

The Howard Ranch and White Gate Farm

Historical Society Plaque # 4

In 1975, the San Ramon Valley Historical Society recognized two historic families from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the Howards and the Donahues. A historic plaque was placed on the historic Howard house, by then called White Gate Farm.

Charles and Nathaniel Howard originally came to California from Wareham, Mass., during the California Gold Rush with Charles arriving first in September of 1849 at 22 years old. In August that year, the 29-year-old Nathaniel and others purchased the ship *Florida* and sailed for California, arriving in San Francisco on January 1, 1850. The brothers reunited and mined a Solomon's Gulch on the Merced River for a year. They returned to San Francisco where Charles engaged in business and Nathaniel plied his carpentry trade as an architect and contractor. Nathaniel was also a member of the (in)famous San Francisco Vigilance Committee during that lively time in the city's history.

Evidently San Francisco's foggy, rainy weather made Nathaniel ill and, in September of 1856, the rothers purchased a 160-acre property two miles east of Alamo. This land became the Howard ranch where they built a large colonial-style house which accommodated both families. Nathaniel had married Elizabeth Hitch of Fairhaven, Mass., on May 30, 1844, who had joined him in San Francisco in 1852. Their three children were Lizzie, Amelia and Kate. Charles and Susan Homan of Boston were married in 1857 and had children Ann, Perez and Ida.

The Howards became important buildings in Alamo and Danville. First they built their two-story house from redwood logged in Redwood Canyon west of Moraga; evidently they sent the logs to New England to be milled. The house featured a redwood-mud foundation, hand-cut and hand-finished doors and window frames, and Georgia pine cupboards. Its Colonial New England design reflected their Massachusetts roots.

This large house was the site of early school classes on the second floor, where Howard and neighborhood youth were taught. In 1865, Nathaniel Howard drew plans and neighbors built the first Green Valley Grammar School on land donated by Danville rancher Andrew Inman.

When Kate Howard married Sycamore Valley's Charles J. Wood in 1897, the Howards built them a house as a wedding present. Still standing, this house has expanded over time. The brothers constructed other buildings, several of which are still around. The Cohen/Vecki House (169 Front St.) and the Boone/Osborn House (15 Serena Court) had almost identical designs. When the Danville Grange No. 85 began in 1873 and outgrew initial meetings at the Danville Grammar School, the Howards designed and built the new Grange Hall at a cost of \$1,383. This hall is now the second story of the Village Theatre at 233 Front St.

According to local papers, Charles was active in the community. He reviewed the votes on a county-wide effort to get a railroad from Martinez to Amador Valley in 1868 and served as the Worthy Master for the Danville Grange in 1889-90.

In 1886 the Howard house and ranch were sold to Judge Warren Olney. Nathaniel and Elizabeth moved to Walnut Creek while Charles and Susan moved into Danville. In 1898 Judge William H. Donahue bought the house and ranch which stayed in their family until 1970. It was a diversified ranch with hay, grains, almonds and fruit trees were raised. Ed Donahue was born in 1922, went to local schools and still recalls the hard work and beauty of the place. In an interview, he said there were three houses on the property at one time, including the old house in which he and his family eventually lived, a newer one built by his grandfather (John J.) and a house for their Japanese farm workers.

Ed's brother Ray spent years restoring the historic home which became a showplace in the area. Ray loved to show off the house and gave it the name White Gate. In 1970 the house and property were sold to Harold W. Smith who built the custom homes and development now called White Gate. Several streets are named for family members.

The historical society placed a White Gate historic plaque in the house on September 10, 1975. At the dedication event Society President Dr. Wilson E. Close provided a history of the house and property. The plaque honored the memory of Fred and Ruth Donahue, Ed and Ray's parents. Present also at the dedication were the grandchildren of Nathaniel Howard, Mary Ridgway Lichens and George and Waldo Wood. In 1998 the house was razed and the plaque was placed on a post at Shandelin Court, just off Stone Valley Road

Sources: *History of Contra Costa County CA*, 1882; Nathaniel Howard obituary, Jan. 28, 1899; Amelia Howard Ridgeway memories; *Oakland Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1970; Virgie V. Jones, *Historical Persons and Places – in San Ramon Valley*; *Valley Pioneer*, Sept. 10, 1975; Wilson Close dedication notes; *San Ramon Valley Times*, July 18, 1998; Ray Donahue's booklet "White Gate"; telephone conversation with Ed Donahue, 2009.

By Beverly Lane. 2018 for SRV Historical Society web site