

550 SAN JUAN STREET

550 San Juan Street

(723 COOKSEY LANE)



1900 ~ Shingle style

ARCHITECT: Charles E. Hodges OWNERS: Cooksey ~ Phi Kappa Psi (Phi Psi) ~ Synergy

BY DAVID & NATALIE WEBER; REVISED IN 2006 BY MARIAN LEIB ADAMS

It was Jane Lathrop Stanford herself who gave her friends Mr. and Mrs. George B. Cooksey the opportunity to build their house on campus. As reported by the *Palo Alto Times* of May 11, 1900:

During the summer Geo. B. Cooksey of Menlo Park will begin building a \$15,000 residence on the knoll opposite Mrs. Dunn's house, on the campus. Ten acres of land for the grounds go with the place. The building will be three stories high, with basement and high sharp roofs and the floor dimensions approximately 120 x 60 feet. The residence will contain thirty rooms, exclusive of pantries, closets, baths, and the large main hall and stairway. C. E. Hodges is the architect.

Dr. Ray Lyman Wilbur's memoirs give some background to this story:

I had the great good fortune to become acquainted personally, right on the Stanford campus, with Dr. Christian A. Herter of New York, who was one of the great leaders in the development of science and medicine....It happened that Mrs. Cooksey and Mrs. Herter were sisters. Dr. Herter's brother, an interior decorator, had come to California to decorate the Mark Hopkins home on Nob Hill in San Francisco. Consequently it was natural enough that Dr. and Mrs. Herter were among those who came to visit the Cookseys, and that I should meet them in the medical calls I made on Mrs. Cooksey and other members of the household.

Linda Dows Cooksey was the wife of George Borwick Cooksey, who was born in England in December 1852, and immigrated to the United States in 1875. The 1900 U.S. census lists his occupation as merchant, and the family name is recorded as *Cooxey*.

The Dunn house mentioned above was that of Orrin and Harriett Dunn, now the Dunn-Bacon House, at 565 Mayfield Avenue, built in 1899. The land for the Cooksey house was a short distance across the County Road, now Campus Drive East.

The lot size for the Cookseys' house is given as 9.75 acres, abutting Santa Ynez Street and extending south from the County Road. There was one gated S-shaped road running up the hill to the dwelling at an elevation of 165 feet, with a low spur road to the barn (built in 1896 and transferred to the Cooksey property at this time). A second road extended up to a tennis court, just west of the house. Paths led from Cooksey Lane and from San Juan, one to the entrance and the other to the west side,

next to the tennis court. Additional outbuildings included a stable, a gardener's cottage, and a coachman's cottage, none of which exist today.

The architect, Charles E. Hodges, drew plans dated May 23, 1900. The contractor and builder was E. A. Hettinger, who cosigned the contract documents with George Cooksey on May 23, 1900. Hettinger had offices in Palo Alto and San Jose, and was at that time building the university's assembly hall and library. For reasons unknown, the original plans on file with Maps and Records, Stanford's Plant Services do not completely match the house as built, though most likely changes made as building progressed weren't added to the plans.

DETAILS OF THE HOUSE

The three-story residence, with a basement and an attic, has a complex gabled roof with projecting gambrel bays on front and rear, plus six dormers and six fireplaces of clinker brick with wood mantels. The house's exterior comprises an exposed common brick masonry foundation, shiplapped clapboard siding on the lower floor, and wood shingles on the upper floors. The back of the house has two covered porches, and the Cooksey Lane side has a covered entry; these and the portecochère outside the front entrance have square Doric columns. All woodwork is redwood. Windows include double-hung ones with painted wood frames, some of leaded-glass on the first floor, and others of beveled plate glass in the hall and the full main stair. The third and attic levels have four small round windows.

The main first-floor rooms have pocket doors. The basement included a wine cellar and a coal cellar, plus a lift to bring coal and wood to the first and second floors.

The plans for the first floor show a library, living room, schoolroom, dining room, pantry, kitchen, cold room, lavatory, servants' hall, servants' double room, and a storeroom, as well as the main entry hall behind the front entrance.

The second floor had separate rooms for Mr. Cooksey, Mrs. Cooksey, Miss Margaret, Miss Eunice Cooksey, Miss Lamb, Master Donald, Miss Dorothy, a spare room, man's room, maid's room, linen room, sewing room, and six baths.

The third floor had rooms for Master Charlton, a spare room, workroom, playroom, trunk room, servants' room, servants' double room, three other servants' rooms, a servant's trunk room, and a cedar closet room, plus one bath.

The large attic space included two rooms, all of the area open to the roof structure. The house's total floor area was about 14,000 square feet.

In 1900, the Cooksey children were Eunice, age 19; Charlton, 17; Maggie, 14; Dorothy, 13; and Donald, 8. Seven servants lived in the house: Marie Lamb, trained nurse, 49, from Canada; Mary Gueran, cook, 36, from Ireland; Charles Matthews, butler, 22, from Georgia; and four others: Lena Fisher, Annie Moriarity, and Ida and Leona Meyer. Eunice Cooksey starred in a campus theatrical in 1903, though she is not on record as enrolled as a Stanford student.

Following Mrs. Cooksey's death, in March 1903, her husband offered to donate the house to the university as a fully equipped student hospital under the direction of his late wife's physician, Ray Lyman Wilbur. As Dr. Wilbur tells it, "Mrs. Stanford was still prejudiced against hospitals...and did not accept the offer. She thought the presence of a hospital on a hill would lead people to think Stanford might be an unhealthful place."

On September 26, 1903, the Stanford Board of Trustees voted to buy the house from George Cooksey for \$15,000, its construction cost in 1900, to be paid in three installments over the next four months. On that same date, Sigma Nu fraternity's application to lease the house was placed on file. The trustees had the "Cooksey place" surveyed in November 1906 and adopted plans in March 1907 for subdivision of the Cooksey Tract, which later became part of the San Juan subdivision. In 1907 the property was treated as the Cooksey subdivision.

Even before the university had had its official opening, Greek letter fraternities were laying plans for chapters on campus. Eight fraternities and two sororities were established in the first year, boasting a total membership of 140 students. President David Starr Jordan, a fraternity man himself, approved. Phi Kappa Psi (Phi Psi), which had begun at Stanford in 1891 as the California Beta chapter, was the third fraternity on campus after Zeta Psi and Phi Delta Theta. However, the Cooksey house's use wasn't resolved until three years after its purchase by the university. In September 1905 the trustees deferred a

proposal for renting the house as a girls' dormitory. In August 1906, Phi Psi's request to lease it was denied. President Jordan recommended that the house "be used as a high-class dormitory for young women or as a family hotel," but no action was taken. Finally, on November 30, 1906, the trustees accepted Phi Psi's offer to buy the house for \$18,000.

From 1903 to 1907, 15 to 18 Phi Psi brothers lived at 359 Emerson Street, Palo Alto. It was the only fraternity living off campus, which may have strongly argued for it to have priority on leasing the Cooksey house. In the first Stanford *Annual Register* (spring 1908), which lists students' local addresses, the Phi Psi (Cooksey) house is given as the residence of 23 students; 28 lived there the next year. No documentation shows when the major changes to the room layouts on the second and third floors took place, but the smaller rooms were almost totally redesigned for student use, with a wide central hall provided on both of these floors. And the picture of the house in the 1908 *Quad* shows the exterior shingles being painted rather than left natural.

Cooksey House's address has changed over the years. The 1908 *Quad* shows it as being at University Heights, and in the Palo Alto directory of 1926 as being at San Juan Heights. From 1928 until at least 1948, the address was 723 Cooksey Lane, though the official address had changed to 550 San Juan Street in 1932. During World War II, all the fraternities became residences for lower-division students, while the few major student dorms were turned over to the military, and all

the fraternities were given temporary names of U.S. Presidents; Phi Psi became Lincoln Hall.

Phi Psi fraternity had a long history in the house, with some successes and some tribulations. A major renovation of the first floor occurred in the summer of 1923. As *The Stanford Phi Psi* of November 21 of that year wrote with its singular literary style:

The condition of the downstairs which was formerly a constant eyesore and glaring barnlike space has evolved into a home: a home that is pleasing to the eye, rich in it's [sic] appointments, and practical in it's [sic] use. The red varnish was removed from all the walls downstairs and the woodwork was left natural redwood with a wax finish. This finish gives a warm, natural glow to the atmosphere. The ceilings have been retinted in harmony with the woodwork which also serves to improve the rooms....The general atmosphere of the bumming room with its pictures of the teams and alumni prominent in athletics has been carefully preserved. A large leather upholstered davenport stretched in front of the fireplace....The name carved table with its scrap book is just behind this davenport. The pictures, the shade of red in the draperies, the block S on the shades, are all reminders of the real Stanford spirit. Upon entering the large room with it's [sic] heavily draped doorways...the general tone of this room is a warm taupe, set off by a bright piano cover of Oriental design, a richly covered piano shade...and bright coverings for the built-in-stands by the window seats. At each end of the room in front of the fireplaces are large Chesterfield davenports with taupe mohair finish. Attractive lamps spread an inviting glow over the Chesterfields from the tables behind. Four large armchairs of the same design [and] material serve to complete the effect of the room. The wall candle lights with their shades, and the clock on the mantle [sic] above the fireplace tend to give the room an air of dignity.

Changes were made to the house at

various times. For instance, the shingles were painted several times. The brick facing on at least one fireplace was painted white, but today the two living room fireplaces, as well as ones in the dining room and library, appear to be the original clinker brick with wooden mantels. In 1936 Phi Psi took out a loan for renovations, hiring Leslie Nichols of Palo Alto as the architect; three new showers were installed on the second floor, the plumbing was repaired, and the walls of the first floor were redone in the original wax finish. At some date, a flagpole was added, extending above the front gambrel roof.

After the end of World War II, each fraternity house was given some funds for refurbishing. Phi Psi's renovation centered at that time on the first floor plus bathrooms, and changes needed to meet current fire regulations. The main stair was probably enclosed and sprinklers added about 1980.

In 1961, the fraternity replaced "rush" with random selection of new initiates. That led the national Phi Kappa Psi board to suspend this chapter, though its charter was reinstated in January 1968. The chapter was apparently inactive from 1976 to 1978, reportedly because of a "lack of interest," and during those two years it was part of the "draw" system for housing selection by undergraduates. In the spring of 1978, Phi Psi was again given permission to rush. (Where the campus once had 24 all-male fraternities, by 1976 there were only 15, two of which were coed; one was off campus.) In 1980 the university again officially recognized Phi Psi and it reoccupied Cooksey House, becoming

Phi Psi Coop, a coeducational residence.

THE LOMA PRIETA EARTHQUAKE

The October 1989 earthquake caused extensive structural and cosmetic damage to the house. Pictures in the Stanford Planning Office document show its very sad condition after that event. Though the house remained plumb and completely atop its unreinforced brick masonry foundation, it was deemed unsafe. Two of the six chimneys had collapsed, and many parts of the structure suffered extensive damage. (After the earthquake, Phi Psi Coop residents were relocated to 553 Mayfield. In 2002, 592 Mayfield was awarded to Phi Psi's California Beta chapter, and there they reside today.)

University officials then proposed to raze Cooksey House. After strong representation by the Stanford Historical Society that the house was of historic significance and worth renovating, and a passionate protest by students, alumni, and local historic preservationists, university officers reversed the tentative decision to raze it and instead ordered a major reconstruction. There followed a lengthy process of analysis, financial planning, historical documentation, and engineering and architectural work. Eventually the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency provided nearly \$350,000 to seismically strengthen and rehabilitate Cooksey House. The total project cost about \$2.3 million including furnishings and an elevator, which was installed in the summer of 1995. This project was designed by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates of Los Angeles. The

contractor was Ralph Larsen & Son, Burlingame, and the Stanford project manager was Robert J. Myers.

The goal of the project was to bring the building into compliance with Stanford's life-safety criteria and to rehabilitate the building in a manner "that honors its architectural style and historic significance to the campus." The project also aimed to provide finishes in the first-floor common living areas "to maintain the original character of the house." Thus the original redwood paneling was removed, stripped, and placed back in its former location. With the hardwood floors and period ceiling light fixtures, it today retains the warm feel of the turn of the last century.

Among many other changes, the external chimneys—which were taken down to their bases—were rebuilt with rigid plywood forms,

and then resheathed with the original brick. Considerable changes made in the upper floors included fire-safety provisions required by Santa Clara County.

When Cooksey House reopened in the fall of 1994, it was the new location of Synergy House, a vegetarian student coop. Much of the original house remains, including the brick-framed white plaster friezes above the two clinker brick fireplaces in the living room and one in the dining room. The four friezes (one living room fireplace has two) were copies of Italian work ordered by the Cookseys; the originals still exist in Italy. In the 1980s, the large pocket doors were removed to make room for sprinkler pipes. Even modified to suit the needs of a student residence, the house is still most impressive both outside and in.

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