

The Ross Town Buildings and the Mysterious Mr. White

Fran Cappelletti, Ross Historical Society/Jose Moya del Pino Library

In early Ross, one could easily say that public business was conducted in less than adequate circumstances. The first trustees in 1908 met in a school building. The fire station had other locations nearby, but there was a need for modern facilities. As early as 1909, plans for a town hall were proposed, but it wasn't until 1928 that Ross built a new Town Hall and Fire Station. Designed by the architect John White, those original buildings, with their arches and tile roofs remain today.

Planning and Building¹

A 1927 Bond issue to purchase the property at the corner of Lagunitas Road and the highway, now Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, was proposed for \$100,000. The architects were reported to be Maybeck and White of San Francisco. By March, the bonds were approved, with \$16,000 allocated to a city hall and \$31,500 for a firehouse and cottages for the chief and assistant chief. The plans of John White were approved. Some difficulties remained as the Town was able to purchase the property, but had to move forward with eviction proceedings against Dr. Hund, an 'uncooperative' tenant in the old house onsite. When the doctor moved on, the project moved forward. The contract went out for bid on August 11, 1927, with F. R. Siegrist winning out in the September 1, 1927 announcement.

At the Town Council meeting of February 16, 1928, matters began with a commitment to the control and eradication of rabies and the construction of new sewers. It was then noted that John White, architect, advised that the new Town buildings were ready for acceptance. So informed, the Council approved and arranged final payment. Further, J. Ongaro won the \$4,450 contract to grade the grounds and construct the walks and driveways. In an interesting addition to the approved Town Hall plans, Trustee Eels succeeded in getting an 8 foot tall wooden screen to be installed inside the entrance, costing \$325.

Ordinance 107 specified that regular meetings would be held on the second Thursday of each month at 8 o'clock P.M., with meetings held at the Town Hall. The ordinance was passed and took effect on March 1, 1928.



Undated photos, Landers Collection, Ross Historical Society

¹ Sources include Town of Ross Council meeting minutes, Building and Engineering News, and Sausalito News, 1927-1928.

The College of Environmental Design at UC Berkeley, has the plans and drawings for both buildings in their archive. Though changes occurred over time, the location and features are recognizable today.

About the Architect

But who was John White? As noted above, newspapers reported the design was executed by Maybeck and White. Maybeck was Bernard Maybeck, the famed architect. White was John White, his brother-in-law. While they spent a relatively brief time as partners, White had a longer collaboration with George Howard in the firm of Howard & White. For many years, the combinations of these architects, along with Mark White, shared office space in San Francisco. In the case of Ross, the design for the Town Hall and Fire station was executed by John White alone.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1870, John was working as a draftsman there by age 16. He became the friend of architect Willis Polk, in Kansas City, when they both worked for Van Brunt and Howe. Another Polk acquaintance, Bernard Maybeck, would also come to Kansas City to start his own practice. While the business climate for him was not favorable, he met John, and more importantly, his sister Annie White. Maybeck married her in 1890, they headed for California, and John joined them a year later.²

They settled into the Maybeck “chalet” at Grove and Berryman in Berkeley. John and Annie’s mother, father and brother soon joined them there. John and Bernard worked in architecture with mixed success at first, but would find work as needed, sometimes together, but more often independently. The younger brother Mark graduated from the University of California in 1900 and would later join with Maybeck as a partner for many years. Near the turn of the century, John started to work with George H. Howard, first as a draftsman and later as a full partner.³

John White is often confused with his brother Mark and will forever be in the shadow of brother in law Bernard Maybeck. Some books even credit his work to the nonexistent Howard White. According to family accounts, John was not much of a mixer or joiner, had no children, and was known to his own relatives as “the mystery man”. He reportedly kept even his marriage secret for eight years, supposedly to avoid offending sister Annie (wife of Bernard Maybeck). It seems his wife was a smoker and Annie and her circle were strict vegetarians who strongly disapproved of tobacco.⁴ Very little is published about his personal life, an interesting contrast to his more social relatives and partners.

² Richard Longstreth, *On The Edge Of The World*, (Architectural History Foundation/MIT:1983)

³ From John White biography by Bill Sonin, part of an extensive archive on John White stored at the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA).

⁴ Bob Johnson at <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/john-white/> .

Beginnings and Endings in Berkeley⁵

White is credited with a number of residences in Berkeley. One landmark house is the Wallace/Sauer house. After the original Hillside Club in Berkeley burned in 1923, he designed the replacement structure, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Hillside Club is still active today, hosting many events throughout the year.

Of personal significance was his own residence at 1163 Euclid Avenue. Built around 1911, he lived there until his death in 1941 at age 71. The residence would remain of interest as the next occupant of the house was photographer Dorothea Lange.

Prolific on the Peninsula

Howard & White were heavily involved on the Peninsula, with many projects in Hillsborough and Atherton. Before partnering with White, George Howard made his name in architecture by collaborating with Joachim Mathisen on the 1894 Burlingame train station. It was inspired, in part, by A. Page Brown's temporary "California Building" at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. More importantly, George was part of the Howard family from early San Francisco. They later pioneered the Peninsula and the architect himself was one of the founders of Hillsborough.⁶ This connection undoubtedly helped to secure contracts for homes to prominent area family names, including Shreve, Bowie and Bothin. One of their greatest credits was the Kohl Mansion in Burlingame, which later became Mercy High School and is now available as an event venue.⁷ Most relevant to Ross was their 1926 plan for a fire house, jail and living quarters on the corner of Walnut Avenue and El Camino Real in Hillsborough.⁸ Much of that structure remains in Hillsborough today.



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⁵ For a discussion of his work in Berkeley, see article and references by Bob Johnson at <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/john-white/>

⁶ For more information on Howard, the train station and his other work, visit the Burlingame Historical Society at <https://burlingamefoundingsamilies.wordpress.com/howard-introduction/george-h-howard/>

⁷ For a detailed history of Kohl Mansion and virtual visit, go to <http://kohlmansion.com/wordpress1/freddie-facts/>

⁸ Notice to contractors, San Mateo Times, February 20, 1926, 11.

John is also credited with a Town Hall further down the Peninsula, in Atherton. In 1927, voters narrowly missed approving a bond measure for \$35,000, with only 65% voting yes. A year later, a reduced bond of \$20,000 did pass with 83%. John White was commissioned to design the



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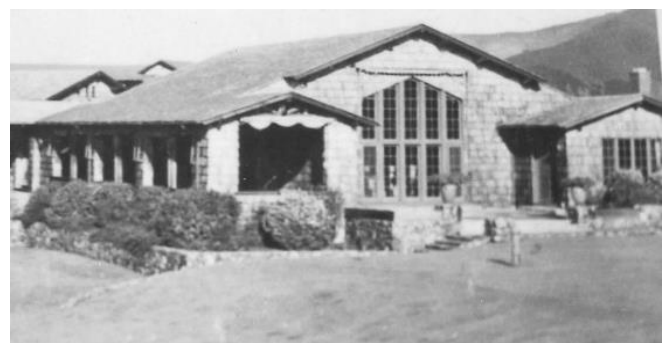
building and produce construction documents. The building was dedicated with a Town Meeting on March 26, 1929. Atherton is currently considering a project to construct new civic buildings while preserving the historic Town Hall.⁹

Many Works In Marin

John White distinguished himself the most in Marin County, with projects in Sausalito, Belvedere, Mill Valley and San Rafael. In the Town of Ross, he designed many homes for prominent families such as the Dibblees, McNears, Coffins and Greenes. He also designed the Lagunitas Club, Meadow Club clubhouse, and an addition to the tavern at the top of Mount Tamalpais.



Lagunitas Club, Schmiwedell Family Collection, Ross Historical Society



Meadow Club, Ross Historical Society

⁹ Richard T. Smith, Atherton Town Hall, Atherton Heritage Collection.



Considerable loyalty was shown by one longtime client, E.G. Schmiedell. His sister Nettie was married to George Howard. This resulted in collaborations with Howard and White over the years in Ross, San Francisco, Lake Tahoe and Carmel. Two neighboring houses at 2400 and 2402 Steiner Street, across from Alta Plaza Park in San Francisco, are surviving examples of their work for the family.¹⁰ When one considers that Mr. Schmiedell was one of the founding trustees of Ross, it is no surprise that this and his many connections with this small community would provide the opportunity to design the Ross Town Hall and Fire Station.

Schmiedell home in Ross, Schmiedell Family Collection, Ross Historical Society

¹⁰ The book, *Gables and Fables*, by Anne and Arthur Bloomfield, pages 237-240, provides a detailed discussion of the houses, Howard, White and the Schmiedells.