



Clark's Hall

The Big Brick Building at the Bend in the Road in Irvington

As Fremont Boulevard traverses the length of Fremont it makes a bend in the Irvington District. Joined there by Bay Street, Washington Boulevard and Union Street, the bend is known as the Five Corners. Called that because of the joining of the streets, it also reflects the early names of the area: Washington Corners and The Corners. Prominent at the corner, at 4000 Bay Street, is a large brick building, the oldest documented commercial building in Fremont. Saved from the wreckers ball in the early 1980s by local preservationist, Joe Betchart, the building has fascinating beginnings, a convoluted history and an enduring presence for our transient society.

The first private school in Irvington was originally on the site, in the diningroom of the George M. Walters home, where eight or nine pupils were taught by M. M. Spencer. That home was demolished in the early 1870s. About a half-block north, on the Irvington-Centerville Road (later called Fremont Boulevard) the International Order of Good Templars had outgrown their lodge room, which was a former saloon adjacent to the International Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) Hall.

They needed a new place to meet, so they partnered with George H. and Alston S. Clark to build a new brick building. Historian Phil Holmes noted in one article that the Templars sold their old building

for \$2,000, which paid for their new accommodations. Other historians state that the Clark brothers built the building and leased the upstairs to the Templars, with a separate entry, a stage in front and a food preparation room in back. The general merchandise store was downstairs with a beautiful tin-tiled ceiling.

Brick buildings are unusual in earthquake country. A local resident, Dan Mosier, is one of California's leading authorities on old bricks. He details the bricks used for Clark's Hall on his web site calbricks.net/firms.com/brick.hagan.html:

In 1874 James and John Hagan first started up a brickyard in Irvington. Their property was located about where Midas Mufflers is currently standing on Washington Boulevard. Because the lime-rich clay was not suitable for making bricks, the Hagan Brothers moved their brickyard to Centerville. The clay there was said to be equal to that found at Pleasanton. By June 1875, they had fired 85,000 hand-molded bricks in a kiln and expected to burn 100,000 bricks per month. These bricks were used locally. The largest job was Clark's Hall in Irvington, which was built in January 1876. It should be noted that there is a new rear extension with faux historical brick veneer.

The building was dedicated with public fanfare on May 4, 1876. The hall quickly became a lively social center where local residents held banquets, dances, Christmas parties, graduation exercises and various entertainments.

With the nearby Washington College (built in 1871), Washington Corners became the cultural center of the township. The hall hosted many visiting lecturers, including Miss Emily Pitt Stevens, a famous temperance worker who spoke about the horrors of the liquor traffic. Traveling thespians used the hall for their productions. Some of them wrote their names and messages on the walls backstage, which are preserved and record the building's history in an inimitable way.

Downstairs the Clark Brothers ran the store, selling groceries and a large variety of merchandise. In 1887 Alstan became the local postmaster. County assessor records indicate the Clarks owned the building through 1902 but at some point they leased the store to Nathaniel L. Babb who ran a general store, served as the town's postmaster and operated the Sunset Telephone Company with 96

subscribers.

According to historian Woody Miner, Around 1900, the ground-floor space was taken over by the newly-established hardware and plumbing business of William W. Hirsch, one of four sons of pioneer merchants Joseph and Caroline Hirsch, who arrived in Washington Corners in 1867. Advertisements from the period indicate that Hirsch sold a wide variety of items, including cutlery, dishware, stoves, furniture, rugs, linoleum, farming implements, wagons and buggies.

The earthquake in April 1906 heavily damaged the upstairs, causing windows to break and major portions of the plaster ceiling to fall. Because of insurance problems and concerns about safety, the upstairs was closed to the public. In 1935 Tierney and Reynolds opened a grocery store downstairs and used the upstairs for storage.

In 1944 or 45 Edward L. Rose, who was in the feed and trucking business, bought Clarks Hall and did extensive renovations to the building. Locals called it Rose Hardware, where they bought tools and equipment for their farms, feed for their chicken and livestock and appliances, furniture and flooring for their homes.

As servicemen returned from World War II, the eight sleepy villages of Washington Township took on new life. New sections of the Bay Shore Freeway were gradually completed south from Oakland, bringing new families and businesses to the area. Before the freeway reached Southern Alameda County in 1957-58, all traffic traveled through the area on Alvarado Road to the Centerville/Irvington Road, to the Irvington/Warm Springs Road and on to San Jose. And all the traffic passed through the Five Corners of Irvington and by the large brick store. After Fremont was incorporated in 1956, those local roads were renamed Fremont Boulevard.

When Ed Rose retired Joseph Betchart bought the building and did extensive renovations in the 1980s, including opening the second floor and adding a new exterior staircase on the east side of the building. The businesses in the building were the Bay Street Coffee Company on the first floor and the Broadway West Theatre Company upstairs.

In 2002, Ward Hill, Woodruff Minor and Michael Corbett, architectural historians, wrote a report about Clarks Hall for the City of Fremont.

Stating that the Italianate Vernacular building was built in 1876 they note that it had undergone extensive changes: In 1945 (when Ed Rose was the owner) new storefront windows were added on the east side, the front canopy was removed, the storefront brick was painted white and a large wooden sign was affixed to the face. The original exterior staircase on the east side was replaced by an interior stairway on the west side. Numerous alterations were made in the 1980s [by Joseph Betchart, owner]. In 1996-7 the upstairs was converted into a theater for live performances, requiring the addition of tiered seating and a new stage; both additions were designed to be removable and the old stage and proscenium are preserved under the new framing.

At a work session on the General Plan 2030 Update with the Fremont City Council, city staff presented the concept that the Fremont Boulevard Corridor is the Secondary Transit Spine of the city, traversing through a necklace of historic districts. Their maps of the Irvington District still show the bend in the road, with Clarks Hall dominating the Five Corners just as it has for the past 133 years.

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