

LIVERMORE



A Historical Walking Tour

LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA: A HISTORICAL WALKING TOUR

Livermore's Victorian-era homes are a fine cultural and historic asset. They represent a comfortable, unostentatious lifestyle in which Livermoreans indulged themselves at the end of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century. Most were open and airy, taking into consideration Livermore's hot summers and mild winters. They were built on large lots, usually 75' by 150' in size, and were surrounded by lush shrubbery and flower beds; lawns were not generally the rule.

Oral tradition has told us many things about these houses and the people who lived in them. But other, more concrete facts about their construction are available from other sources. The *Livermore Herald* each year from 1885 into the 1900's published a list of houses, outbuildings and other improvements to property both in town and in the surrounding countryside that had been made in the previous year. W. P. Bartlett, publisher of the *Herald* and part-time real estate promoter, issued his famous 1889 birds-eye map of the community. Most of the buildings on that map have been identified by use and owner. Other sources of information are Sanborn maps. The Sanborn Company was a fire insurance underwriting firm that rated cities throughout the United States on their fire protection capabilities (fire fighting equipment, water supply, etc.). Their maps identify the building locations, size, construction materials and use. Such maps for Livermore were published in 1884, 1888, 1893, 1097 and 1917, and have proven a valuable aid in bracketing the construction dates of many of the buildings in the community.

1. First Presbyterian Church - Fourth and K Streets

The Presbyterian Church at the corner of Fourth and K Streets was dedicated on July 26, 1874. It was constructed at a cost of \$3500, of which \$1230 was raised by popular subscription among the townspeople, and \$800 came from the Presbyterian Board of Church Erection. Originally the entrance was on K Street, with the pulpit at the west end of the sanctuary. The classroom section was added about 1890. When the church was renovated in 1915 the floor plan was reversed, the belfry moved and the building exterior resurfaced with stucco. Further modifications were made in 1928 and 1952. This building, now called the Founders Memorial Chapel, was replaced by a new sanctuary in 1964.

The Meyers Block

Jacob Meyers, who came to Livermore about 1875, purchased lots on each side of L Street from Fifth to Sixth. The Meyers family home was located at the southeast corner of Fifth and L, now occupied by the Veterans Memorial building.

2. Wallace Meyers - 529 South L Street

Built in 1902 in the Craftsman shingle style, this was the home of Dr. Wallace Meyers, one of Jacob Meyers' six sons. Over time, the exterior has been stuccoed, but there is evidence of the original shingles on the north dormer. The living room/ dining room interior has lovely beamed ceilings and a clinker-brick fireplace.

3. Thomas E. Knox - 567 South L Street

The Thomas E. Knox home was constructed in 1898 and is the first stucco house in Livermore. Knox came to the valley in 1882 and established, with his brother-in-law, a vineyard in Isabel Avenue. He was also a cement contractor and local political figure, serving from 1900 to 1924 in various positions as postmaster, mayor, tax collector, and county supervisor. The stucco on the north side beneath the bay window is interesting because Knox varied the texture from panel to panel almost as if they were product samples for his prospective customers.

4. Oscar Meyers - 580 South L Street

Oscar Meyers, another of Jacob Meyers' sons, built this house in 1895 in the Queen Anne style. It is probable that the architect was Henry Meyers, still another son who went on to later fame as the Alameda County architect. This house was the Presbyterian manse for 50 years beginning in 1905 before it was returned to private ownership. The window "brows" on the south side upper story are exceptional.

5. William H. Taylor - 585 South L Street.

Directly across the street is the Will Taylor home, built in 1897. Taylor was a clerk at Anspacher's Mercantile Company, and later had his own firm, W. H. Taylor Company on First Street. His wife, Lilly, was the only daughter of Jacob Meyers. Local lore says that Henry Meyers designed this house in the Colonial Revival style as a wedding gift to his sister. (Henry Meyers' own home in Alameda is almost identical to this building.)

6. J. H. Wilson/ W. A. Mitchell - 610/626 South K Street

In the Livermore Herald for March 4, 1908, this item appears: "C. H. Rasmussen has the contract for erecting for J. H. Wilson and W. A. Mitchell two six-room modern cottages on the quarter block they recently purchased from J. O. McKown at the corner of Sixth and L Streets." Rasmussen's work here is very similar to others in the Colonial Revival style that he built throughout the town. Note the summer kitchen behind the Wilson house (the one on the corner).

7. Frank R. Fassett - 1881 Sixth Street

Frank Fassett's home is in an eclectic style, combining elements of San Francisco Stick style and Queen Anne architecture. Fassett was a prominent farmer and county supervisor in the early 1890's, and is best known locally as the Father of School District Unification in California. He sold this home to Peter Barthe in 1886. It is one of the few homes left in Livermore with a carriage house, and also has one of the few remaining summer kitchens.

8. Italianate - 657 South M Street

Little is known about the origins of this Italianate cottage. It is not shown on the Bartlett 1889 map. Neither is it shown on one of the early Sanborn maps because the area south of Sixth Street wasn't mapped until 1920. The architectural style, however, is one popular in the 1890's and resembles similar homes in town that can be dated. The floor plan of the Italianate style included a central hallway flanked by two rooms, one was often a bedroom and the other a formal parlor with pocket doors that opened into a large sitting/dining room the width of the house.

9. Rasmus Hansen - 766 South M Street

This outstanding Queen Anne home was built by Elizabeth Gallagher in 1902, and purchased from her by Rasmus Hansen in 1911. Note the various decorative elements: the *rincaux* on the cornice band, the interesting gable brackets and the plate-and-button treatment on the gable make this house a valued local architectural landmark.

10. Richard Rees - 737 South M Street

Richard Rees' home is one of two Queen Anne style homes with a characteristic tower. A local pharmacist, Rees built this residence about 1895. At that time, most of the property to the west was cow pasture. On the lot to the south Rees constructed a fine croquet court. Some of the distinctive Queen Anne architectural elements, in addition to the tower, are the circular gable windows, the "swept" window in the roofline between the gables, and porch columns capped with classic capitals.

11. Phillip Anspacher - 879 South L Street

The Phillip Anspacher house is the successor to one that was destroyed by fire and is shown on Bartlett's 1889 map. The Anspachers were prominent dry-goods merchants and hay-and-grain dealers with warehouses on L Street near the railroad tracks. After the first house burned, Anspacher had this built in 1888 for \$5000. Although intended as a family residence, the Anspachers never lived here. More recently the house has become rental property.

12. Ellen Hart - 799 South L Street

This is believed to be one of the earliest homes in the community, constructed in 1875. Thomas Hart ran a stage stop on the Dublin Road from 1854 to 1860 called the Half-way House because it was midpoint between Livermore and Dublin. Hart died in 1870, and his widow, Ellen, took up residence here shortly after. Later records show the property sold in 1898 for \$2500, a premium price for housing in those days.

13. Dennis Bernal - 755 South L Street

This distinguished Craftsman home was built by Dennis Bernal in 1911. A descendent of the family who was granted Rancho El Valle de San Jose, Bernal was prominent Livermore business man for some years. At different times, he operated an electric company, a brewery and was a carriage painter. Bernal is probably best remembered as the man who gave the light bulb to the town fire department in 1901 that still burns today in the East Avenue Fire Station #6.

14. Pioneer Saltbox - 691 South L Street

This is another cottage that has not been thoroughly researched. It does, however, appear on the 1889 Bartlett map, which helps support its age. The architectural form, which is called Pioneer or Saltbox, is typical of inexpensive (\$500) construction of the time.

15. A. L. Thomas - 679 South L Street

A. L. Thomas erected this story and a half cottage of six rooms in 1885 for \$800. Thomas was a machine agent (salesman for Singer Sewing Machine Company)

16. H. B. Wagoner - 2058 Seventh Street

The Wagoner home (named after the family that bought the property in 1900) was originally located at the northeast corner of Seventh and L Streets. It appears at that location on the 1889 Bartlett map, so its construction date is obviously a few years prior. It is known to have been built by B. D. Morrill, a carpenter on the Hiram Bailey estate, located on the large block directly south. The house was moved to its present site in 1940.

17. Laughlin Moy - 690 South K Street

Laughlin Moy was a sheepherder in the Midway area. He built two small houses there in the 1870's, and later moved them into town, joining them together. Moy had a cow pasture on the lot to the east until about 1900 when the Reimers house was constructed there. The small shed under the pepper tree in the back yard was Moy's milk house.

18. Ed Snapp - 758 South K Street

Ed Snapp was a carpenter-builder who came to Livermore from Santa Cruz about 1895. He built three almost identical houses on adjoining lots on speculation. This is the only one remaining.

19. Jesse Bowles - 2217 College Avenue

Jesse Bowles, who built this house, was on the first town Board of Trustees in 1876. He was also a brother-in-law of William Mendenhall, founder of the town of Livermore. Bowles' house appears to have been moved here from the corner of College and L Streets in the late 1880's, as it is shown on the corner site on the Bartlett map. No date has been established for its original construction. It stands so close to the curb because College Avenue was widened in 1932.

The Model Block

For years the block bounded by I Street on the east, Eighth on the south, J on the west and Seventh Street on the north was known as the Model Block. Fred Schrader, a local blacksmith and several other investors purchased the whole block. Their intent was to make it a model in every respect. Only dwellings above a certain minimum were to be built. The yards were to be uncluttered with driveways, and access to the rear of the lots was provided by a 20 foot wide alley.

20. Varney Cottages - 812/824/838/854 South I Street

The four cottages on the east side of I Street below Eighth were built in 1903 by local banker, H. B. Varney. He built the corner house first and occupied it while the other three were under construction. Note how each one has evolved a character of its own with minor modifications and different exterior colors.

21. Fred Schrader - 713 South I Street

Fred Schrader, a local blacksmith, built this home in 1911. Note that its architectural characteristics, those of Colonial Revival, are somewhat freer than other examples seen on this tour. Note also that we have reached the southeast boundary of the "grand houses" in Livermore, that cluster of late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century homes whose center is the Sixth and South L Street intersection.

22. Fifth Street School

Fifth Street School, originally known as Livermore Grammar School, is the third site in Livermore for public elementary education. The first school was a one-room building dating from 1866 and located on the Dublin Road (now Portola Avenue). That building was moved as the center of population grew to a site that is now Livermore High School football field. Here, another building joined the first one. The continued increase in school-age children demanded a larger building, that was erected on a block bounded by Fifth, I, Sixth and J Streets. The land was donated by William Mendenhall. For two years, beginning in 1891, the student body included post-eighth graders awaiting completion of a high school to be located at Seventh and H Streets. The original Grammar School was replaced by the present structure in 1922.

23. Reubin Hunter - 627 South I Street

Reuben Hunter's house dates from about 1883. Rube was the town postmaster in the late 1890's, and later School Board trustee. An apocryphal story is told that, in this latter capacity, he brought before the Board the matter that while he was sitting on his front porch, he noticed that the teachers were using the outside facilities during school time. He felt that they should be inside teaching the children and taking care of their personal needs on their own time. No record of any action by the Board has been found in the Minutes.

24. Italianate - 2173 Fifth Street

This Italianate house is another about which almost nothing is known. The proportions of the primary portion of the house are exceptional: they give one the sense the structure is an almost perfect cube, as high as it is wide.

25. George Taylor - 2173 Fifth Street

The George Taylor house was built before 1889. Taylor was the town constable and later rural route mail carrier. He was married to Susie Morrill, whose father was Hiram Bailey's carpenter. The floor plan is identical to the Italianate cottage at 657 South M Street, and to several others in the community. Was there a common floor plan for all of them? This house was later occupied by T. M. Twohey, a cement contractor, whose mason's mark can be found in the sidewalk around the Carnegie Building.

26. Carnegie Library - 2155 Third Street

The Carnegie Library is a fine example of Greek Revival architecture. It was designed by William Weeks, a Watsonville/San Francisco architect, who did plans for many of California's Carnegie buildings. The block was formerly Peter McKeany's barn where many of the nearby townspeople stabled their horses. The land was sold to the city in April, 1910 for \$9000. A grant request for \$10,000 was successfully submitted to the Carnegie Foundation by the Livermore Women's Improvement Club. Completed in 1911, this was Livermore's Public Library for 55 years. The building now houses the Livermore Heritage Guild's History Center, and the local art association's art gallery.

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Walking Tour Route

