

A HOTEL AS A HOUSEHOLD: INTERPRETING THE CONTENTS OF THE RAILROAD EXCHANGE HOTEL WELL

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ABSTRACT

The Railroad Exchange Hotel (1864-1938), one of the first constructed in West Oakland, catered to skilled laborers primarily employed by the Central Pacific Railroad. The hotel was owner-occupied and had a restaurant and bar. Recent excavations of the hotel's well yielded a large variety of artifacts including well-preserved perishable items. Through analysis of the artifacts, it is possible to differentiate between items from the hotel's daily activities and those used by the hotel's residents. This paper will examine how analysis of artifacts contributes to our understanding of 19th-century residential hotel life as a household in the emerging community of West Oakland.

INTRODUCTION

A well from the Railroad Exchange Hotel was excavated in 1995 during the Cypress Freeway I-880 Replacement Project in West Oakland. The hotel was located on the corner of Seventh and Bay Streets, on the historic edge of the San Francisco Bay. It was built in 1863 as one of the first hotels in West Oakland and provided short-term and long-term housing for people in the neighborhood. It catered primarily to skilled laborers employed by the Central Pacific Railroad which was just two blocks to the south. Residential hotels, boardinghouses, and lodging houses were in demand because of jobs associated with the construction and maintenance of the Transcontinental Railroad and industrial growth in the San Francisco Bay area. This paper is a work in progress and focuses on the boardinghouse lifestyle at the Railroad Exchange Hotel in late nineteenth century Oakland.

Historical archaeologists often excavate households where there is a clear association between known individuals and their trash. These households are often made up of nuclear and extended families with clear relations between individuals such as husband, wife, mother, son, daughter and so on. The associations of known people to their trash enables us to make a correlation between the historic documentation of these people and the factual but fragmentary story told by their trash. How do we examine a property that had both transient and stable residents? I propose looking at a boardinghouse as a

household, even though residents are loosely affiliated. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines a household as: "A domestic establishment including the members of a family and others living under the same roof" (Morris 1976:638).

A boardinghouse might be called a household because the occupants eat most meals together, often work in the same industry and spend leisure hours in the public rooms of the house together. How can archaeologists get at 'lifestyle'? It is impossible to dig up camaraderie or laughter caused by a good joke. But it is possible to excavate artifacts that will tell you the diet or health of the tenants.

BOARDINGHOUSES

A Harvard economics study of short-term lodging by Albert Wolfe in 1906 reveals that boardinghouses had a limited duration of operation. Boardinghouses were the first type of short-term housing to be established in developing towns. Residents were provided with a bed and meals at scheduled times. Wolfe found that boardinghouses provided a home life where boarders knew each other, because they met for meals two or three times a day. Landlords often took a personal interest in their boarders. "There was a certain personal element in the relations between individuals; no one could be isolated and entirely shut up within himself" (Wolfe 1906:47).

Wolfe describes a transition in Boston, from 1880 to 1905, during which boardinghouses were replaced by lodging houses. Boardinghouses provide rooms and meals at scheduled times which are paid for regardless if they are eaten. Lodging houses only provide rooms and meals are eaten elsewhere at cafés and dining rooms. The competition from eating establishments put pressure on boardinghouses. Many stopped serving meals and became lodging houses instead. This transition had both economic and social consequences. This transition away from boardinghouses meant that residents no longer congregated at one location for meals and were instead eating by themselves. Acquaintances that were struck up during meals would not be a substitute for boardinghouse comradery.

What type of person became a resident of a boardinghouse? Boardinghouses were the first homes of many native and foreign-born people arriving in town. Skilled mechanics often resided at boardinghouses because their employment was transitory in nature. "Both one of the causes and one of the results of the wonderful economic efficiency of modern industrial organization lies in the large number of skilled mechanics who are ever ready to be up and moving to some other place on short notice, literally "journeymen" with no fixed place of abode, no strong family ties, little effective social instinct" (Wolfe 1906:9).

Did these patterns observed in turn-of-the-century Boston occur in West Oakland? To identify the decline of boardinghouses in Oakland it would be necessary to see a drop in boardinghouses and a rise in lodging houses in the census records, city directories and other archives. Increasing diversity of eating establishments over time could parallel lodging house growth.

RAILROAD EXCHANGE HOTEL HISTORY AND NEIGHBORHOOD

The Railroad Exchange Hotel was one of the first residential establishments built on Seventh Street at Oakland Point. It was one of the longest in operation and had the same name for the entire time. In 1863, the first East Bay railroad was built down Seventh Street, crossing in front of the Hotel as it went to the rail and shipping yards. From 1862 to 1866 the population of Oakland doubled, no doubt stressing the existing housing facilities (Clarke Pub. Co. 1914:364). When the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad

was built in Oakland, the railroad workers' housing and employment was centered in West Oakland. Many other boardinghouses were built on Seventh Street, within a few blocks of the Railroad Exchange Hotel.

John Frese, an 18 year old from Germany, came to California on the brig *Express* in 1849 and settled in Oakland as a farmer. He was married to a woman from Germany in the fall of 1860 and they had a son and daughter by 1870. They ran the Railroad Exchange Hotel from 1863 to 1887. An advertisement in 1869 calls the business "A First Class Mechanics Hotel" (City Directory 1869). In 1887 the hotel was sold to Olaf and Johanna Anderson, a Norwegian and Swedish couple who remodeled the hotel in 1890, doubling the capacity to 40 tenants. Both owners lived adjacent to the hotel and ran the business themselves which was owner-run for at least forty-five years.

The description of the hotel and tenants changes over time from hotel to boardinghouse and lodging house. The Railroad Exchange Hotel is referred to as a 'hotel' until 1878 when it is listed under both 'hotel' and 'boarding' in the city directory. The Census records are incomplete for 1880 and nonexistent for 1890. However, we do know that the 1894 *Oakland Great Register* lists 27 men at the hotel. By 1900 a transition had taken place. The 1900 city directory lists the hotel only under the category of 'furnished rooms.' The 1900 census lists all 17 tenants as 'lodgers.' It appears that the hotel attempted to offer board again in 1910 because the both the city directory and census list 'boarders.' However, the 1920 census once again shows 27 'lodgers' at the hotel.

The tenants of the hotel are only names to us that we have learned from the census records, Oakland city directories, voter registers and death records. We know their age, nationality, place of birth and occupation. They were all single or widowed white men, except for one woman, and the major employer was the Central Pacific Railroad. Tenant residence was variable, with some staying for less than a month and others for a few years; at least two stayed for over 10. This particular boardinghouse apparently had more tenant stability than the other boardinghouses on Seventh Street (Praetzellis 1994).

Having just described the hotel owners and the transitory occupancy of the tenants, can the

hotel owners and residents be described as a household? Studies of Western settlement have shown that demanding economic circumstances encouraged new social arrangements (Purser 1987). Despite the fact that the occupants of the Railroad Exchange Hotel did not share commodities and were fundamentally living in an economic arrangement, they did share other things that we associate with households. Most of the tenants were single men from other states or foreign countries and presumably did not have family nearby. They may have worked together, shared a common language, or had similar goals. These men had shared experiences. The stability provided by the proprietors, who were themselves successful immigrants, may have fostered a home-like environment.

"THE WELL" ARCHAEOLOGY

A well was constructed in the backyard of the hotel sometime in the early 1860s. The exact date of well construction is not known but it is assumed to be during construction of the hotel building because there was no public water delivery system in Oakland at the time. The well may have been abandoned some time during the 1860s, '70s or '80s when the municipal water supply was available. It may have been either used for non-drinking water or abandoned altogether due to the intrusion of salty sea water from the San Francisco Bay.

The brick-lined well, measuring six feet in diameter and twelve feet deep, was excavated stratigraphically for the first seven feet. At this point it became necessary to excavate in arbitrary 12 inch layers because the soil was too wet to distinguish strata. In all, seventeen archaeological strata were defined. A total of 1,165 whole items and 6,276 fragments were recovered.

The contents of the well do not represent the entire sequence of occupation or behavior of the residents of the Railroad Exchange Hotel. Variability of what was tossed in the well, preservation biases, and questionable ownership of materials creates an ambiguous picture of change over time at the hotel.

During analysis, the collection was crossmended to determine the sequence of deposition. Ceramics and glass crossmend within the layers from the top four feet, and within layers from the lower eight feet, indicating that there are two depositional phases. The crossmend data

along with the dates from ceramic makers' marks and embossed bottles suggest the entire well assemblage was deposited within a short period of time in the late 1880s or early 1890s. We do not have the whole hotel occupation sequence represented in the well.

There may be differential preservation in the upper, drier, and the lower, saturated, well strata. Bone from the lower half of the well shows exfoliation, probably caused by fluctuation of the water-table. Did water in the well cause increased preservation or cause degradation of other organics? Significant quantities of cloth fragments were found throughout the well deposits, indicating comparable preservation of organic materials throughout the layers.

We do not have remains from the entire hotel represented in the well. For example, it is known that John Frese had a bar at the hotel. Frese was assessed \$100 for furniture and bar fixtures in 1863 and \$200 for furniture, liquors, and bar fixtures in 1866 (Tax Assessment Roll 1863:104; 1866:99). Because of the presence of a bar, one would expect a large quantity of alcohol bottles and tumblers. However, we did not recover sufficient amount of them to conclude that the bar's trash is in the well. If this is true, where did that garbage go? If some Hotel trash is missing, what else is missing?

Because of the dating and crossmending data, and the fact that only part of the hotel's trash is in the well, it is not possible to see the transition from boarding to lodging house in artifact changes. But, it is possible to see the lifestyle of the hotel residents in the late 1880s by looking at their diet and the health products they used.

The contents of the well represent both items from the functioning of the hotel and behavior of individual residents. Hotel artifacts include parts of furniture, a hotel room key tag, fragments of a ledger book, and standard sets of hotel ceramic tableware. Personal artifacts include jewelry, buttons, clothing attachments, clothing, shoes, and tobacco, cigars and snuff.

Food containers and food remains, such as bone and floral remnants were used to analyze the diet of the residents at the Hotel. Because not everything that is consumed will leave evidence in the well, it is not possible to fully reconstruct the entire diet of the Hotel occupants. Dietary remains from the well feature a wide diversity of floral

remains including peach, plum, apricot, cherry, strawberry, blackberry, elderberry, grape, pumpkin, squash, walnut, hazelnut, almond, peanut, and coconut. These floral remains could be from either fresh or preserved food. Eggshell and egg membranes, shellfish, and bone represent the non-floral food. Food containers for pickles, condiments, olive oil, pepper sauce, sweet oils, and wooden keg lids stamped with "Mackerel" give us an idea of what condiments and packaged foods were being purchased. Preliminary faunal analysis has identified cow, sheep, pig, duck, goose, chicken, turkey, rabbit, and jack rabbit remains in the well. Beef and mutton comprise the two largest categories with pork being a distant third. It appears that sides of beef were being purchased and butchered on the premises.

Artifacts related to grooming and health include medicinal bottles, brushes, nit comb, syringe component, tooth brush, comb, and toothpaste. Bottles with embossed descriptions of the contents were found in quantity in the well. Jamaica Ginger, Lows Extract, and Hostetters bottles, to name a few, indicate that the tenants were concerned with their health. Some may have turned to the bottled remedies for relief. At least 20 bottles of Lows Extract were recovered indicating this product might have been provided by the hotel for residents. A nit comb and syringe component are two other indicators of health concerns at the hotel. Did the tenants have lice problems from overcrowding or poor sanitary conditions?

CONCLUSIONS

The boardinghouse lifestyle was typified by positive and negative aspects. Regular meals provided an opportunity to interact with other tenants but controlled mealtime and quality of food being served. Living conditions may have been crowded, unsanitary, or crude. However, for these single men, it was a home life that some kept for many years.

The historic context provides an interesting problem of changing lifestyles from boardinghouse to lodging house. Unfortunately, it does not appear that we are able to address this question with the assemblage from the well. Instead, the well provides a snapshot of life in the late 1880s of transient skilled laborers in a group housing context. These men do not appear in historical records except for their name, nationality, place of birth and age. The artifacts from the well show that these men ate a variety of foods spiced with condiments, took pleasure in snuff and tobacco, wore work clothes, and were concerned with their health and cleanliness.

Directions of further research include rigorous archival research to find more information about Oakland boardinghouses and the life of hotel tenants after boarding at the Railroad Exchange Hotel. Comparisons of the well's assemblage to other households in West Oakland may show similarities to the Railroad Exchange Hotel.

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