



# PAST News

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Autumn 2014

## Walking Tours!

PAST is pleased to be offering another series of fall walking tours, focusing on a few of our local neighborhoods each rich with their own history and subculture. Over the past two years, I have been pleased to lead the charge in reinstating the tours after a long hiatus. So far, the attendance has been beyond our expectations! Each event is a superb opportunity to get out in the sunshine, meet some of your neighbors, and broaden your knowledge and appreciation for our wonderful city. All tours are free and open to the public.

*Hayley Stevens, Tour Coordinator*

Tours start at 10 a.m.



**Professorville: Oct. 11**

Led by Gail Woolley

Meet at the corner of Addison and Bryant



**Crescent Park: Oct. 18**

Led by Margaret Feuer

Meet at the southeast corner of University at Seneca



**Homer Avenue: Oct. 25**

Led by Steve Emslie

Meet at The Woman's Club, 475 Homer



**College Terrace: November 15**

Led by Carolyn George

Meet at the corner of College and Harvard

## Researching Your Home

by Steve Staiger

Members of PAST Heritage may be interested in learning more about the history of a specific house (or other building) in our community. Your curiosity may be drawn to an unusual home you see while traveling in town, or the desire to learn more about your own house. If you are lucky, the Guy Miller Archives in room K-7 in the Cubberley Community Center may have a file on your house of interest and your work is done. A visit to the archives and everything you wanted to know is at your fingertips.

Most of the houses in town do not have an existing file; therefore you might be interested in conducting the research (with our help) into the history of the house in question. I call this process **house genealogy**. Answers are sought to numerous questions including when was the house built, who lived there previously, and what did the house look like when it was new.

Many years ago I wrote a brief survey on how to research your home. The report can be found on the PAST website [www.pastheritage.org](http://www.pastheritage.org) and on pages 3 and 4. The strategy for researching is the same for most houses, specific sources depend on the age of the house. An older home located north of University Avenue will require a different list of resources to be reviewed than would an Eichler home in

south Palo Alto built in the 1950s. Homes built in the old town of Mayfield, on the Stanford campus, or on lands that were unincorporated Santa Clara or San Mateo counties present a separate list of issues to contend with.

If you are interested in researching a house (does not have to be yours), please feel free to contact me at the Archives and we can help you get started. It can be frustrating at times, but it also can be fun and exciting to discover pieces of the puzzle. Aside from the opportunity to explore the Archives and examine old documents, maps and photographs, your search may take you to other places (either in person or by communicating with organizations or persons in nearby places such as San Jose, the county seat for Santa Clara County, or far off places where descendants of former Palo Altans live today).

For some, there is a specific need to do this research (perhaps a legal issue). But for most of us, the search is an excuse to discover additional pieces of our history, explore the archives, and have a great adventure. Perhaps this winter is a great time for you to go exploring a piece of your history.

The Guy Miller Archives are located at the Cubberley Community Center, 4000 Middlefield Road, Room K-7 (out back by the tennis courts). We are open Tuesdays 4-8 pm and Thursdays 1-5 pm.

Steve can be reached at [steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org](mailto:steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org)



**We Need 1915 Houses!** 2015 will be here before we know it. If you think your house was built in 1915, please let us know so verifying research can be completed in time to order a centennial plaque for it! Send an email to us at [president@pastheritage.org](mailto:president@pastheritage.org) or contact Janet Peacock at 650-326-9260.



*Built in 1915:  
340 Coleridge, Palo Alto (left) and  
755 Santa Ynez, Stanford (right).*



## Homemade History: Researching Your House

When was your house built? Want to know how to find out? Find out here!

by Steve Staiger

Researching the history of a house is a popular hobby throughout the country. For some, there may be legal or other reasons that demand such research. Researching can be fun and exciting, or full of frustrating dead ends, twists, and puzzles. For most of us, it is a curiosity about our house's history and its former owners and residents that leads us through the maze of information sources toward a clearer picture of our home's past. For residents of Palo Alto, the Guy Miller Archive, located in Room K-7 at the Cubberly Community Center on Middlefield Road, can serve as a starting point and assist you in several areas of research.

There are professional researchers who dig through the legal records, city directories, and other sources to compile house histories. These searchers may go back 200 years or more elsewhere in the United States, looking for information on owners and their homes. In the Bay Area, we do not have such a long history to search through. In fact, there are very few homes in the Palo Alto area more than 100 years old. This relatively short architectural history permits non-professionals to perform most searches on their own.

House research typically attempts to answer the basic questions:

- Who built my house?
- When was it built
- What did it cost?
- Who were the previous owners and residents?
- What did the interior and exterior originally look like?

Answers to these questions may be found in your home, your neighborhood, city or county offices, libraries, and local historical collections.

Your first step should be a search of your home. Some houses will have physical evidence present that can be useful in your search. A copy of the original building permit may still be posted (perhaps in the garage or other out-of-the-way place). Sometimes a copy of the blueprints may have been left by a previous owner. From these sources, names and dates can be gathered.

A structural analysis of the house itself may also yield useful information. A knowledgeable person can often estimate dates to within just a few years by dating house fixtures (such as kitchen appliances and bathroom fixtures) or building technologies (such as the presence or absence of certain materials). These estimates are, however, subject to error due to misleading clues left by remodels, especially those employing materials and techniques from different periods, which will mask the true date of construction. Yet these clues will date alterations to the house that may not appear in any official records.

Your neighborhood is another good source of information. Long-time residents may have a wealth of data not found in printed sources. You might be lucky to discover a long-timer who remembers the construction of your house. This person may offer details like the original color, landscaping, or unusual events associated with the house's construction. This neighbor and others may

Continued on next page.

provide you with detailed family histories of earlier residents, including the names and number of children living there. These “oral histories” that you compile may also include information on the development of the neighborhood.

## Permits and Tax Records

After searching your house and talking with neighbors, you will want to look at documentary evidence to confirm what you have learned or to fill in gaps in your knowledge. Depending on the date of construction and the legal jurisdiction, the city or county building department may have a copy of the building permit issued for your house. Information included in the permit will be the date it was issued, name(s) of the owner and architect and/or builder, cost, and perhaps floor plans. Later building permits will be evidence of alterations, additions, and major remodels.

A search of the county tax records in San Jose or Redwood City will reveal the real estate transactions associated with your property. It is easier and quicker to search by property parcel number (found on your property tax bill). These transaction records will trace changes of ownership, mortgages, or increases in assessed value (perhaps due to construction). This information is useful in filling in the gaps between previous homeowners.

## Library Resources

Former residents of Palo Alto and surrounding communities can be found listed in the collection of city directories kept at the Guy Miller Archives. Years ago Polk city directories were issued for many communities throughout the country. City directory coverage for Palo Alto began in 1895 and continued until 1979. For many of those years residents of the Stanford campus, Menlo Park, and East Palo Alto were included. Unlike the tax records, which record changes in ownership, the city directories

trace residents or properties by street address as well as by telephone number. An added feature of the city directory for many years was the listing of occupations for head of household.

Located in the Guy Miller Archives are the files of the Palo Alto Historical Association. These files contain several sources of information that can supplement your home’s history. The Palo Alto Historical Association (PAHA) has a set of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps available for Palo Alto and the former community of Mayfield. These large-scale maps show individual lots and the size and type of buildings constructed thereon (including auxiliary structures, such as garages and sheds). PAHA also has an extensive collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, and other materials of historic interest. The photographs can be useful in researching the restoration of a building’s facade. Other local historical groups and libraries may have similar collections for communities served by them.

## Newer Houses

You need not have an old historical home to conduct a search of its history. Homes 20 to 30 years of age can reveal an interesting, if short, history. Remember to keep a record of your search and leave a copy with the new owners should you sell the house at some later date. Also, please be sure to give a copy to the PAHA Guy Miller Archives. Your research might be the starting point for a researcher in 2094.

Steve is available for questions at the Guy Miller Archives, Room K-7, Cubberly Community Center, Tuesdays from 4–8 p.m. and Thursdays from 1–5 p.m.

You can e-mail Steve at [steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org](mailto:steve.staiger@cityofpaloalto.org) or call him at 650-329-2353 during office hours.

# Historic Preservation in Palo Alto: The Case for Preserving Our Community's Architectural History

by Lizzie Orr \*

Palo Alto is a city which prides itself on its forward thinking and innovative spirit. In this light, looking backwards at maintaining the area's older buildings can seem to negate this sense of progressivism. However, historic preservation — the process of preserving our architectural history — touches on key issues of sustainability and economic growth that have become essential parts of the Palo Alto psyche.

## Historic Preservation

Historic preservation is the practice of preserving and conserving the built environment, including buildings, monuments and landscapes. This process includes both researching properties and performing structural and chemical analysis on remaining structures in order to compose a site plan delineating how a property is to be restored. Most often a historic preservationist, a professional with a Masters Degree in Historic Preservation, is employed to create and carry out these plans.



819 Ramona, built for the AME Zion Church before and after restoration. Awarded a PAST Preservation Award in 2011.

While new property owners may be attracted to the idea of tearing down existing buildings to use their land in new ways, historic preservation offers the possibility to utilize existing structures for new purposes. Classic homes can be refurbished to hold modern amenities, such as updated plumb-

ing and AC, while still keeping with the architectural styles that have given Palo Alto its cosy Californian feel.

## Sustainability

Recycling and sustainability go hand-in-hand, and historic preservation is no exception. Instead of simply tearing down old buildings, reusing key structural elements and architectural details is an essential part of the preservation process. This reduces waste while maintaining the historic character of the building.

Older buildings often employ the use of passive solar building techniques: using the building's shape, materials and orientation to affect natural heating and cooling of the spaces. Therefore these structures start out more efficient. Utilizing existing passive solar technology in older buildings also helps save money. These structures cost less to heat and cool because the form of the building does the work. Combining the preservation of such existing structural elements and materials with state of the art systems make for an efficient and cost effective energy footprint. As such, historic preservation is a great way to practice a sustainable lifestyle.

## Economy

This idea of sustainability is inherent in the philosophy of historic preservation and makes preservation instead of destruction an economical option for property owners and the community at large. It may seem that hiring preservation professionals to fix what is broken would be more expensive than simply starting over— but this isn't so.

Donovan Rypkema, Professor of Historic Preservation Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, gave a presentation at the

2007 Historic Districts Council Annual Conference, **Sustainability, Smart Growth and Historic Preservation**. In his speech, Rypkema urges that sustainable development is essential for economic competitiveness. Historic preservation brings local professionals to projects in their area for restoration, instead of outsourcing products from large nation wide sellers and manufacturers. For example, a broken window or historical window casement can be repaired locally, keeping funds within the community, as opposed to buying a new window from a national manufacturer. Local sourcing also encourages the expansion of the artisan community of craftsman.

Using what you already have to create something more (and more efficient) is the only way to be truly sustainable. Historic preservation is the perfect vehicle for sustainability and neighborhood cohesion.

### **Celebrating the Palo Alto Built Environment**

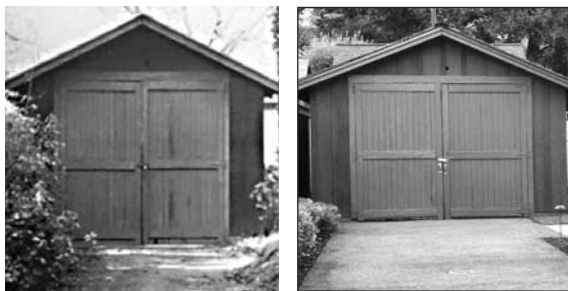
In Palo Alto, innovation did not start in large modern buildings. Hewlett-Packard famously built its first product in a garage on Addison Avenue. It is these types of structures that give Palo Alto its sense of place. One of the greatest ways to honor our past is by building on it (both literally and figuratively) and allowing our historical roots to be integrated as a part of our everyday experience.

All of this information is not to say that new

buildings should not be built. Some buildings are damaged to the point of being unrepairable, or simply are not right for the needs of the property owners. Historic preservation seeks to enhance our future by celebrating our past. While innovative new buildings that focus on LEED and green building are definitely the best new construction techniques moving forward, historic preservation takes advantage of existing architectural heritage for the benefit of the community. Progress should never be avoided, but by employing historic preservation, we, as a community, can while celebrating our cultural and architectural history.

If you are interested in learning more about historic preservation options for your home, send us an email at [contactPASTheritage@gmail.com](mailto:contactPASTheritage@gmail.com) .

*\*Lizzie Orr is a native Palo Alto resident with a Graduate Certificate in Historic Preservation from the University of Pennsylvania. She currently is a Board Member of Palo Alto Stanford Heritage.*



The H-P garage before and after restoration. Awarded a PAST Preservation Award in 2006.



Hoover Pavilion before and after restoration. Awarded a PAST Preservation Award in 2013.

## PAST's Past/PAST's Future

Hello,

PAST has recently gone through a few changes that slowed down our ability to conduct events and mail membership renewals. We are now back to operating as we have in the past as the advocate for preservation of Palo Alto's built environment through educational events and publications. Some of the current issues facing the city may impact preserving historic Palo Alto for future generations. It is important that PAST continue promoting the value of a diverse city of old and new structures. One step toward this goal is providing docent led walking tours starting on October 11 with the Professorville Historic District (see article on page 1).

Additionally, we plan on publishing stories in PAST's newsletters that highlight our

historic city and why it is so important that we assure that older structures are valued for their contribution to a vibrant city.

PAST has also established its own sites on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (see box on page 8) to promote PAST's activities to a wider audience.

PAST's future depends on volunteers and financial support. We appreciate all PAST members' time and money that enabled PAST to advocate for preservation for the last 27 years. Please consider starting/continuing that support by returning the form below.

Thank you,

Brian George  
PAST President

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Please support PAST's preservation work with a contribution of your time and/or money.

Here are some ways to help:

Serving on the Board  
Researching centennial houses  
Leading a walking tour

Photographing houses in your neighborhood  
Helping with events  
Sending a check

Yes! I want to help by \_\_\_\_\_

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Street \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (day) \_\_\_\_\_ (evening) \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make check payable to PAST Heritage and mail to us at P.O. Box 308, Palo Alto, California 94302**  
Because PAST Heritage is a tax-exempt charitable organization, contributions are tax deductible in accordance with IRS regulations.

## Calendar of Historical Happenings

Oct. 10 – Mar. 15 — *Museum of American Heritage A to Z*, Museum of American Heritage, 351 Homer Ave., 11 a.m.– 4 p.m., Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Free.

Sunday, November 2, 2 p.m. — *Creating Resources for 3rd Grade Classes*. Palo Alto Historical Association, Lucie Stern Center, 1305 Middlefield Road.

Sunday, December 7, 2 p.m. — *Palo Alto Vignettes*, Palo Alto Historical Association, Lucie Stern Center, 1305 Middlefield Road.

Oct. 11, 18, 25 and Nov. 15 — *Saturday Morning Walking Tours*, Contact Hayley Stevens  
[hes.stevens@gmail.com](mailto:hes.stevens@gmail.com) (Details on page 1)

Sunday, Nov.16 — *Preserving Your Life: Saving a Record of the Past for the Future*. Brian George will showcase the importance of media in preserving family and community history at the Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Rd, 2 p.m.

**Historic Resources Board** — 1<sup>st</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesdays – 8 a.m., City Hall, 250 Hamilton Avenue.

## Researchers Wanted— Volunteer Today!

Help research centennial homes. No experience necessary. Will train. Get to know the PAHA archives!  
Easy parking.

E-mail Brian George at  
[president@pastheritage.org](mailto:president@pastheritage.org)



## PAST Social Media Sites

YouTube

<https://youtube.com/user/heritagePAST>

Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/heritagePAST>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/PASTheritage>



## PAST News

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P.O. Box 308  
Palo Alto, CA 94302

PAST Heritage is a nonprofit organization advocating the preservation of the historic architecture, neighborhoods, and character of the greater Palo Alto Stanford area through informed citizen involvement and education.

## PAST Heritage Board of Directors

President:	Brian George
Vice President:	Tom Johnson
Secretary:	Hayley Stevens
Treasurer:	Tom Johnson

Carolyn George (Webmaster)  
Lizzie Orr (Social Media)  
Steve Staiger (Historian)

[www.pastheritage.org](http://www.pastheritage.org)