

MOVING THE LYFORD HOUSE

By Susan Cluff

On December 4, 1957, one of the oldest homes in Marin County, a distinctive Italianate Victorian that stood for 80 years on the east side of Strawberry Point, was lifted off its foundation and barged across the bay. Known as the Lyford House, now at the Richardson Bay Audubon Center, it arrived at its present location just off Tiburon Boulevard through a combination of good luck, timing and a massive community effort that saved the bay from development and created a bird and wildlife refuge.

The old home was originally owned by Hilarita Reed and her husband Dr. Benjamin Lyford who operated the Eagle Dairy Ranch on land she'd inherited. Built about 1876 and damaged during the 1906 earthquake, it had been lived in, restored, rented, neglected, reused, and finally slated to be torn down to make way for the new Harbor Point development on Strawberry.

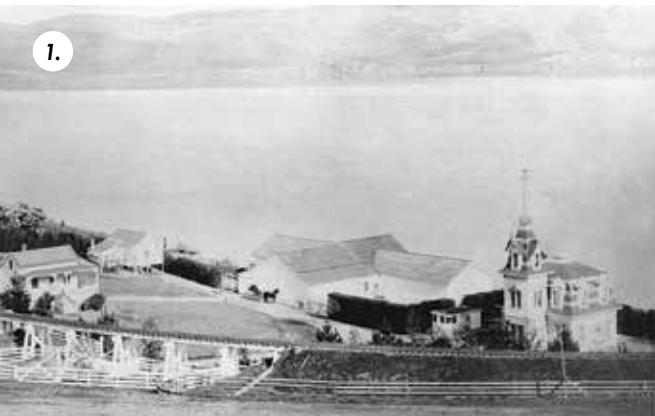
Dr. David Steinhardt, who'd helped organize the Richardson Bay Foundation to fight a planned 2,000 home and yacht harbor, asked developer Sam Neider if he could have the old house if he moved it. Working with conservationist Caroline Livermore, architect John Lord King and tugboat operator Tom Crowley, they then moved the historic home to the 11-acre property deeded to the Audubon Society by Rose Rodrigues da Fonta, Tiburon's "Goat Lady." Rose was among the many people on shore who watched the old mansion glide across the Bay pushed by a puffing tugboat looking like a mirage in the fog. Crews then carefully edged the house onto the beach and winched it up the hill, somehow miraculously intact.

The cost of restoring the old home on its new foundation was donated by Noel Dickey in memory of her husband Donald, a noted ornithologist. This included restoring the patterned shingles on the mansard roof, gilding the molding inside, and refinishing the circular mahogany staircase. The four upstairs bedrooms once occupied by the Lyfords and their orphaned nephew and nieces were turned into study and library rooms, the front and back parlors were combined to make a more open work and lecture space and a caretaker's residence added at the rear.

The one change requested by Mrs. Dickey was that the restored mansion be painted yellow, her husband's favorite color. The Lyford House was originally painted white, as was everything on the hygienic Eagle Dairy Ranch including the barns, fences, outbuildings and a converted ship's pilothouse Dr. Lyford used as a laboratory for his embalming work.

Several local families and supporters donated period furniture, documents and some original John J. Audubon artwork -- the house opened to the public in 1962. In 2002, 75-foot-tall cypress tree fell on the Lyford House, crushing the roof and it was closed for restoration until 2004. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000, it can be visited most Saturdays or by appointment.

The Landmarks Society needs your help! Keep our local history alive and accessible to the public by getting involved at www.landmarkssociety.com



1. The Eagle Dairy Ranch circa 1888 was a model dairy with meticulous white-washed buildings, fences and railroad trestle with the Lyford House on the right and the Tiburon hills across Richardson Bay.
2. The Lyford House was barged from Strawberry to Tiburon in December 1957.
3. In 1956 the weather-beaten Lyford House was used as a setting for a party promoting the Harbor Point development on Strawberry Point.

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