San Francisco Department of Building Inspection permits and various editions of the *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Vestkusten* (Swedish language weekly newspaper).

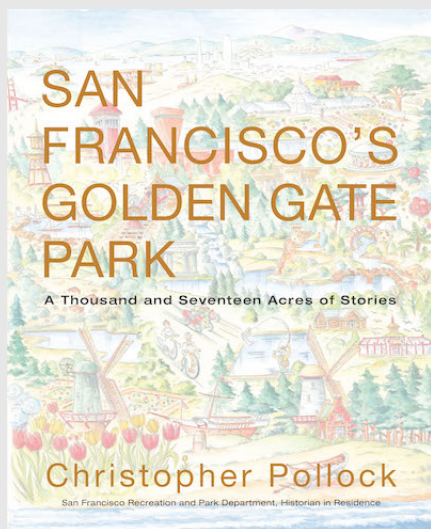
For more about house moving in San Francisco see: Bill Kostura, “Itinerant Houses: A History of San Francisco’s House Moving Industry” in *The Argonaut: Journal of San Francisco Historical Society*, 10:1, Spring 1999; and Diane C. Donovan, *San Francisco Relocated* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2015). The author’s forthcoming book about residence parks, *Garden Neighborhoods of San Francisco*, is due this year by McFarland Publishing.



Left: 269 Dalewood (1927), 267 Dalewood (1915), 265 Dalewood (1920). All once sat on Portola Drive, addresses unknown.
Right: the 1950s context into which these older houses were dropped. Photos by the author.



Left: 1190 Portola Drive in 1930 (arrow), built as a one-story bungalow by Karl Wengard (1927).
Photo: San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.
On right: House now sits atop a new garage story at 330 Harvard Street, just north of McLaren Park. Photo by the author.



Cover art: Chip Sullivan

Christopher Pollock, Historian in Residence for the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, and NCCSAH member, has just authored a significantly updated version of his 2001 book *San Francisco's Golden Gate Park: A Thousand and Seventeen Acres of Stories*. The 150-page book is a hybrid of guide and history to all the park's many features including buildings, meadows, lakes and gates, and the cultural events associated with them. The net price is \$45 and is available directly from the San Francisco based publisher Norfolk Press. Go to: <https://norfolkpress.com/san-franciscos-golden-gate-park-a-thousand-and-seventeen-acres-of-stories-christopher-pollock/> Alternatively, the book is available in San Francisco at the Golden Gate Park 150 Welcome Center, which is directly across the street from the Conservatory of Flowers on JFK Drive; Browser Books, 2195 Fillmore Street; or The Green Arcade, 1680 Market Street.

Sister Organization Turns Attention to Neighborhoods Often Overlooked by Preservation

Approaching its 50th anniversary, SF Heritage, the city's leading preservation advocate, has launched a new initiative, *Heritage in the Neighborhoods*, intended to cultivate an active preservation constituency in the city's diverse neighborhoods. Founded in 1971 as The Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage, the organization was a response to the destructive course of "urban renewal" in the city's residential neighborhoods, notably the Western Addition.



Claiming a small victory there, by 1974, saving and relocating some dozen Victorian houses that had been slated for demolition, the organization focused increasingly on emerging preservation issues in the city's downtown.

Realizing that fighting many individual conservation battles would prove ineffective in the long run, Heritage embarked on a preservation strategy whose foundation would be a comprehensive downtown survey. The results of that survey appeared in the book *Splendid Survivors* (1979) and drew national attention. The Planning Department relied heavily on the survey in formulating the preservation element of the Downtown Plan (1985) enacted in the Planning Code as Article 11.

Meanwhile, Heritage had turned to what insiders came to label "Splendid Extended", surveying Chinatown, the Tenderloin, Civic Center and the Van Ness corridor, SOMA, and the northeast waterfront. By the mid-1980s, the organization was surveying the Inner Richmond.

In 2013, Heritage opened a new avenue with its legacy bars and restaurants initiative, resulting in a 52-page report, *Sustaining San Francisco's Living History: Strategies for Conserving Cultural Heritage Assets*. With Heritage as co-sponsor, the Board of Supervisors established a Legacy Business Registry, that would recognize locally-owned businesses—not just bars and restaurants—that have served their communities for at least 30 years (20 under special conditions). Subsequently, voters approved the Legacy Business Historic Preservation Fund to provide annual grants for businesses entered on the registry and for their property owners if they agreed to a lease extension of at least ten years.

Currently, some 245 businesses appear on the Planning Department's registry.

Earlier this year, Heritage inaugurated *Heritage in the Neighborhoods* "to celebrate and defend the unique characteristics of three San Francisco neighborhoods: Excelsior, Parkside and Marina districts." The pandemic has prevented realizing some planned activities, which were to include walking tours and in-person meetings with residents and business owners to discuss possible surveys, and to identify potential candidates for landmark and historic district nominations. Virtual events have filled some of the void.

Heritage's long-range plan is to expand this effort throughout the city, neighborhood by neighborhood, creating a community-based movement that will advocate for preservation and get involved in active preservation issues. For more information, go to sfheritage.org; under menu heading "advocacy" click on "Heritage in the Neighborhoods".

Other Events Of Interest

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, usual programs and activities of sister organizations have been cancelled, rescheduled or offered online. Please visit websites for updated information. And remember to continue to support your favorite historic, preservation and related professional organizations at this difficult time.



Kresge College, UC Santa Cruz, William Turnbull and Charles Moore. Photo: Hannah Simonson

The '70s Turn 50 in Northern California

In the 1970s many new forms of Modernism began to appear in Northern California, including Brutalism, New Formalism, Corporate Modernism, and residential projects influenced by Sea Ranch and the Third Bay Tradition. But there were also reactions against Modernism itself, such as Postmodernism and Historicism. Join DOCOMOMO/ Northern California for a 60-minute virtual "walking tour" that takes you to Santa Cruz, Larkspur, Sea Ranch and San Francisco. Saturday, October 10, 2020, 11:00 am - 12 noon. Free for DOCOMOMO US Members, \$5 for non-members.

docomomo-us.org/events

DOCOMOMO US National Symposium, in Chicago, Rescheduled to May 26-29, 2021

If you registered for this event, originally scheduled for June of 2020, your registration will be carried over to the new dates with no changes to the announced benefits. For updates: docomomo-us.org/events

Society for Industrial Archeology

2020 Fall Tour: Central & Mid-Coast Maine. Rescheduled to Fall of 2021. Annual Lehigh Valley Conference, Rescheduled for June 2 - 6, 2021. sia-web.org

California Historical Society

Tell Your Story - California during the time of COVID-19.

We are living through an extraordinary moment, a crisis of historic proportions. As California's official historical society, CHS invites you to help document this time. Go to:

<https://www.californiahistoricalsociety.org>

California Preservation Foundation

Preservation Design Awards. Online ceremony, Wednesday, October 21, 2020, 6:00 - 7:30 pm, plus a month of conversations featuring some of the most talented professionals in history, historic preservation and architectural design, throughout October. All Free.

californiapreservation.org

AIA San Francisco

For online events, go to aia-sf.org

San Francisco Heritage

Virtual Lecture Series: *Women in Preservation*.

October 22, 2020, "Intersections of Racism, Gender, and Historic Preservation in San Francisco's Asian American Communities". November 19, 2020, "Preservationists on Preservationists". Audio of July-September lectures also available on website: sfheritage.org

National Trust for Historic Preservation

PastForward Online. Join the Trust online for the first virtual National Preservation Conference, October 27 - 30, 2020. Register now. savingplaces.org

Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

To join or make a donation: berkeleyheritage.com

Oakland Heritage Alliance

Online lecture: *For the Advancement of Women: The Women's Club Movement in Oakland*. oaklandheritage.org

SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS

The mission of the NCCSAH is to promote the study and discussion of our region's architectural history and its related fields; visit significant works of architecture; and increase public awareness and appreciation of our historic built environment. Membership is open to anyone interested in architectural history and its related fields.

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NCCSAH Web Site

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