

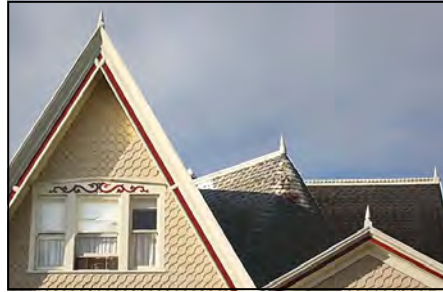
Exploring Eureka's historic neighborhoods

Architectural LEGACY

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A STROLL THROUGH TIME

Ross Park

No mansions but plenty of high-class style blossomed in this neighborhood during the late 19th and early 20th centuries

Story and photography
by Kathy Dillon

Now and again, Helen Connick Person drives through the neighborhood her family moved to in the 1920s. Much has changed: the old Lafayette Grammar School at 11th and M streets, for example, is long gone – replaced by Ross Park.

Still, the Connick home just half a block away looks much the same. There were more open spaces between the houses back then. They're all filled in now with newer homes and apartments. But the gracious old houses remain and stir memories.

"It was a nice, quiet neighborhood," Helen recalled. "I remember the teachers all walked to the school – by our house, so

we had to be good."

This residential section of Eureka – roughly from L to O and 8th to 12th streets – may not be in the preservation lime-light, but it nevertheless remains a show-place for some of the

city's prime and much admired historical architecture.

There are no grand estates here, but rather the middle- and working-class houses that reflect Eureka's two main growth spurts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was a time when high-style Victorians burst onto the scene, giving way in the early 1900s to the more simple, natural graces of Colonial Revivals and Craftsman bungalows. All are enduring works of art.

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Residents walk dogs and play with their kids in Ross Park. The first Lafayette school was built here.



The two Maguire houses on M Street (left) and the Rager house on L Street (below) reflect the stories of the earliest residents in this part of the city.

ROSS PARK

FROM PAGE 1

Perhaps the oldest house here, 833 L St., dates back a bit further, to 1878. According to the Eureka Heritage Society’s survey files, this Italianate home was likely built for either William Carson or John Dolbeer — the city’s biggest lumber barons.

Still standing, it became the longtime home of the Rager family, beginning in 1885. Levi Rager, a native of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, his wife, Mary, and their children arrived in Eureka in 1869. Rager had been a successful steamboat cabin builder in the South but lost everything in the Civil War. He started over in Eureka, where he died at age 93 in 1907.

Among the Ragers’ first neighbors was William Maguire, a timber railroad section boss whose small Italianate home was built around the corner at 804 M St. in 1885. One of the stars of this year’s Heritage Society Home Tour, it has been meticulously restored by current owner Josh Kuhnel.

In 1906, Maguire had an elegant 1½ story late Queen Anne cottage built next door. Now the Mikkelsen residence, it has proved an ideal spot for artist Leatrice Mikkelsen.

“I liked this house right away,” she said. “The light was the best, and I wanted the high ceiling for the circulation.”

Leatrice has taken on a list of rehab projects. She has rewired, replumbed, restored much of the woodwork, repaired the diamond-pane windows, and — like most of her neighbors — is still repairing cracked plaster walls from January’s temblor.

This second Maguire house was a latecomer; this was a style



Humboldt County Historical Society

Levi Rager stands in his garden at 833 L St.

more popular a decade earlier, but it was a fond one for many Eurekaans who held onto the look after builders in other parts of the country found newer architectural trends.

As was the case along most of the North Coast, many of the early residents and builders in this neighborhood were from New Brunswick, Canada. Among them was George Close, who constructed the houses at 917 and 923 M St. and 1134 10th St. Close was a millwright and furniture dealer, and it seems he was advertising his carpentry skills with these houses. His own 1887 Stick-Eastlake beauty at 10th and M is a standout.

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ROSS PARK

FROM PAGE 2

Described as “a superb example of the late 19th century decorated cottage” by the Heritage Society, its windows and eaves are laden with ornamentation, with fish-scale shingles layered in-between. All now gleams with new blue and white paint.

The 1890s saw the arrival of impressive two-story Queen Annes throughout this area. Prime among them is another blue wonder at 1102 M St. It was built in 1896 for Alonzo and Mary Bacon, who had lost an infant son the year before but welcomed a healthy baby daughter in 1898.

This was no surprise to the current owners, Steve and Susan Peacock, who uncovered two cameo hearth tiles profiling the faces of a boy and a girl.

“We’ve always assumed they

[symbolized] the children of the original owners,” Steve said.



In residence since 1988, the Peacocks have uncovered other

treasures, including most of the elegant woodwork. Original doors were used as a pattern to reconstruct those that were lost. The door style also was copied to build new cabinets.

Steve has done much of the work himself, including adding a replica garage and replacing missing balustrade parts on the front porch. He got help from Steve’s Stained Glass, which designed a peacock motif for the window on the front door. And Blue Ox Millworks took a replacement square porch post and matched it to



A cat basks in sun in an elegant square bay window at 1134 10th St.



At another blue beauty at 1102 M St., a stained-glass peacock graces the front door.

the style of the house. Then the rotted porch floor was replaced with a cement pattern that resembles wood.

A seismic retrofit was done after the 1992 quake, using a method that retains the pier-and-post foundation.

“I’m a structural engineer,” Steve said, “and all the Victorians need to have their foundations upgraded.”

This house has had many owners in-between the Bacons and the Peacocks.

They included the Woodcock family — Helen Connick Person’s cousins — who were in-residence from 1929 to 1943.

The Peacocks bought it from the Eureka Rescue Mission, which used it to help the homeless. The Mission bought it in 1969 from the First Congregational Church, which used it for two decades as a home for troubled single mothers. The household included the minister and his daughter. One day, not long after the Peacocks moved in, the minister’s daughter knocked on the door, hoping to see inside. She was invited in. “We’ve been exchanging Christmas cards ever since,” Susan Peacock said.

Continued on Page 7

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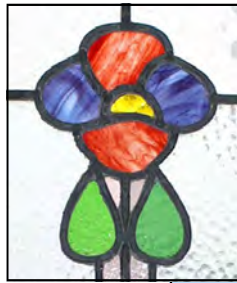


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Story and photography
by Kathy Dillon



Greg DeBacker collection



FROM TOP: A floral designed from an antique replacement window Greg DeBacker found locally. Phillias Petch poses on the front steps. The interior restoration includes the dining room (above), where elegant wainscoting and the fireplace have been given new life. An in-progress view of the dining room (right).



Greg DeBacker collection

“This was the worst house on the block. I actually had people come up and thank me for buying it and cleaning up the property.” -

cedence at Petch House



Working on his own, a 21st century owner is fully rehabbing this 19th century beauty

Wearing fresh paint like a fine, new wardrobe, the gracious 115-year-old Queen Anne at 904 M St. seems to stand with serene pride. Newcomers would never guess the grand structure has endured some tough times.

All credit for the home's fresh lease on life goes to current owner Greg DeBacker. In 2002, he bought what was then another one of Eureka's "decaying old houses." Its most recent history had been that of a notorious drug house, with a bullet hole through its front arched window and decrepit appliances and cars piled up in the yard.

Greg soon began work on a massive rehabilitation project — and neighbors took notice.

"This was the worst house on the block when I bought it," he said. "I actually had people come up and thank me for buying it and cleaning up the property."

The house started out in much grander style when it was built for the upwardly mobile Petch family in 1895. Through research and information gathered from descendents, Greg discovered Thomas Petch was in the British Royal Navy when he went AWOL in San Francisco in 1878. That year he also met and married a Scottish emigrant named Phillias. He was 19; she was 17. They eventually settled in Eureka and had three sons.

By 1893, Thomas was superintendent of the Eureka Gas Works and later operated the Eureka Lighting Co. The Petches were renting a house on J Street owned by next-door-neighbor Eugene Mowry, one of the city's noted architect/builders. Mowry designed the ultra-opulent Vance-Simpson mansion, the



Greg DeBacker collection

The Petch family included father Thomas (left) and mother Phillias, seen above with her three sons.



Grand Hotel, and two of the fanciest homes on fashionable Hillside Street — one which bears a striking resemblance to the Petch House. Greg believes Mowry also designed the Petches' new home, although he is still searching for concrete evidence. He also speculates that, given the owner's occupation, Thomas wired the house himself as a show-place for his business.

The Petches' personal success didn't last. In 1905, Thomas and Phillias separated. He moved to Santa Rosa. She stayed in Eureka and rented rooms to boarders. Phillias sold the house in 1919, and new owners divided it into apartments. This work included a two-story addition on the main house and a separate Mission style apartment/garage.

For the next six decades, the structure was a respectable working-class residence. It wasn't until the 1990s that it fell on hard times.

when I bought it.
me for buying it

— Greg DeBacker

Continued on Page 6



Completed projects include the dining room and foyer.



PETCH: A rebirth

FROM PAGE 5

The evidence was unmistakable. Greg heard stories of drug busts from local authorities, and while doing the initial cleanup he discovered numerous hypodermic needles and rounds of ammunition. It was time for a big change.

The Petch House is Greg's second old-house rehab in Eureka, and he has learned how to do the work through study and practice. So far he has removed the 1920s addition and rehabbed the kitchen, foyer, and dining room.

The dining room's original wainscoting was painted green, and the built-in cabinets had been removed to make way for a Murphy bed. Greg has refinished all the woodwork and rebuilt the cabinet using old-growth redwood he has found through various venues. Once, while walking down a street, he serendipitously came across two slabs of redwood and purchased them from the owner. Other finds have come from Almquist Lumber, the old Daly's Department Store, and even from e-Bay.

Still to be done are the two downstairs parlors and most of the upstairs. And that bullet hole must go.

"To me," he said, "it's not a history the house is worthy of."



The remodeled kitchen features vintage cabinets, including one that hides a modern dishwasher.

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The Miller (left) and Morelli homes on L Street

ROSS PARK

FROM PAGE 3

The 20th century brought in new styles. The beloved Queen Annes blended with the next big trend, Colonial Revival. One of these transitional works of art belongs to Stephen and Shirley Miller at 1204 L St. They moved in in 1976 and have since retro-fitted, redone the kitchen and applied vast amount of paint.

This house, built for attorney Joel Burnell in 1907, has an exceptionally complex Queen Anne roofline (see photo Page 1, second from left), yet its porch looks like a mini-Grecian temple, using classical elements favored in the American Colonial era.

The look entranced the Millers. “The first time we saw it, we walked in and were just drawn to it,” Shirley Miller said.

The same is true at the Morelli house down the street. It was built in 1902 for John Armstrong, a constable. By the time Val Morelli bought it in 1971, it had long since been turned into apartments and was a sorry site.

“I had to shovel the dirt out of this house ... and the grass around the house was waist high,” she recalled with a laugh.

Val did most of the work to turn the house back into a single-family home. It took time. “Let’s see, I’ve been here for 39 years, and I finished about 2 years ago,” she laughed.

The next architectural stars were Craftsman bungalows. The era of ostentation was over — and the Humboldt Standard took note in 1910: “Practically every new residence which has been constructed this year is of the bungalow type, that style of architecture now having a firm hold in Eureka as it has in the southern and central parts of the state.”

Continued on Page 8

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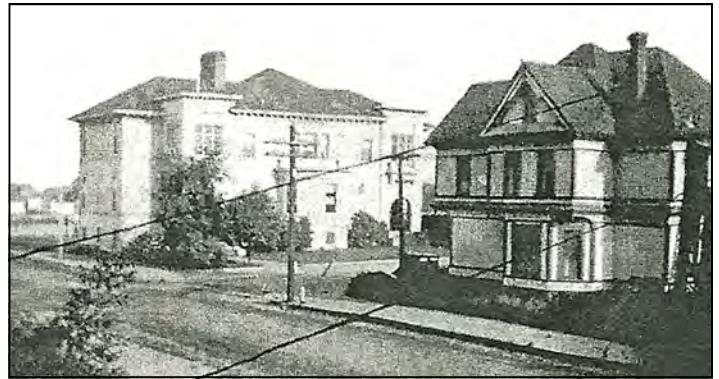
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This 11th Street house was built in 1905, and the Connick family owned it from the 1920s-1970s. The pink Victorian behind it was built on the corner in 1889 but was later moved to make way for apartments.



Helen Connick Person collection

ROSS PARK

FROM PAGE 7

With so many new houses, a neighborhood market was built in 1906 at 11th and M. Customers included students from Lafayette Grammar School, constructed across the street in 1903. Its story has been recounted in “The Lions Roar” by Carol Skaggs, retired librarian for the modern Lafayette on Park Street.

The first school was impressive, but it always had a leaky basement. In the 1940s, the school district gave up repairs and demolished it. The open space became Ross Park.

While several rental properties lend a transient, good-times-bad-times element to the area, many say it’s a good place to live.

“It was a reasonably rough neighborhood when we moved in, and we’ve watched it get better and better,” Stephen Miller said, adding that Ross Park had become a drug scene but now seems to be drawing more families and dog-walkers.

Greg DeBacker, owner of 904 M St. (see Page 4), said the area is also home to halfway houses for prisoners on parole, but officials have managed the program well.

“It’s not like I would want it there, but it’s not the worst thing,” he said. “They respect people’s property ... and you don’t hear a peep out of them after 8 o’clock.”

Life in historic homes and neighborhoods has its joys and challenges, yet many agree the effort is worthwhile.

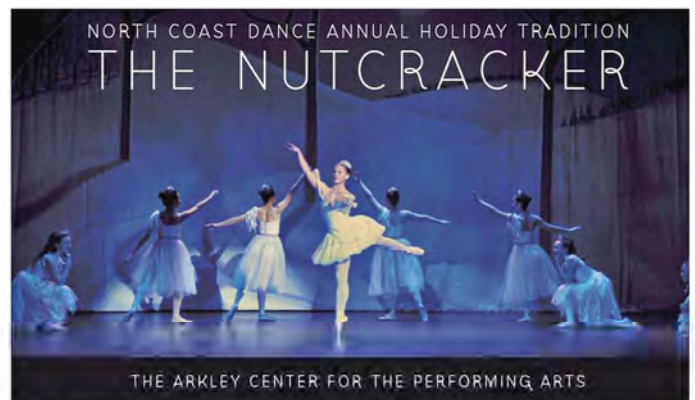
“I just love my house,” Val Morelli said. “The Victorians always seem so elegant, so regal. They have character.”

There’s still much to admire in Helen’s enduring neighborhood.



The first Lafayette School (above) was built in 1903 across from the Bacon House. A Craftsman beauty on M Street (left).

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