

Howard and White: The Story of Two Architects

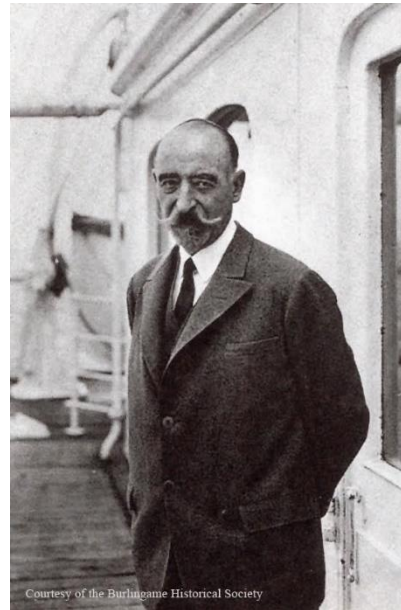
Fran Cappelletti

This is the story of two men, George Howard and John White, who lived and worked in the Bay Area from the late 1800s to the 1930s. While not household names, their work is recognized in print and many of their buildings remain in place today. Yet they remain unknown in many circles. John seems to be relatively unknown and is often confused with his brother Mark. Some even credit their work to the nonexistent Howard White. Perhaps it is the fact that more famous Whites and Howards made their mark in architecture or that they often worked directly with famous partners. It could also be that one of them evaded the attention of society while another relished in it, sometimes to the point of caricature. Each man had a unique personality, in many ways opposites. Like a puzzle, the pieces of their lives and careers are found throughout the Bay Area. Years ago, Bill Sonin, a researcher from Berkeley, put much of it together in hopes of writing John's story. He didn't live to complete this, but he did leave his work with the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association. Sifting through the notes, checking sources and making visits to the places in the present day, a more complete picture emerged, pointing to two very productive careers.

George Howard

Born in 1864, George Henry Howard was the son of George Henry Howard. Technically a Junior, he was often identified without that suffix. His mother was Agnes Poett, the widow of William Davis Merry Howard, an early San Francisco merchant. Already well-established by the time of the California Gold Rush, he was an active citizen in early San Francisco and was the inspiration for Howard Street¹. He and Agnes also owned the Rancho San Mateo, an area encompassing the future communities of San Mateo, Hillsborough and Burlingame. Young George would grow up there, but also travel to Europe, with some long stays in Paris. He would also become acquainted with John McLaren when the famous custodian of Golden Gate Park was first employed as Head Gardener for the Howard family's 'El Cerrito' estate.² They would later collaborate on the development of San Mateo Park, a neighborhood of winding streets inspired by the "City Beautiful Movement".³

George made his name by collaborating with Joachim Mathisen on the 1894 Burlingame train station, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was inspired, in part, by A. Page Brown's temporary "California Building" at



Courtesy of the Burlingame Historical Society

¹ See <https://www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/history/hgstr.htm>

² Betty Lochrie Hoag, "John McLaren at Rancho San Mateo", La Peninsula, Vol. 14. Redwood City, California: San Mateo County Historical Association, 1972.

³ See web site of the San Mateo Park Neighborhood Association at <http://www.sanmateopark.org/history/>

the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.⁴ Sadly, the collaboration and partnership was cut short, with Mathisen committing suicide in 1896. Notably, as a precursor to future collaboration, they also announced a partnership with Bernard Maybeck in 1892. A column in *The Wave*, a weekly newspaper, noted with some surprise that Howard was pursuing architecture as a vocation. More credit was given to Howard's choice of respected partners along with his own social backing and 'good taste'.⁵ George was also a founding trustee and police commissioner of Hillsborough.⁶ While connections certainly helped, he was certainly capable and would succeed on more than reputation.

John White

Born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1870, he was the son of Henry A. White. Born in New York, his family moved west to Indiana. After working on the family farm as a teen, Henry went on to become a teacher in Sacramento, California before serving as a Major in the Civil War for the Union's 148th Indiana Infantry. After the War, he worked as an attorney and teacher, eventually becoming Principal for several Kansas City schools. He and his wife had three children, Annie, John and Mark. The Whites have a very long and distinguished history, dating back to the Revolutionary War, the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1635 and several generations in England.⁷



Maybeck Family, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

John was working as a draftsman in Kansas City by age 16. He became the friend of architect Willis Polk when they both worked for Van Brunt and Howe, a firm recently moved from Boston to Kansas City. Continuing work there until 1891, he gained valuable experience. A photo from the Maybeck family collection shows John as a young man in Kansas City.

Another Polk acquaintance, Bernard Maybeck, would also come to Kansas City to start his own practice. He met John, and more importantly, his sister, Annie White. Maybeck married her in 1890 and moved to California, with John joining them a year later.⁸ He moved into the Maybeck home at Grove (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Way) and Berryman in Berkeley. A few years later his mother, father and brother joined them. Records show John designed a Berkeley house in 1894 and worked at times with his brother-in-law and on his own.

According to architectural historian Bradley Wiedmaier, White likely was part of a team sketching the old Missions for a series of articles published by Willis Polk. It seems further likely

⁴ See National Register Nomination form at <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/38e1d06f-ce53-4eff-b7cc-70fe5af1c242/?branding=NRHP> .

⁵ Richard Longstreth, *On The Edge Of The World*, (Architectural History Foundation/MIT:1983), 371. Original source is *The Wave*, San Francisco, July 2, 1892, 3. The trio also were listed in Langley's Directory for 1892.

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

⁷ Many thanks to the White family historian for his extensive research on the White family.

⁸ Richard Longstreth, *On The Edge Of The World*, (Architectural History Foundation/MIT:1983), 309.

he was acquainted with, and perhaps worked with, Mathisen, Howard, and Maybeck in those years.

John was also in charge of the Maybeck office when his brother-in-law toured Europe as part of the University of California campus design competition.⁹

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.¹⁰

The younger White brother, Mark, graduated from the University of California in 1900 and would later become Maybeck’s formal partner for many years. The White brothers and Maybecks would reside near each other for the rest of their lives as family and peers.¹¹

John is credited with a number of residences in Berkeley. One landmark house is the Wallace/Sauer house on Arch Street. A survivor of the 1923 Berkeley Hills fire, it is a notable example of the Chalet style.¹² After the original Hillside Club in Berkeley burned in 1923, he designed the replacement structure, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹³ The Hillside Club is still active today, hosting many public and private events throughout the year.

Of personal significance was John’s 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, who lived there for the rest of her life.

A Long Partnership

By the mid-1890s, White started to work with Howard as a draftsman and later as full partner. They did have a brief formal partnership with Maybeck after the San Francisco earthquake. One notable Maybeck, Howard and White project was the Charles Josselyn House in Woodside from 1907. For their long careers, these architects, along with Mark White, shared office space in San Francisco. In the city of San Francisco, they designed a number of residential and commercial buildings.

⁹ Kenneth H. Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck: Artisan, Architect, Artist*, (Peregrine Smith, Inc.:1977), 43.

¹⁰ Bob Johnson at <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/john-white/>. The site provides images of White’s long time home.

¹¹ From John White biography by Bill Sonin, part of an extensive archive on John White stored at the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA).

¹² For a discussion of his work in Berkeley, see article and references by Bob Johnson at <http://berkeleyplaques.org/e-plaque/john-white/>

¹³ See National Register Nomination form at <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/57785d04-a7b1-41c9-9854-31042deb5369/?branding=NRHP> .

As partners, Howard and White each brought their own particular styles to their work. A telling example is provided in the book *Gables and Fables*, in which she tells the story of two neighboring houses at 2400 and 2402 Steiner Street, across from Alta Plaza Park in San Francisco, built for the Edward and Alice Schmiehell.¹⁴

Over many decades, considerable loyalty was shown by the Schmiehells. The relationship likely began when Edward's sister Nettie married George Howard in 1887. George would design their summer home in Ross in 1898. Later additions were made when the family settled in Ross after the 1906 earthquake. Edward was a founding trustee of Ross and his wife was active in the community. In addition to Ross and San Francisco, John worked with the family at Lake Tahoe and Carmel. At the right is a 1921 photo of John White (center), with Alice Schmiehell, Matt Green and Jake Obexer (sitting) at Lake Tahoe.¹⁵ John also worked for the Schmiehells and other families in the Secret Harbor enclave.



Courtesy of Edward B Scott and the Saga of Lake Tahoe

Prolific on the Peninsula

Howard and White were heavily involved in San Mateo County, with many projects in Hillsborough and Atherton. Howard's social connections undoubtedly helped to secure contracts for the homes of several prominent area families, including the Shreves of jewelry fame and Stewart Edward White, well known author of adventure novels. Also notable project was their 1926 plan for a fire house, jail and living quarters on the corner of Walnut Avenue and El Camino Real in Hillsborough.¹⁷ Much of that structure, remains in Hillsborough today. George is also credited with the neighboring Pacific Bell building, now the Police Department.

¹⁴ The book, *Gables and Fables*, by Anne and Arthur Bloomfield, pages 237-240, provides a detailed discussion of the houses, Howard, White and the Schmiehells.

¹⁵ Photo from collection of Schmiehell Family Photos. This and many more photos and stories regarding the Lake Tahoe region are found in E.B. Scott, *The Saga of Lake Tahoe, Volume II*.

¹⁶ The San Mateo County Historical Association archives store plans for the monument.

¹⁷ Notice to contractors, *San Mateo Times*, February 20, 1926, 11.



The Architect and Engineer of California, February, 1916

Howard and White's masterpiece is Kohl Mansion in Burlingame, California, now Mercy High School and a popular event venue.¹⁸ Listed on the National Register of Historic Places¹⁹, it dates from 1914.

Recently, Bridget Bell, a graduate of Mercy and current student at Chapman University made the documentary "The Oaks of Burlingame: The Story of The C. Frederick Kohl Mansion". She notes the following:

In 1913, Frederick Kohl purchased a 36 acre, oak studded plot of land from Ansel Easton on the northern border of what would become Burlingame. He hired an architect, George Howard, who also designed the Burlingame train station, to design an English Tudor estate that would rival the other large homes in the area such as the Crocker family home and the Ogden Mills estate. With music in mind, the design called for the house to be built around the large Aeolian pipe organ they discovered and purchased a few years earlier. The construction was placed in the hands of John McBain, a builder from Menlo Park. The Kohls were in competition to finish in time for the upcoming 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Their main rival was socialite Harriet Pullman Carolan, who was building a large estate home in neighboring Hillsborough.

With artisans brought in from around the world, construction began in late 1913. Workers arrived from all over the area by train or the streetcar line which serviced the Peninsula and then were able to be transported on Ansel Easton's Burlingame Railway to within one block of the construction site. Construction went very quickly with the mansion set to open in December 1914, however, a cable that was required to connect the mansion to the local power grid did not arrive in time and the opening had to be delayed until January 1915.

The mansion was spectacular. Set amongst the oaks, with its' massive red brick and stone exterior, Gothic bay windows, projecting wings and gabled roof, it provided the grandeur that the Kohls wanted for impressing family and friends as well as dignitaries that would soon be attending the grand Exposition. The Kohls accomplished what Harriet Pullman Carolan could not, having their palatial estate ready for all of the social gatherings associated with the opening of the Panama Pacific Exposition.

¹⁸ For a detailed history of Kohl Mansion and virtual visit, go to <http://kohlmansion.com/wordpress1/freddie-facts/>

¹⁹ See National Register nomination form and documents at <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/cf577466-a700-4f6e-9b71-871a0eee2762?branding=NRHP> and <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/GetAsset/90e2d30d-5cd6-4150-acb9-1b6f9e8bcf34/?branding=NRHP>.

White is 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



Fran Cappelletti, 2017

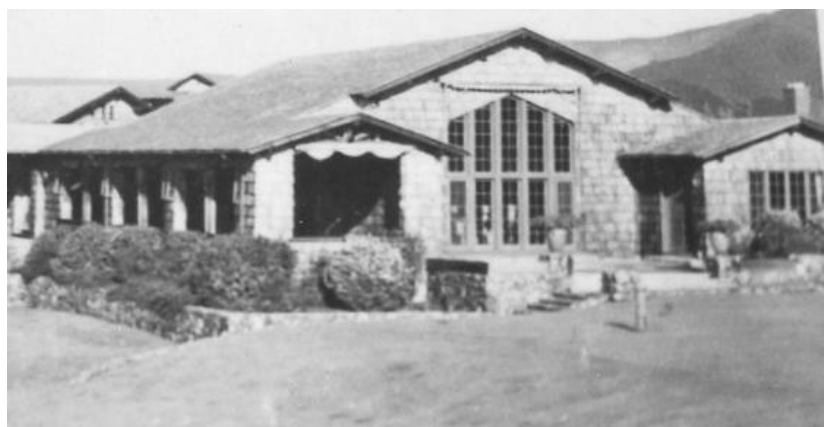
building and produce construction documents. Dedicated with a Town Meeting on March 26, 1929, Atherton is currently working on a project to construct new civic buildings while preserving the historic Town Hall for new uses.²⁰

Projects in Marin County

With Howard, but more often on his own, John White distinguished himself in Marin County, with projects in Sausalito, Belvedere, Mill Valley and San Rafael. He also designed the Lagunitas Club, Meadow Club clubhouse.



Lagunitas Club, Ross Historical Society



Meadow Club, Ross Historical Society

In the Town of Ross, Seward McNear, president of Sperry Flour, commissioned multiple homes in Ross and San Francisco. Members of the Dibblee family hired him for houses on Upper Road and on Glenwood Avenue, a neighborhood with several surviving White homes. Further design work, not all realized, was performed for the Kents and the Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods

²⁰ Richard T. Smith, Atherton Town Hall, Atherton Heritage Collection.

Railway, including an addition to the tavern at the top of Mount Tamalpais. In 1927, White designed the Ross Town Hall and Fire Station.



Landers Collection, Ross Historical Society



Landers Collection, Ross Historical Society

Notable Collaborations

The partners were also active behind the scenes. George had early relationships with A. Page Brown and Willis Polk. George was part of efforts to advance local design efforts. Along with Ernest Coxhead, Willis Polk, Fred Meyer and Arthur Brown, he took part in an ambitious, yet ultimately unsuccessful effort to promote a city-wide site plan for the 1915 Panama Pacific Exhibition.²¹

As time went on, Howard would become less active, but John remained in demand. A 1927 letter from Maybeck's office notes that any work on projects by John White would command a higher cost due to his experience, speed and ability, even more for special composition work.²²

One important collaboration recently in the news is the Earle Anthony House in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, in which John White was the associate architect to Bernard Maybeck.²³ A combination of Medieval, Gothic, Spanish and Tudor styles, it was the product of many years work. After a protracted legal fight, the celebrity singer Katy Perry won a judgement in 2017 in her effort to purchase the property. The house and grounds have appeared in a number of popular television shows over the years.

²¹ "High Artistic Aim is Sought By Architects", San Francisco Call, July 26, 1911, 5.

²² Bill Sonin archive on John White, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA).

²³ Kenneth H. Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck: Artisan, Architect, Artist*, (Peregrine Smith, Inc.:1977), 225.

John was also involved in the monumental project at the end of Maybeck's career, the campus of Principia College in Elsah, Illinois. Robert M. Craig provides a thorough history of the project in his book, *Bernard Maybeck at Principia College*.²⁴ John White, along with his brother Mark and Julia Morgan, provided assistance to Maybeck over multiple years. John designed the Dining Hall. Meant to be temporary, the building lasted for several decades before it was razed for further development. The shingles and overall shape are reminders of many of White's prior projects. He assisted Maybeck with many of the sketches and elevations.



*The Principia Archives and Special Collections,
Principia College, Elsah, Illinois*



*The Principia Archives and Special Collections,
Principia College, Elsah, Illinois*

Client Frederic Morgan noted the following about White in a 1930 letter to the Principia Board of Trustees:

While Maybeck and I are hard at work as indicated, Mr. John White, Maybeck's partner and small unit specialist, works with our masses with roof lines as his guiding star. He keeps us from lumping together masses that will have ugly or impractical roof lines. He also takes our rough drafts of dormitories and other smaller units and pours beauty into them. He is truly an artist, and he and Maybeck complement each other.²⁵

The Environmental Design Archives at UC Berkeley holds many of their plans, drawings and correspondence. Though changes occurred over time, the locations and buildings are often recognizable today.

George died in Paris on August 8, 1935. He was survived by his wife, son and brother.²⁶ He is memorialized with other members of the Howard family at St. Matthew's Episcopal church in San Mateo. John would continue to work for several more years and died on November 12, 1941 of heart failure. He had no children. Over their long careers, both left their mark on the architectural history of the Bay Area and beyond.

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²⁴ Robert M. Craig, *Bernard Maybeck at Principia College, The Art and Craft of Building* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 488 and 494.

²⁵ Robert M. Craig, *Bernard Maybeck at Principia College, The Art and Craft of Building* (Gibbs Smith, 2004), 476.

²⁶ "George Howard Passes in Paris", *The Times and Daily News Leader of San Mateo California*, August, 9, 1935, 8.