

# City refutes Realtor claim that 606 Ellis buyer could build 10 stories high

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discolored tan brick building built about the same time that houses a busy, 19-year-old Coin Op Laundromat. On the north side of 645 is the three-story historical gem, a home with fancier brick, excellent adornments and a lusty history. It was once owned by popular hussy, Tessie Wall, whose expensive cathouses were known for their elegance.

Six years ago, when The Extra came across a single-family home that was up for sale, reporter Stan

Hutton thought it so rare that he combed the area for others. His subsequent Page 1 story in the October-November 2001 issue began:

"Only five dwellings in the Tenderloin are classified as single-family homes. And one of them, at 611 Jones St., will likely soon be demolished and replaced with eight stories of condominiums."

At the time, owner-developer Taso Manitasas said he wasn't worried about getting his condo project approved by the Planning Commission. On Oct. 11, 2001, when the commissioners gave the okay for the demolition, it looked like a done deal, but they hedged

on how much backyard to concede to the building. The reverberations from 9/11 and the dot-com bust deepened and the project fell through.

Now, 611 Jones St. remains the only wood-frame, single-family home still standing in the Tenderloin. The cream-colored, green-trimmed runt lies between a four-story apartment building and the four-story Halcyon Hotel; with its Colonial Revival front from a 1933 remodeling, it looks defiantly out of place. Water was turned on there in 1866, records show.

It's amazing it has survived. It has been surrounded by hotels and apartment buildings since at least

1910, and it's anybody's guess how the builder, Timothy Moynihan, got a permit in 1907 to put up wood that soon after the devastating fire of 1906.

Manitasas told reporter Hutton he didn't know much about the house's history other than he heard it once had a red door and that "newspaper people" attended parties there. He bought it in 1997 on a bank foreclosure and had never lived in it, he said. He and his wife live in Novato. Efforts to reach him failed. Now his phone is disconnected and the operator had no new number.

Other single-family homes Hutton identified were: 645 and 647 Hyde, 3 Meacham Place, and 1035 Post St. Somehow, 606 Ellis St. didn't make the list.

3 Meacham is across from the back entrances of the Hyde Street residences and near the end of Meacham Place next to a still-operating PG&E power plant. Built in 1900, it was rebuilt of brick in July 1906, just months after the fire and earthquake, probably using some of the foundation that remained, a practice of the time. The owner, A.B. Ruggles, turned it into a live-work Chinese laundry.

The pert and tidy building is behind an unkempt three-story red brick apartment building facing Post Street that has a couple of broken windows and a tattered black awning. 3 Meacham is no longer a residence but a business. Sean and Caroline Ziegler bought it three years ago from Clive A. Sheldon for about \$700,000, according to city records. It is the home of Voicebox Creative, a branding and design firm that numbers among its clients Beringer, Clover Farms, Duraflame and Jack in the Box. Sean Ziegler is a managing partner.

Until recently, Timothy Merrill-Palethorpe and his wife Jennifer lived behind the mysterious industrial-looking facade at 1035 Post between Larkin and Polk. It's also where Merrill-Palethorpe ran his graphics business, Fulcrum Legal Graphics, that employs experts in a variety of fields to create visual presentations in courtrooms.

The front of the building is a wall of 108 frosted-glass windows, each framed in black metal. Above the

windows is a gray concrete facade with a 2-foot-high, black metal shield from which a bas relief head of Medusa looks out across the street where nine of the 10 buildings on the block are apartments. 1035 Post was erected in 1919 as an auto supply store. Merrill-Palethorpe said he bought the building from an architect whose extensive renovation converted it to a snazzy live-work space. But in June, Merrill-Palethorpe sold the place, and with Jay Jeffers, the new owner, it reverted to work-only.

There's nothing outside to identify the business, but stepping inside is the capacious, well-groomed studio of Jeffers Design Group with a 20-foot-high ceiling showing support beams and, in back, steps leading to a work loft. Jeffers, an interior designer, doesn't intend to live there. In an e-mail, he said he likes his neighbors and is crazy about the location that's convenient to Potrero Hill where the Design Center is, and to his clients in Pacific Heights and Marin County. The only drawback, he says, is trash and debris on the street.

"The space itself was already a fantastic shell, which is what attracted me to it in the first place," Jeffers said. "I absolutely love the area. It's a very colorful neighborhood and really feels like the center of the city to me. I find it very interesting that there are only four single-family homes left in the Tenderloin. I had no idea."

TRI Coldwell Banker's flyer makes no mention that 606 Ellis St. near Hyde is a single-family home. In fact, it says it's an "existing commercial building."

But the Department of Building Inspection, in an August 2007 report, described it differently. Acting on a telephone complaint that there was a new awning and a lawyer/accountant shingle hanging out front, DBI investigated. It found a single-unit residence on the second floor, a storage area on the ground floor, and no office furniture. Inspector Ivan Sarkany told the owners, Ba Tong and Thanh Mai (Monica) Tran, to stop trying to use it for commercial space until they got City Planning approval and a permit. They have a popular one-stop business on the Ellis-Hyde corner. They live in the Sunset District.

The Trans' business, beneath a seven-story apartment building whose west side abuts 606 Ellis, is Happy Travel & Legal Services. It offers Vietnamese clients help with tax filing, money orders, notarizing, visas, translations and more.

After the fire of 1906 swept away the 600 Ellis block's structures, 606 was one of the first to go back up. A 1909 Department of Public Works map shows 80% of the block barren and 606 Ellis surrounded by empty lots.

The Trans bought the house in 2004 for \$710,000 from Clarisse Carriere. The house, built in 1907, had been in the Carriere family since 1966 when Lew Serbin sold it to the widow Florence Carriere for \$53,000, according to city records. Actually, Florence owned 50% and her son and his wife, George and Clarisse Carriere, 50%. Florence died first, then George.

A neighbor from the apartment house across Ellis

Street told The Extra that 606 Ellis had for years been "a little oasis" in the concrete jungle.

"It had a sort of forested appearance, nestled down between big apartment buildings," said Jonathan Runckel. "I knew Mrs. Carriere only to speak to — I knew her husband but I don't know what he did for a living. After he died, she became a recluse."

Runckel said a fragrant magnolia tree existed for years behind the Northfolk Island pine that he believed the husband had planted. But it was taken out sometime after a son moved in with his mother, and before she sold it to the Trans.

The removal of the pine three years ago by the owners, though, was a chilling spectacle to residents. The tree was close to 100 years old and maybe 100 feet high. Responding to complaints, Supervisor Daly authored the legislation that allows San Franciscans to nominate "significant" trees of a certain size for landmark designation and Board of Supervisors protection. But, designated or not, under the bill a property owner would need a permit to cut down a significant tree or face a \$200 fine.

"They want \$1.6 million?" Runckel said. "If I had it, I'd buy it — if the tree was still there."

But some of Runckel's neighbors liked the tree gone. "Some were delighted," he said. "They said it was much, much lighter now. I think it's a cultural animosity toward trees. There's a prevailing feng shui to eliminate trees on the west side of a business to prevent bad luck."

The building has a living room, bedroom and kitchen on the second floor, and an in-law with kitchen and garage on the ground floor.

The property is zoned RC-4, which means residential-commercial with building up 40 feet high in a district that encourages a combination of high-density dwellings with compatible commercial uses on the ground floor, the Planning Code says. Building higher than 40 feet requires Planning Commission approval.

The TRI Coldwell Banker flyer says "Height limit 80-T." That would be a neighborhood 80-foot height limit with a certain setback distance in front based on bulk, Jim McCormick of Planning told The Extra.

The flyer adds: "Seller states that the city agrees to allow building of nine or ten stories on this site. Buyer to complete their own investigation of zoning and/or site potential."

McCormick could find no such city agreement. "There's no variable to the height," he said. "If they have an agreement it's news to the city because I don't see anything here. No approval. You can't go up higher than 80 feet unless you go down."

This reporter visited the property Oct. 1 for an appointment with agent John Kirkpatrick. But at the 3 p.m. appointed time he wasn't there and Monica Tran, in maroon dress and decked out in abundant gold jewelry, appeared by chance.

She wanted to know why I was hanging around. Once I explained I had an appointment and was a

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Three years ago, Herb Caen's "tree in the Tenderloin" was cut down, left, at 606 Ellis St. Now, the century-old house is for sale.



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

## Homage to some century-old Tenderloin survivors

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In the process, the hotel became San Francisco Landmark No. 176. Other landmarks from the Cadillac's era in and around the Tenderloin include St. Boniface Church (1908), and the Geary Theater (1910).

An older landmark, the venerable Hibernia Bank, constructed in 1892, was designed by Albert Pissis, one of the most influential architects in San Francisco's history.

"More than any...single architect, Albert Pissis (which rhymes with crisis) changed the face of San Francisco in the two decades bracketing 1900, bringing to this strange frontier city the imperial pomp and gravity it so longed for," notes San Francisco Architectural Heritage in its bio of the architect.

With its Sierra granite walls and gilded dome, Hibernia Bank established Pissis as one of the leading architects in the city before he died of pneumonia at 62. When it was still operating, customers hustled up the steps and once inside felt the wondrous effect of the soaring dome.

### Dozen 100-year-old gems, other venerables

Allen Hotel, 411 Eddy St., 1907  
Cadillac Hotel, 380 Eddy St., 1907  
Grant Building, 1095 Market St., 1904  
Hibernia Bank, 1 Jones St., 1892  
Hotel Kinney, 410 Eddy St., 1907  
Odd Fellows Building, 26 Seventh St., 1909  
Pacific Bay Inn, 520 Jones St., 1908  
Page Hotel, 161 Leavenworth, 1907  
St. Boniface Church, 133 Golden Gate Ave., 1908  
Hotel Warrick, 188 Taylor St., 1907  
West Hotel, 141 Eddy St., 1908  
William Penn Hotel, 156 Eddy St. 1906

The historic landmark on the corner of Jones and McAllister now stands unoccupied, its gilded cupola in a state of ruin, its marbled portico chained shut, obscured by a tall metal fence.

### BUILDING BOOM

Using Anne Bloomfield's 1983 survey of area buildings, produced to make the case for a hotel historic district, The Extra found that in that year, only 10 hotel and apartment buildings predated the quake and fire in the area bounded by O'Farrell, Mason, Golden Gate and Polk. (Bloomfield surveyed a larger area, up to Bush on lower Nob Hill.) By 1907, however, the year the Cadillac opened its doors, dozens of new buildings were up in the Tenderloin.

As the topography changed from north to south, so did the structures that went up after the earthquake. On the south slope of Nob Hill extending down to the edge of the Tenderloin, buildings were architecturally more interesting and structurally more enduring.

A hybrid apartment-hotel genre existed on the slope where a resident could get meals from a kitchen staff and have laundry done. It's comparable to corporate rental housing today, says lower Nob Hill resident historian David Overdorf.

The National Register of Historic Places identifies the salient differences between the two "apartment-hotel districts" rebuilt during 1910-22. Lower Nob Hill is almost all residential, with no "leisure" activity buildings. Less than half the buildings have storefronts and the most prominent style is ornamental brick. On average, the register says, they are in "good condition."

By contrast, the flatland of the Tenderloin has more nonresidential buildings; 75% have ground-floor storefronts. The style is plain stucco and unadorned brick; the leisure activity buildings included bars, restaurants, union halls, theaters, brothels. They are in "less good condition" and have "more security gates, more intrusive storefront changes and signs."

A white-collar workforce occupied most of the lower Nob Hill apartment-hotels. Blue-collar workers stayed in the cheaper Tenderloin.

"Most of the SRO residents were men," says

Tenderloin Housing Clinic Director Randy Shaw. "They were seamen and truck drivers and restaurant workers — men who didn't cook, who worked late, who needed good transportation to get around the city. SROs mostly were built to accommodate them for weeks or months, not as tourist hotels."

A distinct "psychological distance" existed between lower Nob Hill and the Tenderloin, the register says, as well as structural differences. If a Tenderloin building deteriorated, demolition was a common option.

"Inspectors looked at each building and assessed if it could be recovered," said Bill Beutner, research assistant at San Francisco Architectural Heritage. He didn't know why demolitions were more common in the TL.

One survivor is the nine-story Grant Building with its 2½-foot-thick brick walls, one of the first steel-framed buildings erected in San Francisco. Built in 1904, it survived the Big One and is home of The Extra. It was designed by Newton Tharp, constructed by the engineering firm of Washington Roebling, a civil engineer who helped complete the Brooklyn Bridge with his father, John Augustus Roebling.

The Grant Building, with approximately 45,000 feet of office space, is owned by Seligman Western Enterprises, a property management company from Michigan.

### SROs BLOOM

A year after the Great Fire, five hotels rose in the Tenderloin: the three-story Allen; the four-story, 57-room Kinney; the four-story, 49-room Page; Warrick, four stories; and another Albert Pissis design, the four-story William Penn Hotel, home of EXIT Theatre.

Buildings constructed in 1908 include the seven-story, 89-room Pacific Bay Inn; the West Hotel, where the Tea Room, a male strip club, is located; and St. Boniface Church.

The cornerstone for St. Boniface, built by German immigrants, was laid on Golden Gate Avenue July 29, 1900. The fire destroyed the church, run by Franciscan monks since 1887, but it was rebuilt by the community in 1908.

The poor and homeless queue daily in front of the church, waiting to be fed at St. Anthony's around the

corner on Jones Street. St. Anthony Foundation, a non-profit run by the Franciscans, was founded by the late Father Alfred Boeddeker, born in 1903, a mere three years before St. Boniface, the church where he was baptized, was destroyed by fire. He would later become its pastor.

In 1909, the Odd Fellows, also known as the Three Link Fraternity, moved into its new building at Seventh and Market streets, across from the Grant Building. According to a Sovereign Grand Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows brochure, the organization was founded "for the purpose of giving aid to those in need and pursuing projects for the benefit of mankind."

The Three Link Fraternity stands for "Friendship, Love and Truth." Its roots go back to 17th century England, but its lineage in San Francisco can be traced to the Gold Rush of 1849 when members returning from the gold fields formed their first lodge in California at the site of the current building. The lodge, too, was destroyed in the Great Fire.

The Odd Fellows Building now houses Alonzo King's internationally renowned Lines Ballet Company and its San Francisco Dance Center, which offers classes for adults and a bachelor's degree in dance.

Tenderloin Housing Clinic's Shaw would like to see many of the area's historic buildings restored as affordable housing units to get people off the streets. THC and other nonprofits have entered master leases with old buildings, and Shaw has been working for years to get the Tenderloin registered as a historic Hotel and Apartment District on the National Register.

The Tenderloin "has the largest number of historic SROs in the world," Shaw said in a December 2006 story in The Extra. The designation would stimulate growth and return pride to the neighborhood, he said.

As The Extra was going to press, Shaw reported that the nomination for the historic designation is almost a done deal. In February, it goes before the state Historical Resources Commission, then on to the National Park Service and listing on the National Register. ■

Tom Carter contributed to this story.



645 and 647 Hyde St., left to right, are two of the four remaining single-family homes in the Tenderloin.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO