

756 SANTA YNEZ STREET

## *756 Santa Ynez Street*

(5 AIBONITO, 5 CABRILLO, 756 CABRILLO)



### **1908 ~ Shingle style**

ARCHITECT: John K. Branner OWNERS: Elliott ~ Weigle ~ Ritson

BY HELEN BABB; REVISED IN 2006 BY MARIAN LEIB ADAMS

**I**n the summer of 1891, Orrin Leslie Elliott and his wife, Ellen Coit Elliott, came to Stanford from Cornell University, among the pioneers recruited by President David Starr Jordan for the new university. Elliott was to be the university's first registrar. The Elliotts lived for 17 years in a faculty house at 10 Alvarado Row, but when the university opened a new subdivision on San Juan Hill in 1908, they chose a lot on the street then called Aibonito.

Ellen Coit Elliott described the lot as “as the very choicest location of all.” The back of the house faces the foothills, and when it was built—before trees and vegetation grew up—the view from all floors would have been wide and uninterrupted, though now only the second floor has unobstructed views of San Francisco and the Bay. The two-story house, clad in dark-stained cedar shingles, was designed by San Francisco architect John K. Branner and built by Gustav Laumeister, much advised and closely supervised by Mrs. Elliott.

The design derives from the American shingle style that in the West has been called California Craftsman; it is also known as First Bay Tradition. It was built with two stories, plus an attic and a basement.

As on the original house plans, the entry still faces the street (east) and has a covered porch. The glass panels in the front door are still masked with the original variegated lace-pattern paper. To the left of the 9- by 11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-foot entry hall are a similarly sized library and a 16<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>- by 27<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-foot living room. This room’s original fireplace mantel, hearth, and chimney are of patterned brick, handmade in San Jose.

Another hall to the right leads to the staircase and a small room with a built-in locker that contains a laundry chute to the basement; pocket doors on the right open to the light and airy dining room (14 by 19 feet), which has windows on the north and east walls. The dining room’s built-in buffet also opens to the kitchen; more storage is in a corner china closet next to the buffet and in two built-in cupboards on the east wall with leaded-glass doors above. Off the kitchen on the west side of the house were a servant’s room and open porch.

Downstairs rooms have stained redwood paneling and trim and oak floors. Redwood bookcases line the first-floor library. The second floor has five bedrooms and two baths. The house was built with several open porches: off the master bedroom, northwest and northeast bedrooms (the latter quite large, 14 by 17<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> feet), and facing south for the view. The attic is unfinished, and the basement has the original servant’s half-bathroom.

With few exceptions, the windows are double-hung, though windows on the lower stair landing, in the study, and in the dining room let in light but do not open. Dining room and staircase windows swing out horizontally for cleaning and ventilation.

Today the house remains much as it was, except for the usual changes made in houses with few baths and numerous porches. Because changes occurred before careful documentation was required, their chronology is sometimes hard to determine. The second owners, the Weigles, glassed in the porch off the master bedroom, creating a sunroom and bath. The porch on the west side of the upstairs was also glassed in.

Incorporating an alcove off the southwest bedroom created a larger bedroom, and two bedrooms on the north side became a bed-sitting room with kitchenette. The small porch off the upstairs bathroom was walled in to enlarge the bathroom. The Ritsons built an elegantly tiled, elevated tub in the space, with a view on a clear day all the way to San Francisco; the west-facing porch has the same view. The original linen closet remains in the upstairs hall, and another closet gives access to the attic.

Though few original fixtures remain, most

of the original windows do. Downstairs the library retains its redwood paneling and features a fine old rolltop desk and chair, purchased “for a song” when the Physics Department moved from the Quad. The Ritsons converted a closet off the downstairs hall into a bath. They also built a deck off the living room. From this deck, an outdoor staircase leads up to the open porch on the corner of the house

To extend the kitchen, the Weigles opened it to the adjacent servant’s room; the Ritsons converted the area to a breakfast room. They also blocked off the kitchen fireplace, exposing the brickwork of the triple chimney for the original living room, south-facing upstairs bedroom, and kitchen fireplaces; the latter two are gone. The kitchen door to the open porch was glassed in, so the back door is now in the breakfast room. The porch withstood the 1989 earthquake, but the Ritsons reinforced it and the basement stairs with redwood beams.

## THE OWNERS

**Orrin Leslie Elliott.** He was born in Centerville, New York, in 1860 and received his B.Phil. degree in history and political science from Cornell in 1885. In 1890, he received a Ph.D. from Cornell, and then held a fellowship in history and political science, and an instructorship in English. David Starr Jordan recruited him to become his secretary and then registrar for Stanford. Elliott’s *Stanford University: The First Twenty-Five Years* gives a detailed and reliable account of the university’s philosophy, founding, first years, and culture, as well as of student life and key events. According to his memorial resolution,

“Dr. Elliott provided a model service in support of Stanford’s democratic form of organization, leaving to academic faculty members a minimum of routine and clerical responsibility, keeping their time and energies clear for instructional and advisory activities.”

While an instructor at Cornell, he married Ellen Coit Brown, who was born in 1860 in West Dresden, New York. She graduated from Cornell in 1882 with a B.S. in science and letters, and a Phi Beta Kappa key. In her autobiography, *It Happened This Way*, the articulate Mrs. Elliott proves to be a keen and outspoken observer of early campus life.

During the Elliotts’ occupancy, the house and garden were the scene of many social occasions. There was much entertaining by Mrs. Elliott, both because of her husband’s position in the university and because of her own inclination to be a frequent hostess. Japanese lanterns illuminated a garden barbecue pit. Two of the three Elliott children, Christabel and David, grew up in this house. Their eldest, Louis, was in college.

Elliott retired in 1925, and after his death, in August 1940, Mrs. Elliott maintained the house with the aid of a Japanese servant named Fuji. After a fall resulted in a broken hip, she moved to Southern California to live with her daughter. The house was empty for several years, because Mrs. Elliott refused to rent it. Instead, she retained Fuji to keep things as they been when the family lived there. And so he did—polishing the floor with his feet wrapped in cloths, and following Mrs. Elliott’s written cleaning and maintenance instructions to the letter.

**Clifford Weigle.** In 1951, Weigle and his

wife, Margaret, saw the empty house while house hunting on San Juan Hill. Professor Weigle had joined the journalism department faculty in 1934, and Mrs. Weigle had strong Stanford connections, being a descendant of John D. McGilvray, who was known as “Mrs. Stanford’s builder.” It was he who supervised the construction of the Outer Quad and Memorial Church.

The Weigles were very attracted to the house, and despite being told that it was not for sale, Mrs. Weigle wrote to Mrs. Elliott in an effort to persuade her to let them buy the property. The effort fell short, but Mrs. Elliott agreed to rent the house, and the two women became frequent correspondents, exchanging friendly letters until Mrs. Elliott’s death, in 1958 in Los Angeles. The Weigles rented the house, complete with most of the furniture, from 1951 until 1957, at which time they bought the house from the Elliott estate.

Weigle was born in San Francisco in 1906, a few months after the disastrous earthquake, and was valedictorian at Burlingame High School. He received his A.B. from Stanford in 1929, following in the footsteps of his father, who graduated in 1895. The son, who majored in social science with a journalism emphasis, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and earned an M.A. in 1936.

He did further graduate work at UC Berkeley and the University of Minnesota, specializing in the history of the American press, about which he later became one of the nation’s leading authorities. His other interests were in newspaper writing and editing.

In 1930, he married Margaret Sturrock (born in 1907). They had two children, a son,

Charles, and a daughter, Marion, who died as a child. Charles Weigle was aged 11 when the family moved onto campus, and he has many memories of the house and the neighborhood from 1951 to 1961.

After Stanford, Weigle joined the editorial staff of the *San Francisco News* as a reporter, moving up to assistant city editor in 1934. At the paper, he helped develop Stanford’s pioneering “City Practice” course, which introduced journalism students to the real-life experiences of working reporters and editors. The success of this course brought an offer in 1934 to become an instructor on the Stanford faculty. He taught at Stanford until 1948, when he became dean of the journalism school at the University of Oregon.

In 1950, Weigle returned to Stanford as professor of journalism and associate head of the Institute for Journalistic Studies, later the Department of Journalism and Communication, and in 1962 the Department of Communication.

When the Weigles moved into the house, in 1951, it was essentially as originally built. They remodeled the kitchen by incorporating into it a former servant’s room and updating the appliances. They also made changes upstairs, already described. In 1961, they subdivided the lot, selling the house to David Ritson, and building a new house (760 Santa Ynez) for themselves on the remaining ½ acre, where they lived until their deaths. Weigle died in March 1981, and his wife in July 1986.

**David Mark Ritson.** He was born in London in 1924 and attended Oxford University, where he received a B.A. in 1944 and D.Phil. in physics in 1948. After teaching

at M.I.T. from 1952 to 1964, he came to Stanford as professor of physics. Now emeritus, he was employed from SLAC's beginning as a group leader. Among many projects, he helped Nobel laureate Burton Richter build the landmark Stanford electron-positron storage ring. Ritson was a member of the National Academy of Sciences' Commission on Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Applications (CPSMA) and is author of *Techniques of High Energy Physics* (1961).

In 1950 he married Catherina Edda Elena Maria Francesca Martinez, who was born in Sicily in 1927 but grew up in New York. Her multiple names honored favorite family members. From 1944 to 1947, she attended Queens College and in 1949 received an M.A. in sociology from Cornell. She began her doctorate at Columbia when she married but did not continue, choosing to raise their five children. Edda Ritson was an artist, and the house is full of her hooked rugs and wall

hangings, inset tile pieces and stained glass. She also designed silver jewelry, which she was fond of wearing.

She was the heart of her neighborhood and a mainstay in the Stanford Faculty Women's Club (now Stanford University Women's Club) as leader of the Italian conversation group. She was also president for many years of the Catholic Interracial Education Fund, founded in the 1960s. She died at Stanford in August 2004.

The house and gardens have been preserved to retain as much as possible of the original design. Edda Ritson's famous roses continue to flourish. When changes were necessary, the Ritsons attempted to find replacements similar to, or in the period of, the originals. Today Ellen Elliott would easily recognize her beloved house, and while mature trees obscure much of the view you can still see the Bay and beyond from the "very choicest location of all."

## SOURCES

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