

**FROM 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY VICTORIAN TO THE CHOSEN FAMILY COMMUNE:  
A STUDY OF THE BURDELL TWO STORY FRAME HOUSE  
AT RANCHO OLOMPALI**

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**ABSTRACT**

A two-story frame house located in Marin County, California was examined using archeological techniques to prepare an historic structure report in advance of a rehabilitation project. First constructed circa 1873 as part of an "elite" ranch complex, this building has acted in a support capacity to the main house on the estate over the years. Rancho Olompali was listed on the National Register in 1973, a time when details of significance such as "contributor" had not been specified. Although nominally eligible under Criterion C, it may be a more likely candidate under Criterion D due to various renovations that have taken place over the years which may shed light on its rather vague history. In addition, due to the prominence of Rancho Olompali in the late 1960s as a "hippie" commune and resort for such groups as the Grateful Dead, the building's eligibility may be justified under Criterion G.

**INTRODUCTION**

This study of an historic house built ca. 1873 was stimulated by the need for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) in order to qualify for a Transportation Enhancement Activity (TEA) grant. At the same time, such an Historic Structure Report (HSR) was intended to meet California State Public Resources Code 5024 mandates to inventory historic properties under state ownership. The California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has a very large number of such buildings distributed among its more than 250 state parks. Typically, while the legislature mandated such an inventory, it provided no specific funding to accomplish it. Therefore, historic structures are usually properly recorded only when a major development project is in effect. The only other funding source currently available is the Cultural Resource Management Program administered by the Resource Management Division of DPR. This woefully underfunded program can only support a few such studies at best each year.

In this case, an historic building at Olompali State Historic Park (SHP) in northern Marin County, California was the subject of a TEA grant proposal initiated by architects of the Planning, Acquisitions, and Environmental Development Division (PAEDD) of DPR. It is a two-story frame house built by the Burdell family about 1873 to house Mrs. Burdell's cousin and her family (Burdell 1998). Over the years it has generally housed various individuals who were employed on the estate known as Rancho Olompali. However, since its acquisition by DPR in 1977, the lower floor of the building has been used mainly for storage and office space while the upper floor has been largely abandoned to the vicissitudes of the bats and other critters that manage to get inside. The TEA grant was sought to allow for the building to be rehabilitated for use as office, museum, meeting space, storage and public restroom. My role was to prepare the appropriate Section 106 documents to process the grant proposal. As part of this Section 106 study, we sought to complete an HSR on the building.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF RANCHO OLOMPALI

The property known as Rancho Olompali derived its name from a Coast Miwok Indian village site associated with the place. Excavations by Dr. Charles Slaymaker (1976:B-10) from 1972 to 1978 revealed the house floor of a large dwelling (20 by 14 meters) radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1600 ± 75 years. It has been conjectured that Olompali may have been a ceremonial site in a place that formed the common border of three California Indian tribal groups (Coast Miwok, Southern Pomo and Southern Wintun). Associated with this house floor Slaymaker reported finding an English silver sixpence of the reign of Elizabeth I dated 1567. This find combined with the radiocarbon date suggested the possibility of a connection or at least contemporaneity with the visit to California of Sir Francis Drake in 1579.

The site continued to be inhabited by Coast Miwok peoples into the period of the establishment of the California missions in the Bay area beginning in 1776. Some people from the village were taken into the early missions of Dolores (San Francisco) and San Jose´ where over 200 people were sent. In 1817 a mission *asistencia* was established nearby at San Rafael. This became a full-fledged mission in 1822. A mission rancho was established at Olompali by 1828 and it appears that its *capitan* was a neophyte named Camilo Ynitia. In 1843, with the support of Mariano Vallejo, Camilo Ynitia petitioned for and was given a land grant for the property that continued to carry the name Olompali. He held on to the property even after the American takeover of California in 1846 and it was confirmed to him by the federal lands commission in 1852. At this point he promptly sold the majority of the land to a Scotsman named James Black who had established himself in California during the Mexican regime and married a woman named Agustina Sais from a neighboring family. Their only child, a daughter named Mary Agustina Black was educated in a Catholic boarding school in San Jose´, California. Following her graduation she married an American immigrant dentist named Galen Burdell, who was based in San Francisco. Mary and Galen Burdell were given Rancho Olompali by Mary's father as a wedding gift (Mason

1971).

Unfortunately, Agustina Sais Black died in Galen Burdell's dental chair while undergoing treatment. James Black remarried a widow by the name of Maria Pacheco. Toward the end of his life, he changed his will, providing little of his property to his daughter, instead giving it over to his widow and her children. Following his death in 1870, his daughter Mary Agustina Burdell contested the will in court. This led to an acrimonious legal struggle that went on for four years, but resulted in a victory for Mrs. Burdell. Prior to James Black's death, a niece named Mary Joynsen and her family immigrated to California to help care for him. During the trial, Mrs. Joynsen provided important information about the level of drinking and thus mental instability of Mr. Black in his final days. She was ordered off the Black property by Black's widow and according to family tradition she and her family were taken in by the Burdells. The two-story frame house was built to accommodate her family in 1873 (Burdell 1999). How long they stayed there is not clear from the historical record. They do not appear to be at Olompali on the 1880 census. The house was next occupied by James Burdell, Sr. and his wife, Josephine, following their wedding in 1892 (Burdell 1999).

In the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the house was occupied by the family of the superintendent of the ranch, a man named Tobin. They left when the Burdells sold the property in 1943. In 1948 it was purchased by the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit institution. The Jesuits developed a retreat at Olompali. In order to provide a number of rooms for visiting priests, they partitioned off some open areas on the second floor to create individual rooms. Later, in 1967, the property was purchased by Timothy O'Donoghue who leased out portions of the property. A wealthy local named Donald McCoy rented part of the property and established a hippie commune that he called "The Chosen Family." The commune became a focus for counter-culture activity including popular music of the day. The bands most closely identified with Olompali were the "Grateful Dead" and the "Jefferson Airplane." Several "Grateful Dead" album covers display scenes of Olompali (Brandelius 1989:35). The "Dead" actually rented Olompali and lived there in

the summer of 1966 (Scully 1996:53-63). In February 1969 a fire badly damaged the main mansion on the property. This mansion had been built by James Burdell, Sr. in 1911. It encompassed the earlier clapboard house of his parents, Galen and Mary Burdell, that they had built in 1867. In turn, these structures were built around the adobe of Camilo Ynitia. The hippies soon left and the property reverted back to the University of San Francisco which did little with it and deeded it over to the Marin Open Land Conservancy which, in turn, sold it to the State of California in 1977 to be administered as a state park.

### **THE TWO STORY FRAME HOUSE**

Built about 1873, the building has a channel rustic siding and was originally a rectangular structure; however, an addition soon appeared on its southwest corner. In the twentieth century a shed addition on the north side enclosed what had once been an outdoor stairway and entrance to the second floor on that side. The upper portion of this addition was described as a screened-in sleeping porch by Lillian Tobin Cash who had lived there as a child in the 1930s and up to 1942 (Cash 1998).

Mrs. Cash provided some details of the living arrangements in the building prior to ownership by the University of San Francisco. The Jesuits evidently made the most dramatic changes in the makeup of the interior of the building. In addition to having placed a number of interior walls to create more individual rooms, the Jesuits also covered all the walls and ceiling with plasterboard. This now masks to a large extent a variety of earlier windows, doors, and other features, including chair rails, picture rails, etc. The Jesuits also changed the bathroom facilities to reflect their own needs for a number of toilets, sinks and shower stalls to accommodate a number of single men rather than a family.

During the period of the "Chosen Family" commune residency at Olompali (1967-1969), the two-story frame house was used as housing for a number of the commune members. Their main contribution to the décor was the colorful paint

regime they introduced to the various rooms, evidently reflecting the personal whims of the various occupants.

Following the departure of the commune members the building has remained largely empty of residents and the neglect shows throughout. Overall, except for the periods of approximately 1892-1911 and 1938-42, little or no first-hand knowledge of the uses of the interior of the building have been reported. This lack of a strong historical base has a negative effect on the determination of significance for the structure, especially under Criteria A, B, and C. However, the very mystery of the uses and occupants of the building make for an argument for its value under Criterion D, in that a close study of the building may well contribute to our knowledge of life at Rancho Olompali. The fact that the building may indeed have housed not only the notables, but the servants or hired people at the ranch throughout parts of its history adds even more to its importance to us in telling the story of essentially ahistoric characters.

### **OBSERVATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY**

The object of our on-going study is to fully record the structure and to determine the sequence of episodes of construction (and destruction) that have affected the two-story frame house. As an organizing technique, I have been utilizing the Harris Matrix principles (Harris 1989) as applied to the vertical stratification of a standing structure. Martin Davies (1987, 1993) in his chapter on the application of the Harris Matrix to standing structures laments the "lack of [manuals and methodological procedures] on standing structures" that would parallel the plethora of such applications to archaeological excavation (Davies 1993:167). Within my own organization (Department of Parks and Recreation), this use of the Harris Matrix on standing structures has been most adroitly applied by Peter Schulz, who developed a form for recordation (Winter and Schulz 1990; see figure 1). The important elements of the Harris Matrix are the numbering of "events" or changes to the building, whether of construction, decoration, remodel or outright

destruction. One of the most ubiquitous elements that we record is the sequence of paints applied to various portions of a building. Most valuable to us is a part of the most original structure that may have been sufficiently conspicuous to be painted over at virtually every event of the history of the structure. From such an object one gains a base sequence to which those found in other building features can be compared. In the case of the two story frame house, although there were a number of paint events noted, they seem to have been disproportionately in the latter years of occupation. In fact, when we sampled the underlying vertical board walls that are currently covered over by the Jesuit plasterboard, we were surprised at how few layers there were. However, the tell-tale element of tack holes in this wooden wall were a clue that the wall was covered over with wall-paper during the majority of its life span. In fact, Lillian Cash commented on the presence of wallpaper at the time of her residence (ca. 1938-42).

One intriguing question is the presence at the north end of the second floor main hall of what was once a doorway comparable to the main entrance facing east on the bottom floor. There remains a diagonal scar on the original north side of the structure that is currently enclosed within a shed addition. Unfortunately, we have no early photos of the building showing the north side and so do not know what form the staircase took. Was it simply a fire escape or might there have once been a separation of the upper and lower floors for residential purposes? If so, this must have been changed prior to 1938 because Lillian Cash remembers the north extension being in place with the upper floor used as a screened-in porch.

The main stairway itself presents various structural anomalies that still need to be worked out. It is interesting that certain decorative features of the stairway are similar to the original clapboard house built by the Burdells upon first taking up residence at Olompali in 1866. These include an Eastlake style in the stairway railing decoration and newell posts similarly designed to those in the Burdell home.

The trim around the 4/4 light, double-hung windows and the interior room doors is the most telling element indicating what was original. They

show distinctive forms of bull nose molding that does not appear on later trim. All of this trim is attached using cut nails. The paint layers bear out the relative antiquity of these features.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two-story frame house at Olompali State Park is a generally unprepossessing building dating back to ca. 1873. Much of its history is still rather vague and it probably was used mostly to house servants for the household. However, it is one of the major remaining early structures, especially with the partial destruction by fire of the Burdell mansion. The foggy history of its use would normally make it questionable as a candidate for any of the National Register Criteria A, B, and C. However, a dissectional analysis of the building coupled with more intense research that would be inspired by such a focus would make it a candidate under Criterion D, especially when one considers the potential to elucidate the lifestyles of the usually obscure servant class on such an "elite ranch" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, its connection with the Grateful Dead may make it eligible under Criterion G (established for structures less than 50 years old but with historic potential).

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STRATIF-  
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EVENT:

SITE: \_\_\_\_\_

AREA / ROOM: \_\_\_\_\_

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Figure 1. Stratification Event Recording Form