

Hand-drawn map of the Peralta Rancho San Antonio land grant, 1840s. COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY.

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On Becoming a Historic Resident of Oakland

When knowing your history doesn't help

In March of 2011, after signing our names so many times that our wrists ached, my wife and I took into our weakened hands the keys to a modest wooden rectangle on a slightly larger rectangle of dirt in Oakland's Golden Gate neighborhood. Never mind that we bought it with borrowed money, we now "owned" a home.

This was something we never thought we'd be able to do when we moved to California in 2004, each from states with far lower costs of living. By the time we finished graduate school and found satisfying but not extravagantly compensated jobs, we'd consigned buying a house in the Bay Area to the same category of laughable impossibilities as commuting to work in a flying jet car or playing the harp.

The messy pop of the housing bubble changed all that. As sources of easy money shriveled and foreclosures swelled, home prices dropped precipitously. We came out okay; our jobs were stable. The crash—that is, the collective misery of those around us—gave us the opportunity to join one of California's long traditions: the land grab.

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We'd been renting in this neighborhood in Oakland's northwestern corner for more than four years before we bought. We'd seen the area change and mostly, we felt, for the better. Three cafés had opened since we arrived in 2006, followed shortly by a cupcake shop, then a knitting and fabric store. When the latte-drinking, cupcake-eating knitters arrive, you know your neighborhood has arrived, too.

We watched these changes accrete happily, first as renters who were glad to have a spot to grab coffee or a beer just a short walk from our place. Later, as owners, we were excited to see this process of change continue south along the main thoroughfare from the cottage we'd rented toward the house we bought, reassuring us in our investment with every half block's advance.

This process of change, of course, has a name. "Gentrification" is a dumb word, in the same way that a hammer is a dumb tool, and likewise it must be used with special care. To a lot of people who use the word, everything looks like a nail. It floats in a cloud of imprecise definition, like "middle class" or "pornography." But we know it when we see it.

So we knew that what gentrification meant in our neighborhood wasn't just coffee shops opening in long-vacant storefronts. In April 2010, the national brokerage firm ZipRealty named our zip code the second "hottest" in the entire country, as measured by the percentage over asking prices that houses were fetching. This new rebound boom, like those that had come before, was producing winners and losers. We happened to be on the winning side, almost entirely owing to forces beyond our control: the timing of our lives with respect to the crash, the untimely death of a relative whose modest bequest constituted our down payment, and the fact that we'd been born white and able-bodied and the beneficiaries of good educations at great universities. Even that good fortune, however, would not have been sufficient had many others not lost their homes, savings, and livelihoods in the crash.

Plenty of others could see the changes in our neighborhood. To some, these changes spelled opportunity. Actually,

they spelled "NOBE." In the fall of 2012, local real estate agents attempted to brand our area "North Oakland/Berkeley/Emeryville." One agent produced a video cataloguing the virtues of "NOBE," interviewing beaming local residents, all relatively recent arrivals like us. It was as if the neighborhood had been a blank spot on the map prior to 2009 and had now been christened by its discoverers in the language of their aspirations.

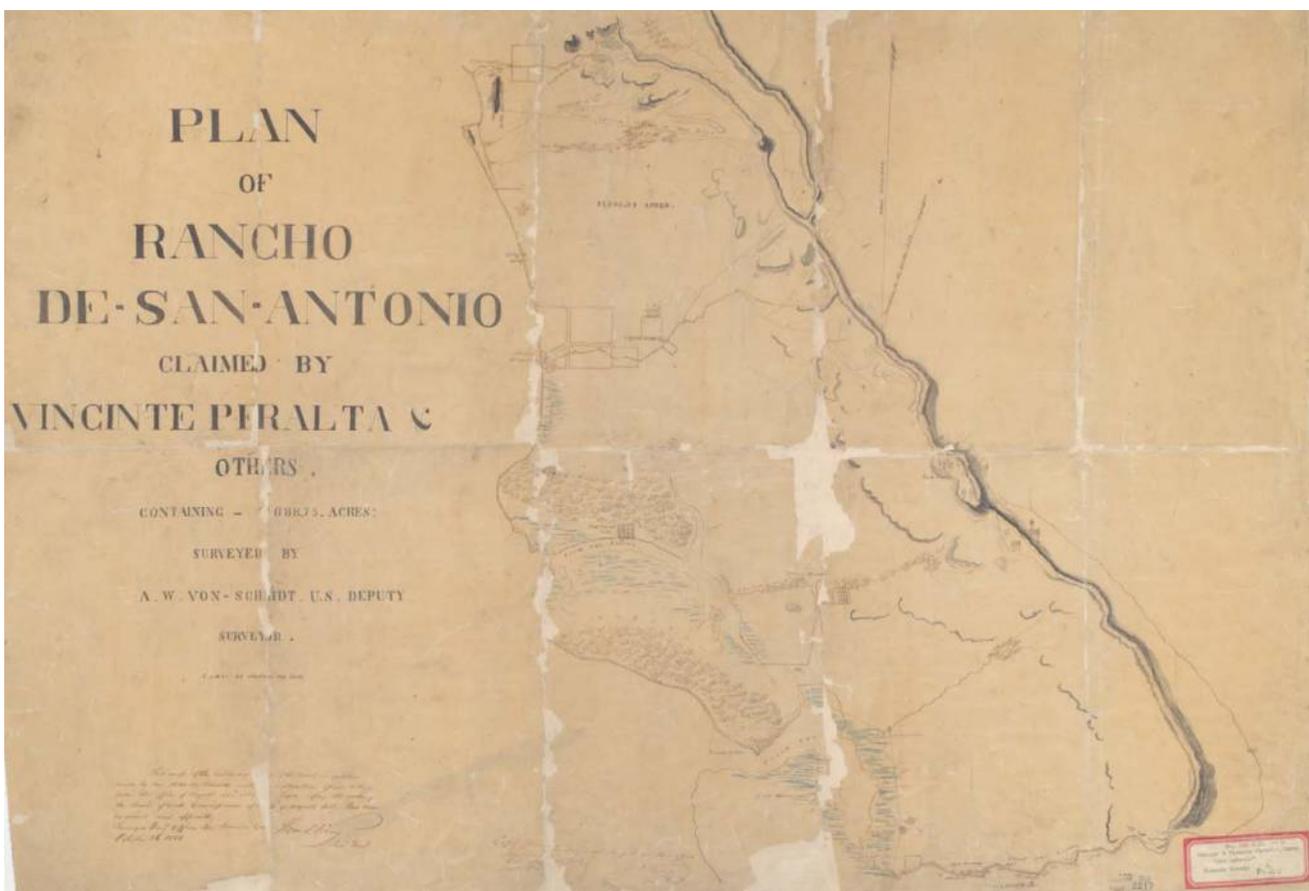
I wasn't the only one who found the tone (and tone-deafness) of the NOBE video off-putting. A contingent of local activists had been working to slow displacement and keep the neighborhood affordable and livable for the people who were already there, not just the café-and-cupcakes set that was growing with every "SOLD" sign. These activists saw the rapid increase in housing prices in the area not as opportunity but as oppression, a further kick to a population that was already down. The video was like cold water dropped onto their hot skillet.

The reactions and counter-reactions boiled up, among other places, on our neighborhood email lists and web message boards. I was only an observer to the impassioned debates that followed—I try to avoid arguing on the Internet for my own mental health—but they gave me a lot to chew on. I thought of myself as someone who cared about affordable housing and creating neighborhoods that are accessible to everyone. I agreed, I believed, with the local activists about the problem, and I shared their despair at a lack of substantive local solutions.

I thought I was on their side, but here they were talking about people like me—people who had moved to the neighborhood fairly recently, who had bought houses in the depressed post-crash market, who enjoyed and supported new local businesses—as if we were the enemy. Our presence was an offense. Our individual and collective actions, we were told, were leading to the displacement of the neighborhood's "historic residents."

I knew what they meant by that phrase: the mostly lower-income African Americans who had predominated in the

If the local antigentrification crowd
could use history as a cudgel, perhaps
I could use it as a shield.



Watercolor and ink map showing settlements and geographical features of Rancho de San Antonio, 1852. COURTESY OF THE BANCROFT LIBRARY.

neighborhood before people like me started moving in. But that rested on a very narrow definition of history. The loudly denounced NOBE video pretended the neighborhood sprang to life fully formed from the head of the god Re/Max around 2009. The antigentrification activists were doing the same thing, except they'd set the dial on their time machine to about 1970. While I remain wholly sympathetic to those struggling to remain resident in this community, the "historic resident" phrase brought home a more complicated truth about gentrification. This place was not always thus. Neighborhoods are constantly in flux, and change itself is not necessarily where the problem lies.

About six months before the neighborhood shouting matches reached peak ALL CAPS online, the Census Bureau released the full archive of the 1940 census. My wife and I dug into the forms to find out who had lived in our house seventy-two years before we moved in. We also scanned through the records for the rest of the neighborhood to get a sense of the area's demographics. The vast

majority of residents were working-class laborers and craftspeople. There were some middle-class professionals and a few wealthier outliers. And they were almost all white.

This made me want to know more than the census's seventy-two-year-old snapshot could tell me. The papers we'd signed said our house was built in 1905. Who lived in our house in the century before us, and who lived on the land before the house was built? Who was displaced when they moved in? If this neighborhood had seen demographic and economic shifts many times before, was the present wave of change just part of a long pattern?

Of course, I had some self-interest in this investigation. If the local antigentrification crowd could use history as a cudgel, perhaps I could use it as a shield. I'm not a historian, but I could play one on the Internet. So that's what I did. I spent the better part of six months, in-between real work, researching this history. I learned where and how to find old property transfer records. I massaged archival newspaper databases to find traces of long-dead real estate

speculators. I located and interviewed the great-grandson of the man who built my house. I had a great time.

By the time I was done playing historian, I'd answered all of the questions that I had started with. But I also realized that history raised even more questions, and it didn't provide many of the answers I really needed.

The story of my house starts like the story of most of California. The original historical residents of this area, at least as far back as we have any archaeological and historical records, were the Huchiun band of the Ohlone people, whose ancestors migrated here tens of thousands of years ago. They ate from the land and drank from the creek that flows just 750 feet south of my house, now buried underground in a culvert. Their territory bordered areas held by other Ohlone groups with whom they traded, married, and occasionally fought. They had no system of individual land ownership, but this place was theirs—until it wasn't.

In the first decades of the sixteenth century, Spanish explorers made their way across Mexico and claimed the land to the north for the Spanish crown—even though they had no idea what it was they were claiming. They thought this part of the world was an island, and they named it accordingly after a mythical island from a novel published in 1510: California. By the middle of the 1500s, California was firmly a part of Spanish territory, part of the larger Nueva España. Nobody had the courtesy to inform the Huchiun Ohlone that their neighborhood had been renamed. The Spanish didn't know they existed. Their earliest explorations up the Pacific coast missed the San Francisco Bay entirely.

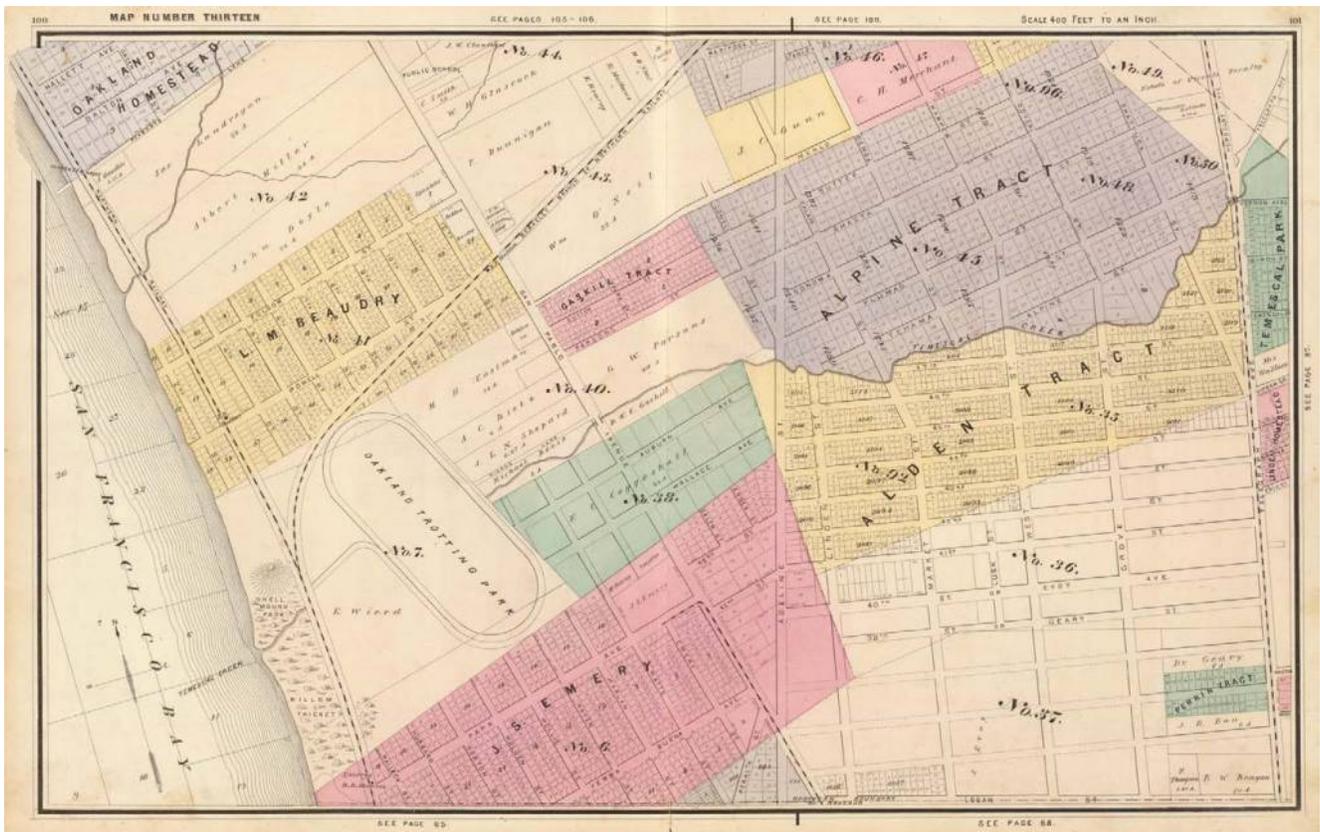
It wasn't until the late 1760s that Spain began settling the northern part of its claim, by then named Alta California. Spanish settlers developed a tripartite pattern of Franciscan missions, forts (*presidios*), and towns (*pueblos*). They treated native populations such as the Huchiun Ohlone as cogs in their engine of empire: they were removed from the land, forcibly converted, and put to work in the missions' agricultural and craft operations. Missions, *presidios*, and *pueblos* were small polygons of order in the great unruly geometry of Alta California, with wide stretches between largely ungoverned by the Spanish. They wanted a way to control the rest of the territory and put it to productive use. In the 1780s, they began granting vast tracts of land to prominent men, often as a reward for military service. They called these grants *ranchos*.

Luis María Peralta, an ex-military and later civilian official in Pueblo San José, was the recipient of one such grant. One warm mid-August day in 1820, Peralta rode north with a small party of companions and a bag lunch. He marked out a claim of nearly 45,000 acres bounded by creeks on the north and south, hills on the east, and the bay on the west, with views of the San Francisco peninsula on the other side. The land would one day comprise all of the present-day cities of Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Oakland, Piedmont, Alameda, and part of San Leandro. Peralta called it Rancho San Antonio.

The next year, after a decade-long war, New Spain became the independent Empire of Mexico. Peralta's claim on his rancho was secure, but he never moved there himself. Instead, his four sons made Rancho San Antonio their home. They moved up from San José during the 1820s and 1830s, bringing their families, building houses, barns, and corrals, and establishing a bustling ranch, with over 2,000 horses and 8,000 head of cattle spread across the land at its peak. Their father had helped clear the land of its previous inhabitants in his soldiering days. But it was the sons who first truly gentrified my neighborhood, in an etymologically literal way not seen since. For twenty-five years after Mexican independence, as far as we can tell, the vast rancho of this landed gentry was largely untroubled by anything but the vicissitudes of weather and perhaps the usual quarrels between brothers and their families.

The fictional island namesake of California was rich in gold, but Spanish settlers never found the precious yellow metal here. James Marshall fulfilled that aspiration when, on the morning of 24 January 1848, he spotted shining nuggets in a mill trace in the Sierra foothills. News spread slowly in the days before widespread telegraphy, but by 1849 the Gold Rush was on.

Another rich nugget of news was also creeping across the continent. Just nine days after Marshall's find, Mexican and American authorities signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in Mexico City, ending the war between their nations and ceding a huge swath of the West, including Alta California, to the United States. The negotiated treaty included an article guaranteeing the validity of Spanish and later Mexican land grants. When the US Senate ratified the treaty in March, however, Senators struck that provision, throwing those claims into a legally unsettled area. A new



By 1878, the subdivision of north Oakland was well underway. Page from the Thompson & West Atlas of Alameda County from the David Rumsey Collection.

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set of rules now governed this land, and another wave of displacement was about to begin.

California was admitted to the union in September of 1850. As people from all over were still streaming into the Golden State hoping to strike it rich one way or another, the Gold Rush soon produced a land rush. One of the first laws passed by the brand-new California State Legislature allowed squatters to claim up to 160 acres of unoccupied public lands by continuously occupying and cultivating it for a period, with the definitions of both “unoccupied” and “public” often stretched for the benefit of new arrivals.

In 1851, Congress created the Public Land Commission, charged with settling the Spanish and Mexican rancho titles left in the lurch by the amended 1848 Treaty. The grantees were required to present documentary proof of ownership, lest their lands pass automatically into the public domain in two years. Brothers Vicente and Domingo Peralta presented joint claim documents for their half of their father’s ranch—

the half that included the land where I now live—in January of 1852.

Not long after the Peralta brothers filed their documents, a wagon arrived on their land bearing George and Lucena Parsons. Tilling the soil on his northern Illinois farm, George learned of the far more lucrative harvest that could supposedly be found with ease in California dirt in late 1849. He developed a powerful case of gold fever. He ditched the farm and headed to Janesville, Wisconsin, where wagon trains were assembling for the journey west. There he met Lucena Puffer, the cousin of another member of his still-stationary traveling party. They married on 18 March 1850 and left the next day for California.

Lucena kept a diary for most of their journey, and from that diary we know how she and George wound their way to Utah, wintered in the Salt Lake Valley, and then in February of 1851 resumed their journey through Nevada and into California. By the time they made it to the source of George’s fever dream of easy riches, the Gold Rush had

moved into a more established phase, one nearly impossible for newcomers to enter. They traveled on, eventually making their way to a spot on the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay, about three miles north of the brand new town of Oakland, which was incorporated in 1852. It was here, on land they had no right to occupy, that they established a farm. They grew beans and onions. They grew peaches that won awards at the fair. They grew children.

All over the East Bay, farmers like the Parsons were squatting on Peralta land. Rustlers were stealing Peralta cattle and felling Peralta timber, all to feed the appetites of the growing boomtown across the bay. Even as they submitted their Public Land Commission claim, the Peraltas were watching their estate disappear bit by stolen bit. Political power at every level was shifting to the English-speaking newcomers, and Spanish-speaking Californios found themselves on the losing side of that change.

A much wealthier and better-connected group had been scheming for portions of the Rancho San Antonio well before the Parsons arrived. These men convinced Vicente and Domingo Peralta to begin selling their land, in part to pay their legal bills, even before the Public Land Commission made its ruling. By 1853, both brothers had sold the majority of their holdings to a group of squatter-investors that came to include San Francisco Sheriff John C. Hays, US Senator William Gwin (coincidentally, author of the law that created the Public Land Commission), and William Tecumseh Sherman, who managed a bank on our Pacific shore a decade before he marched across Georgia and burned Atlanta down.

After lengthy appeals, Vicente and Domingo Peralta's land claim wound up before the US Supreme Court in 1856. The Court ruled that they had rightfully owned all the land that they had already sold away. Through all the legal turmoil, George and Lucena Parsons had continued building a family and a farm on their parcel, now labeled Plot Number 40 on the official map of the Peralta lands. They failed as squatters, but they did well enough as farmers to purchase the full seventy-four acres from its post-Peralta owners in 1858 for \$2,590.

Vicente and Domingo Peralta, meanwhile, had been left with only a few hundred of the roughly 9,400 acres their father had deeded each of them. Their cattle were stolen, their patrimony was lost, and the Californio ranch culture was fading rapidly. They were historic residents, but that counted for little in the new order.

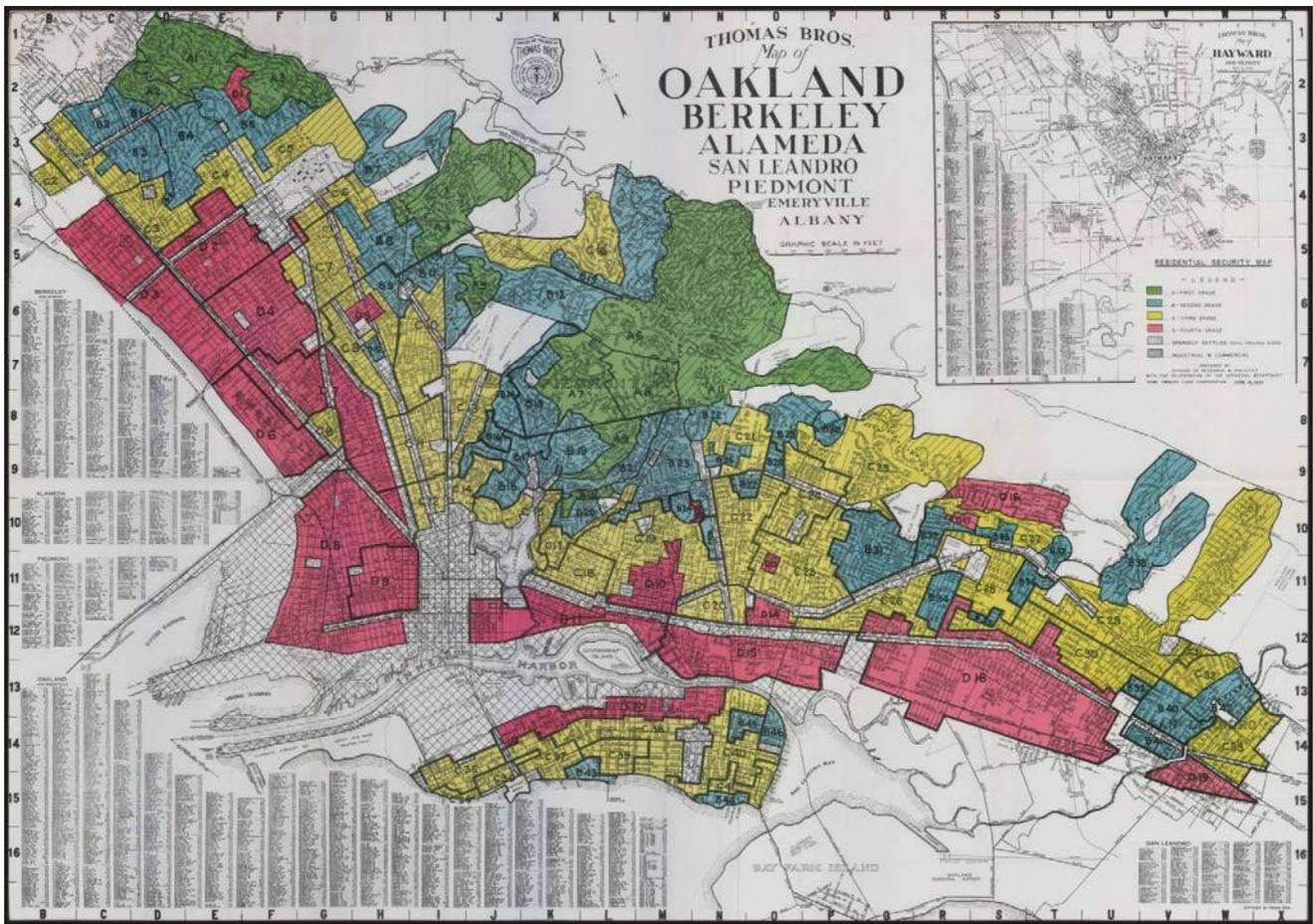
In the late 1860s, newspaper advertisements in this area shifted from offering prime farmland to touting tracts suitable for subdivision. As the growing city of Oakland spread northward and local transit lines sprang up, the Parsons began to cash in. In 1869, Oakland became the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad. The same year, George and Lucena sold a seventeen-acre portion of their farm—the land that now contains my house.

The new owner of this parcel was DeWitt Clinton Gaskill. He had made his fortune selling mining supplies in the northern gold fields. He bought the Parsons land while still living in Butte County, but did nothing with it for several years. When he finally relocated to Oakland in 1877, all around him people seemed to be making fortunes turning the productive farmland into housing parcels. He filed a subdivision map for his seventeen acres and sold most of his lots by the end of that year.

He did so just in the nick of time. The country was still reeling from the Panic of 1873 and the recession that followed. Unemployment in California was high and still rising. The primary cause of the boom around Gaskill's property was land speculation, not a genuine demand for new houses. The bubble popped and real estate values plummeted.

Over the next decade, the economy recovered, development accelerated, and houses began to replace the farms on the Gaskill tract and neighboring parcels. By 1890, the area wasn't yet fully developed, but the farmers were almost entirely gone. (George Parsons, the farmer who had owned my land before Gaskill, had died from a terribly metaphorical blow in August of 1882: he was thrown from his wagon against a car of the new railroad connecting a neighborhood station to the San Francisco ferry pier.) Once more, historic residents were giving way to new arrivals: middle- and working-class residents commuting by rail to downtown Oakland and via ferry to San Francisco. It would take an unexpected cataclysm, though, to finalize the neighborhood's transition to something resembling what it is today.

In July of 1905, railroad worker John Kavanagh and his wife Johanna bought a 50-by-91-foot lot in the Gaskill tract. A small house occupied the lot's western half. The previous owners had rented it to a succession of working-class tenants for the previous decade. John and Johanna moved into that house with their two teenaged sons, John, Jr. and Matthew. The neighborhood, which had been annexed into



Home Owners Loan Corporation map, 1937. COURTESY LADALE WINLING.

the city of Oakland in 1897, was still sparsely developed, with as many empty lots as houses on most blocks.

Less than a year later, on the morning of 18 April 1906, the Kavanaghs' investment received a tremendous boost when a 7.8-magnitude earthquake clapped just off the coast of San Francisco, shaking the city apart and setting much of it on fire. Oakland and the East Bay fared much better, and roughly 200,000 suddenly homeless San Franciscans fled on eastbound ferries. Three quarters of the refugees decided to stay. The aptly named but sparsely developed Golden Gate neighborhood would not remain that way for long.

In 1907, John Kavanagh built a new, larger house on the eastern half of his lot. A few years later, in 1911 or 1912, he tore down the old house and built a duplicate of the newer one in its place. His twin houses still stand today. The slightly younger twin is my home. John, Sr. would go on to build a third house next door. When John, Jr. married, he

moved into one of the houses with his wife, Marie. They eventually had two sons of their own, William and John.

All around the Kavanaghs, lots were filling in. By 1925, the neighborhood had taken the form that it still holds: a streetcar suburb with a central commercial strip; relatively close transit connections to downtown Oakland and San Francisco; a mix of Victorian houses and early Craftsman bungalows, some apartment buildings, and, here and there, a reminder of a previous age in the form of a larger estate home or old farmhouse.

This is the neighborhood captured in the 1940 census files that my wife and I pored over in 2012. We found Marie Kavanagh (widowed by the 1936 death of John, Jr.) living in what is now our house with her sons, William and John, then in their twenties. The Kavanaghs were surrounded by people of mostly similar incomes, backgrounds, and race.

We found another description of the area in the same period prepared by the federally backed Home Owners'

Loan Corporation in 1937: “occasionally there are several blocks which are practically free of coloreds or Orientals, but . . . certain blocks . . . are nearly 100% Negro and constantly spreading.” Based on that assessment, the section of Oakland including my neighborhood had been assigned the HOLC’s worst loan risk grade, and on the corporation’s maps, the area was colored red.

“Redlining,” as it became known, meant that people in the area couldn’t qualify for federally guaranteed loans, or pretty much any loans, to buy, build, or renovate a house. Redlining operated in concert with racially restrictive covenants that prohibited property owners from selling or leasing to certain groups, especially African Americans. As the Huchiun Ohlone and then the Peralta family had learned, the law does not serve everyone equally. It’s usually not designed to.

By 1940, these mechanisms were already prompting those who could afford mobility—mostly whites—to move out of the area, but it was war that led most directly to my neighborhood’s next major shift. World War II shoveled great heaps of federal money into defense industrial centers, including the Bay Area. Like the Gold Rush nearly a century before, the bonanza of jobs in shipyards and factories drew people here from all over the country, especially African Americans from the South. Redlining and other systems set up before the war meant that these black immigrants and those who came after them, through the 1950s and 1960s, were largely restricted to living in certain neighborhoods, such as the band sweeping north from West Oakland into South Berkeley, which includes my Golden Gate neighborhood.

In 1940, the census tract containing my neighborhood was 96 percent White. The HOLC area captured in that 1937 description was larger than the census tract, and included more African American residents south of where I now live. By 1950, the tract was 70 percent White and 28 percent “Negro.” Over the next ten years, those numbers flipped: the 1960 census showed the tract as 69 percent Black and 28 percent White. By 1970, it was 85 percent Black and 12 percent White.

“Historic residents” like the Kavanaghs, who helped give this neighborhood its shape, fled. Marie was one of the last. She left in 1970. A few years later, the family sold her house—now my house—to Willie and Maud Turner, an African American couple. Willie had migrated here from

the South, probably for a wartime manufacturing job, and he was working as a janitor. He and Maud had been renting in the neighborhood for several years before they bought this house.

This was the era of the historic residents that our neighborhood antigentrification activists refer to when they use that phrase. From there, it’s a short hop to the present—and to the period of their displacement, which we are now in.

Maud Turner eventually sold the house to Charlotte Rose, whom everyone around here called Lottie. Lottie owned more than two dozen properties in the area through the 1990s and into the 2000s, operating a quiet rental empire, and earning the respect of her neighbors for her support for local organizations, the library, and neighborhood beautification. After Lottie died, and in the wake of our modern Great Recession and the real estate speculation that followed, her son David took the house off the rental market, renovated it, and sold it to my wife and me in 2011.

And there my research came full circle. I had found most of what I was looking for when I started this project. I had found many of the documents and the maps, the names and dates, and some of the personal and family stories that comprise the history of human habitation—at least for the last few centuries—of the place where I now live.

I found in that history the pattern that I expected. One group pushes out another group, often aided by forces much larger than themselves: a royal army, a Gold Rush, an earthquake, racism, the law, or the gears of capitalism turning. Those gears grind some people to dust. Others manage to harness their power to make fortunes large and small. Whether a person ends up as the machine’s operator or its input is often not determined by anything resembling merit or even by individual decisions, however much we might like to pretend otherwise.

I could conclude that this is the way of all the earth. It’s tempting, really, to see myself as simply a mote swept along in a wave of change. Displacement isn’t my fault. I’m just a particle man, “doing the things a particle can.” When I started this project, part of me was looking for that kind of absolution.

I didn’t find it, and I realized eventually that I was foolish to have ever gone looking. Instead, I found a growing discomfort with the pattern of our history. I found a deeper connection with this place and with the people who had been here before. I found more empathy for



The author's house in Oakland's Golden Gate neighborhood.

those who had wound up on the losing side of the changes that have swept through this place time and again, including the changes happening now, of which I am a part, not just a particle.

And that, for me, is the rub—now.

I still think “historic residents” is the wrong way to talk about this very real problem. We can’t and shouldn’t pin a neighborhood or a city to a particular historical period. Even if the buildings stay in place, people don’t. The sense of who constitutes the historic residents of a neighborhood can change in a few decades; an individual’s name—George Parsons, Maud Turner, Brock Winstead—can disappear even faster.

I don’t want to dismiss the possibility of righting the wrongs of the past. But when my neighborhood has a shouting match or, perhaps more productively, when we talk about housing and development policy in the city, the region, or the state, we’re talking about addressing the

problems of the present. Knowing that this cycle repeats through history doesn’t absolve us from building cities that are inclusive and accessible to as many people as possible, not because they’re “historic residents,” but because they’re people. Our responsibility is not just to the residents here now, who suffer when change displaces them, but also to those of the future, here and elsewhere.

It’s likely too late for my neighborhood’s historic residents. Barring a seismic or economic cataclysm, the gentrification of Golden Gate will continue until the neighborhood is remade. I walk out of my front door every day and push that process forward one more step. When the hammer comes down again—and we know it will—how do we protect those most likely to get squashed? Learning the history of this place did not lead me to an answer, but it taught me that we must find one, because the question will be posed again, here and all around us, as long as California continues to change. **B**